

1. Good Morning Brother

Chapter 001 Good Morning Brother

Zorian's eyes abruptly shot open as a sharp pain erupted from his stomach. His whole body convulsed, buckling against the object that fell on him, and suddenly he was wide awake, not a trace of drowsiness in his mind.

"Good morning, brother!" an annoyingly cheerful voice sounded right on top of him. "Morning, morning, *MORNING!!!*"

Zorian glared at his little sister, but she just smiled back at him cheekily, still sprawled across his stomach. She was humming to herself in obvious satisfaction, kicking her feet playfully in the air as she studied the giant world map Zorian had tacked to the wall next to his bed. Or rather, pretended to study – Zorian could see her watching him intently out of the corner of her eyes for a reaction.

This was what he got for not arcane-locking the door and setting up a basic alarm perimeter around his bed.

"Get off," he told her in the calmest voice he could muster.

"Mom said to wake you up," she said matter-of-factly, not budging from her spot.

"Not like this, she didn't," Zorian grumbled, swallowing his irritation and patiently waiting till she dropped her guard. Predictably, Kirielle grew visibly agitated after only a few moments of this pretend disinterest. Just before she could blow up, Zorian quickly grasped her legs and chest and flipped her over the edge of the bed. She fell to the floor with a thud and an indignant yelp, and Zorian quickly jumped to his feet to better respond to any violence she might decide to retaliate with. He glanced down on her and sniffed disdainfully. "I'll be sure to remember this the next time I'm asked to wake *you* up."

"Fat chance of that," she retorted defiantly. "You always sleep longer than I do."

Zorian simply sighed in defeat. Damn the little imp, but she was right about that.

"So..." she began excitedly, jumping to her feet, "are you excited?"

Zorian watched her for a moment as she bounced around his room like a monkey on caffeine. Sometimes he wished he had some of that boundless energy of hers. But only some.

"About what?" Zorian asked innocently, feigning ignorance. He knew what she meant, of course, but constantly asking obvious questions was the fastest way of frustrating his little sister into dropping a conversation he'd rather not have.

"Going back to academy!" she whined, clearly aware of what he was doing. He needed to learn some new tricks. "Learning magic. Can you show me some magic?"

Zorian let out a long-suffering sigh. Kirielle had always treated him as something of a playmate of hers, despite him doing his best not to encourage her, but usually she remained within certain unspoken boundaries. She was downright impossible this year, though, and Mother was wholly unsympathetic to his pleas to rein her in. All he did was read all day long, she said, so it wasn't as if he was doing anything *important*... Thankfully the summer break was over and he could finally get away from them all.

"Kiri, I have to pack. Why don't you go pester Fortov for a change?"

She scowled at him unhappily for a second and then perked up, as if remembering something, and quickly ran out of the room. Zorian's eyes widened when he realized what she was up to a second too late.

"No!" he yelled as he ran after her, only to have the bathroom door slammed into his face. He pounded on the door in frustration. "Damn it, Kiri! You had all the time in the world to go to the bathroom *before* I woke up!"

"Sucks to be you," was her only answer.

After hurling a few choice curses at the door, Zorian stomped off back to his room to get dressed. She would be inside for ages, he was sure, if only to spite him.

Quickly changing out of his pajamas and putting on his glasses, Zorian took a moment to look around his room. He was pleased to note Kirielle hadn't rummaged through his stuff before waking him up. She had a very fuzzy notion of (other people's) privacy.

It didn't take Zorian long to pack – he had never really unpacked, to be honest, and would have gone back to Cyoria a week ago if he thought Mother would have allowed it. He was just packing his school supplies when he realized with irritation that some of his textbooks were missing. He could try a locator spell, but he was pretty sure he knew where they had ended up – Kirielle had a habit of taking them to her room, no matter how many times Zorian told her to keep her sticky little fingers away from them. Working on a hunch, he double-checked his writing supplies and, sure enough, found they had been greatly depleted.

It always happened – every time he came home, Kirielle would raid his school supplies. Putting aside the ethical problems inherent in breaking into your brother's room in order to steal his things, what on earth was she doing with all those pencils and erasers? This time he specifically bought extras with his sister in mind, but it still wasn't enough - he couldn't find a single eraser in his drawer, and he bought a whole packet of them before coming home. Why Kirielle couldn't simply ask Mother to buy her some books and pens of her own was never really clear to Zorian. She was the youngest, and the only daughter, so Mother was always happy to spoil her - the dolls she talked Mother into buying her were five times more expensive than a couple of books and a stack of pencils.

In any case, while Zorian had no delusions about ever seeing his writing supplies again, he really needed those textbooks. With that in mind, he marched off to his sister's room, ignoring the 'Keep out!' warning on the door, and quickly found his missing books in their usual location – cunningly hidden under the bed, behind several conveniently placed stuffed animals.

His packing done, he went downstairs to eat something and see what Mother wanted from him.

Though his family thought he simply liked to sleep in, Zorian actually had a reason for being a late riser. It meant he could eat his food in peace, as everyone else had already had their breakfast by then. Few things annoyed him more than someone trying to strike up a conversation while he was eating, and that was precisely the time when the rest of his family was most talkative. Unfortunately, Mother wasn't willing to wait for him today, and immediately descended upon him when she saw him coming down. He didn't even finish his descent down the stairs and she had already found something about him she didn't like.

"You don't really intend to go out looking like that, do you?" she asked.

"What's wrong with this?" asked Zorian. He was wearing a plain brown outfit, little different from the ones other boys wore when they were going into the city. It seemed just fine to him.

"You can't go out looking like that," his mother said with a long-suffering sigh. "What do you think people will say when they see you wearing that?"

"Nothing?" Zorian tried.

"Zorian, don't be so difficult," she snapped at him. "Our family is one of the pillars of this town. We're under scrutiny every time we leave the house. I know you don't care about such things, but appearances are important to a lot of people. You need to realize you're not an island, and you can't decide things as if you were alone in the world. You are a member of this family, and your actions inevitably reflect on our reputation. I will not let you embarrass me by looking like a common factory worker. Go back to your room and put on some proper attire."

Zorian restrained himself from rolling his eyes just long enough to turn his back on her. Maybe her guilt trip would have been more effective if this was the first time she tried it on him. Still, it wasn't worth the argument, so he changed into a pricier set of clothes. It was totally excessive, considering he'd be spending the whole day in the train, but his mother nodded approvingly when she saw him coming down the stairs. She had him turn and pose like a show animal for a while before pronouncing him 'fairly decent'. He went to the kitchen and, to his annoyance, Mother followed after him. No eating in peace today, it seemed.

Father was thankfully on one of his 'business trips', so he wouldn't have to deal with him today.

He entered the kitchen and frowned when he saw a bowl of porridge already waiting for him on the table. Usually he made his own breakfast, and he liked it that way, but he knew his mother never accepted that. This was her idea of a peace gesture, which meant she was going to ask something of him he wouldn't like.

"I figured I'd prepare something for you today, and I know you've always liked porridge," she said. Zorian refrained from mentioning he hadn't liked it since he was about eight. "You slept longer than I thought you would, though. It's gone cold while I've waited for you."

Zorian rolled his eyes and cast a slightly modified 'heat water' spell on the porridge, which was instantly returned to a pleasant temperature.

He ate his breakfast in silence while Mother talked to him at length about a crop-related dispute one of their suppliers was involved in, dancing around whatever topic she wanted to broach. He effortlessly tuned her out. It was practically a survival skill for every child in the Kazinski family, as both mother and father were prone to protracted lectures on every subject imaginable, but doubly so for Zorian, who was the black sheep of the family and thus subjected to such monologues more frequently than the rest. Thankfully, his mother thought nothing of his silence, because Zorian was always as silent as possible around his family – he had learned many years ago that this was the easiest way of getting along with them.

"Mother," he interrupted her, "I just woke up via Kiri jumping on me, I haven't had a chance to go to the bathroom and now you're pestering me while I'm eating. Either get to the point or wait a couple of minutes while I finish breakfast."

"She did it again?" his mother asked, amusement obvious in her voice.

Zorian rubbed his eyes, not saying anything, before surreptitiously pocketing an apple from the bowl on the table while his mother wasn't looking. There were a lot of annoying things Kirielle did again and again, but complaining about it to Mother was a waste of time. No one in this family was on *his* side.

"Oh, don't be like that," his mother said, noticing his less-than-pleased reaction. "She's just bored and playing with you. You take things way too seriously, just like your father."

"I am nothing like my father!" Zorian insisted, raising his voice and glaring at her. This was why he hated eating with other people. He returned to his breakfast with renewed vigor, eager to finish this as soon as possible.

"Of course you're not," Mother said airily, before suddenly switching the subject. "Actually, this reminds me of something. Your father and I are going to Koth to visit Daimen."

Zorian bit the spoon in his mouth to prevent himself from making a snide comment. It was always Daimen this, Daimen that. There were days when Zorian wondered why his parents had three other children when they were clearly so enamored of their eldest son. Really, going to another continent just to visit him? What, were they going to die if they didn't see him for a year?

"What's that got to do with me?" Zorian asked.

"It will be an extended visit," she said. "We'll be there for about six months, most of it spent traveling from one place to another. You and Fortov will be at the academy, of course, but I'm worried about Kirielle. She's only nine and I don't feel comfortable bringing her along with us."

Zorian paled, finally catching on to what she wanted of him. Hell. No.

"Mother, I'm 15," he protested.

"So?" she asked. "Your father and I were already married when we were your age."

"Times change. Besides, I spend most of the day at the academy," Zorian responded. "Why don't you ask Fortov to take care of her? He's a year older and he has his own apartment."

"Fortov is in his fourth year," his mother said sternly. "He's going to graduate this year so he has to focus on his grades."

"You mean he said no," Zorian concluded out loud.

"And besides..." she continued, ignoring his remark, "I'm sure you're aware of how irresponsible Fortov can be at times. I don't think he's fit to raise a little girl."

"And whose fault is that?" Zorian grumbled quietly, loudly dropping his spoon and pushing the plate away from him. Maybe Fortov was irresponsible because he knew mother and father would simply dump his responsibilities onto Zorian if he just played dumb long enough, didn't that ever occur to her? Why did it always fall to him to deal with the little imp? Well, he wasn't going to get saddled with this! If Fortov was too good to take care of Kirielle, then so was Zorian!

Plus, the little tattletale would undoubtedly report everything he did back to Mother without a second thought. The best thing about attending a school so far from home was that he could do whatever he wanted with his family being none the wiser, and there was no way he was going to give that up. Really, this was just a transparent ploy by his mother to spy on him, so she could lecture him some more about family pride and proper manners.

"I don't think I'm fit for that either," continued Zorian a little louder. "You said only a few minutes ago that I'm an embarrassment to the family. We wouldn't want to corrupt little Kiri with my uncaring attitude, now would we?"

"I didn't..."

"No!" Zorian shouted.

"Oh, have it your way," she huffed in resignation. "But really, I wasn't suggesting..."

"What are you talking about?" Kirielle called out from behind him.

"We were discussing what a rotten brat you are," Zorian shot back immediately.

"No you weren't!"

Zorian just rolled his eyes and rose from his seat, intending to go to the bathroom, only to find an irate little sister blocking his path. There was a knock at the door.

"I'll get it!" said Zorian quickly, knowing that Mother would demand that one of them open the door and that Kirielle wouldn't budge from her spot any time soon - she could be very stubborn when she wanted.

That was how Zorian found himself staring at a bespectacled woman dressed in expensive-looking khaki-colored clothes and cradling a thick book in her arm.

The woman gave him an appraising glance, adjusting her glasses. "Zorian Kazinski?"

"Uh, yeah?" he said, unsure how to react to this development.

"I am Ilsa Zileti, from Cyoria's Royal Academy of Magical Arts. I'm here to discuss the results of your certification."

Color drained from Zorian's face. They sent an actual mage to talk to him!? What did he do to warrant this!? Mother was going to skin him alive!

"You aren't in trouble, Mister Kazinski," she said, smiling in amusement. "The Academy has a habit of sending a representative to third year students to discuss various matters of interest. I confess I should have visited you sooner, but I have been a tad busy this year. You have my apologies."

Zorian stared at her for a few seconds.

"May I come in?"

"Huh? Oh!" said Zorian. "Forgive my manners, Miss Zileti. Come in, come in."

"Thank you," she accepted politely, stepping into the house.

After a quick introduction to his mother and sister, Ilsa asked him if he had somewhere they could discuss school matters privately. Mother quickly decided she had to go to town market and took Kirielle with her, leaving him alone in the house with the mage, who promptly scattered various papers across the kitchen desk.

"So, Zorian," she began. "You already know you passed the certification."

"Yes, I got the written notice," Zorian said. "Cirin doesn't have a mage tower, so I was going to pick up the badge when I got back to Cyoria."

Ilsa simply handed him a sealed scroll. Zorian inspected the scroll for a few seconds and then tried to break the seal so he could read it. Unfortunately, the seal was quite tough to break. Unnaturally so, even.

He frowned. Ilsa wouldn't have given him the scroll like this if she didn't think he had the ability to open it. A test of some sort? He wasn't anyone terribly special, so this would have to be something pretty easy. What skill did every recently-minted mage possess that would...

Oh. He almost rolled his eyes when he realized what this was all about. He channeled some mana into the seal and it promptly snapped itself in half, allowing Zorian to finally unroll the scroll. It was written in very neat calligraphy and appeared to be some kind of proof of his identity as a first circle mage. He glanced back at Ilsa, who nodded approvingly, confirming to Zorian that he had just passed a test of some sort.

"You don't really have to pick up your badge until you finish school," she said. "The badge is pretty expensive and nobody is really going to bother you about it unless you plan to open a shop or otherwise sell your magical expertise. If they do bother you for whatever reason, just refer them to the academy and we'll clear things up."

Zorian shrugged. While he did intend to break away from his family, he'd prefer to wait until graduation, and that was two years away. He motioned on for her to continue.

"Very well, then. The records say you lived in the academy housing for the past two years. I assume you intend to continue?"

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Zorian nodded and she reached into one of her pockets and handed him a rather strange key. Zorian knew how locks in general worked, and could even pick simpler ones with enough time, but he couldn't figure out how this key was supposed to work – it had no 'teeth' to fit in with the tumblers inside the lock. On a hunch, he channeled some mana into it, and faint golden lines immediately lit across the surface of the metal. He looked at Ilsa in a silent question.

"Housing for third years works differently than you are used to," she told him. "As you're likely aware, now that you are a certified first circle mage, the academy is authorized to teach you spells of the first circle and above. Since you'll be handling sensitive material, greater security is required, so you'll be moving into a different building. The lock on your door is keyed to your mana, so you'll have to channel some of your personal mana into the key like you did just now before it will unlock."

"Ah," said Zorian. Idly he spun the key in his hand, wondering how exactly they got a hold of his mana signature. Something to research later, he supposed.

"Normally I would be explaining to you in detail what it means to be a third year student at Cyoria's magical academy, but I hear you have a train leaving soon, so why don't we jump straight to the main reason I'm here: your mentor and electives. You can ask me anything you wish to know afterwards."

Zorian perked up on this, especially the mention of 'mentor'. Each third year was given a mentor that they met with once a week, who was supposed to teach students in ways not possible in a standard class format, and otherwise help them reach their maximum potential. A choice of one's mentor could make or break one's magical career and Zorian knew he had to choose carefully. Fortunately, he had asked around among older students to find out which ones were good and which ones were bad, so he figured he would at least be able to get an above-average one.

"So which mentors can I choose from?" Zorian asked.

"Well, actually, I'm afraid you can't," Ilsa said apologetically. "Like I said, I was supposed to get to you sooner. Unfortunately, all but one of the

mentors have filled their quota of students at this point.”

Zorian had a bad feeling about this... “And this mentor is?”

“Xvim Chao.”

Zorian groaned, burying his face in his hands. Of all the teachers, Xvim was widely agreed upon as the *worst* mentor you could possibly get. It just had to be him, didn’t it?

“It’s not that bad,” Ilsa assured him. “The rumors are mostly exaggerated, and mostly spread by students unwilling to do the kind of work Professor Xvim requires of his charges. I’m sure a talented, hard-working student such as yourself will have no problems with him.”

Zorian snorted. “I don’t suppose there is any chance to transfer to another mentor, is there?”

“Not really. We’ve had a really good pass rate last year, and all of the mentors are swamped with students as it is. Professor Xvim is the least burdened of the available mentors.”

“My, I wonder why,” Zorian mumbled. “Alright, fine. What about electives?”

Ilsa handed him another scroll, this one unsealed, containing a list of all elective classes offered by the academy. It was long. *Very* long. You could sign up for practically anything, even things that weren’t of strictly magical nature: things like advanced mathematics, classical literature, and architecture. It was to be expected, really, since Ilkosian magical tradition had always been inextricably connected to other intellectual pursuits.

“You can choose up to five, but no less than three electives this year. It would be a lot more convenient for us if you did it now, so that we can finalize the schedules over the weekend before the classes start. Don’t be too intimidated by the sheer size of the list. Even if you choose something that doesn’t appeal to you, you can switch to a different elective during the first month of school.”

Zorian frowned. There were a lot of electives and he wasn’t quite sure which ones he wanted to take. He’d already gotten shafted in the mentor department, so he really couldn’t afford to screw up here. This would take a while.

“Please don’t take this the wrong way Miss Zileti, but would you mind if we take a short break before we go any further with this?”

“Of course not,” she said. “Is something the matter?”

“Not at all,” assured Zorian. “It’s just that I *really* need to go to the bathroom.”

Probably not the best way to make a first impression. Kirielle was so going to pay for putting him in this position.

- break -

Zorian trailed after his family in silence as they entered Cirin’s train station, ignoring Fortov’s exuberant greeting of some ‘friends’ of his. He scanned the crowd on the train station for any familiar faces but, predictably, came out empty. He didn’t really know all that many people in his home town, as his parents loved reminding him. He felt his mother’s gaze on him as he unsuccessfully searched for an empty bench, but refused to look back at her – she would take that as permission to initiate conversation, and he already knew what she would say.

‘Why don’t you join Fortov and his friends, Zorian?’

Because they’re immature jackasses, just like Fortov, that’s why.

He sighed, looking at the empty train tracks with annoyance. The train was late. He didn’t mind waiting as such, but waiting in the crowds was pure torture. His family would never understand, but Zorian hated crowds. It wasn’t any tangible thing, really – it was more like large gatherings of people projected some kind of presence that weighed down on him constantly. Most of the time it was annoying, though it did have its uses – his parents stopped taking him to church when they realized that dragging him into a small hall packed with people resulted in vertigo and fainting in a matter of minutes. Fortunately, the train station wasn’t currently crowded enough to produce such intense effects, but Zorian knew prolonged exposure would take its toll. He hoped the train wouldn’t take *too* long, because he didn’t relish spending the rest of the day with a headache.

Fortov’s loud laughter broke him out of such gloomy musings. His older brother didn’t have such problems, that’s for sure. Like always, he was cheerful, sociable, and had a smile that could light up the world. The people he was surrounded with were clearly enthralled with him, and he stood out among them at first glance, despite having the same thin build that Zorian did. He just had that kind of presence around him. He was like Daimen in this way, only Daimen had actual skills to back up his charm.

He scoffed, shaking his head. Zorian didn’t know for sure how Fortov had been accepted into a supposedly elite institution like Cyoria’s magical academy, but he strongly suspected Father had greased a few palms to get Fortov in. It wasn’t that Fortov was stupid, so much as lazy and completely unable to focus on a task, no matter how critical. Not that most people knew that, of course – the boy was charming as hell, and very adept in sweeping his inadequacies under the metaphorical rug.

His father always joked that Fortov and Zorian each got a half of Daimen in them: Fortov got his charm, and Zorian his competence.

Zorian had never liked his father’s sense of humor.

A whistle pierced the air, and the train entered the station with a high-pitched squeal of metal wheels braking against the tracks. The original trains were steam-powered machines that billowed smoke wherever they went and consumed unholy amounts of coal to keep going, but this one was powered by the newer techno-magic engines that consumed crystallized mana instead. Cleaner, cheaper, and required less maintenance. Zorian could actually feel the mana radiating off the train as he approached, though his ability to sense magic was too underdeveloped to tell him any details. He had always wanted to look around the engine room of one of these things but could never figure out a good way to approach the train operators.

But that was a thought for another time. He gave a brief goodbye to Mother and Kirielle and entered the train to find himself a seat. He intentionally chose an empty compartment, something that was surprisingly easy to find. Apparently, despite the gathered crowd, few of them would be taking this particular train.

Five minutes later, the train gave another ear-splitting whistle and began its long journey towards Cyoria.

- break -

There was a sharp crackling sound, following by the sound of a bell ringing.

“Now stopping in Korsa,” a disembodied voice echoed. A crackling sound again. “I repeat, now stopping in Korsa. Thank you.”

The speakers crackled one last time before turning silent.

Zorian released a long sigh of irritation and opened his eyes. He hated trains. The boredom, the heat, and the rhythmic thumping sounds all conspired to make him sleepy, but every time he finally drifted off to sleep he was rudely awoken by the station announcer. That this was the very purpose of that announcer – to wake up passengers who would sleep through their destination – was not lost on Zorian, but it was no less annoying because of it.

He looked through the window, only to see a train station like any other. In fact, it was completely identical to the previous five, down to the blue outline on the big white tablet saying ‘Korsa’. Apparently the station builders were working off some kind of template these days. Looking at the station platform they were stopping at, he could see a large crowd of people waiting to get on the train. Korsa was a major trading hub, and a lot of newly minted merchant families lived here, sending their children to Cyoria’s prestigious academy to become mages and mingle among children of other influential people. Zorian found himself wishing that none of his fellow students join him in his compartment, but he knew it was an idle dream – there were too many of them and his compartment was completely empty aside from him. He did all he could to make himself comfortable in his seat and closed his eyes again.

The first person to join him in his compartment was a chubby, glasses-wearing girl in a green turtleneck. She gave him a cursory glance and started reading a book in silence. Zorian would have been ecstatic with such an agreeable traveling companion, but soon enough a group of four other girls came in and took the remaining four seats for themselves. The newcomers were very loud and prone to giggling fits, and Zorian was sorely tempted to get up and find himself a new compartment to occupy. He spent the rest of the trip alternating between looking through the window at the endless fields they were passing and exchanging annoyed glances with the green-turtleneck girl, who seemed similarly irritated by the other girls’ antics.

He knew they were getting close to Cyoria when he could see trees on the horizon. There was only one city on this route that was this close to the great northern forest, and the trains otherwise avoided getting close to so infamous a place. Zorian picked up his bag and went to stand by the exit. The idea was to be among the first to disembark, and thus avoid the usual crowding that always occurred once they got to Cyoria, but he was too late – there was already a crowd at the exit when he approached. He leaned on the nearby window and waited, listening to animated conversation between three first year students beside him, who were talking excitedly amongst themselves about how they were going to start learning magic and whatnot. Boy, were they going to be disappointed – the first year was all theory, meditation exercises, and learning how to access your mana consistently.

“Hey, you! You’re one of the upperclassmen, aren’t you?”

Zorian looked at the girl talking to him and suppressed a groan of irritation. He so did not want to talk to these people. He had been in the train since early morning. Mother had given him a nasty lecture because he hadn’t offered Ilsa something to drink while she was in the house, and he was in no mood for anything.

“I suppose you could describe me as such,” he said cautiously.

“Can you show us any magic?” she asked eagerly.

“No,” said Zorian flatly. He wasn’t even lying. “The train is warded to disrupt mana shaping. They had problems with people starting fires and vandalizing compartments.”

“Oh,” the girl said, clearly disappointed. She frowned, like trying to figure something out. “Mana shaping?” she asked cautiously.

Zorian raised an eyebrow. “You don’t know what mana is?” She was first year, yes, but that was elementary. Anyone who went through elementary school should know at least that much.

“Magic?” she tried lamely.

“Ugh,” grunted Zorian. “The teachers would so fail you for that. No, it’s not magic. It’s what powers magic - the energy, the power, that a mage shapes into a magical effect. You’ll learn more about it in lectures, I guess. Bottom point is: no mana, no magic. And I can’t use any mana at the moment.”

This was misleading, but whatever. There was no way he was explaining things to some random stranger, especially since she should already know this stuff.

“Um, okay. Sorry to bother you then.”

With a lot of squealing and steam-letting, the train stopped at Cyoria’s train station, and Zorian disembarked as fast as he could, pushing past the awed first-years staring at the sight before them.

Cyoria’s train station was huge, a fact made obvious by the fact that it was enclosed, making it look more like a giant tunnel. Actually, the station as a whole was even larger, because there were four more ‘tunnels’ like this one, plus all the support facilities. There was nothing like it anywhere in the world, and virtually everyone was stupefied the first time they saw it. Zorian was too, when he first disembarked here. The feeling of disorientation was amplified by the sheer number of people that went through this terminal, whether they were passengers going in and out of Cyoria, workers inspecting the train and unloading luggage, newsboys shouting headlines, or homeless people begging for some change. As far as he knew, this massive flow of people never really ceased, even at night, and this was a particularly busy day.

He looked at the giant clock hanging from the ceiling and, finding out he had plenty of time, bought himself some bread from the nearby bakery and then set course for Cyoria’s central plaza, intending to eat his newly acquired food while sitting on the edge of the fountain there. It was a nice place to relax.

Cyoria was a curious city. It was one of the most developed and largest cities in the world, which was at first glance strange, as Cyoria was dangerously close to monster-infested wilderness and wasn’t in a favorable trade location. What really catapulted it to prominence was the massive circular hole on the west side of the city – probably the most obvious Dungeon entrance ever and the only Rank 9 mana well known to exist. The absolutely *massive* quantities of mana gushing out from the underworld had made the spot an irresistible magnet for mages. The presence of such a huge number of mages made Cyoria unlike any other city on the continent, both in the culture of the people living there and, more obviously, in the architecture of the city itself. A lot of things that would be too impractical to build elsewhere were routinely done here, and it made for an inspiring sight if you could find a good spot to watch the city from.

He froze in his tracks when he noticed a swarm of rats staring at him from the bottom of the stairway he was about to descend. Their behavior was strange enough, but his heartbeat really sped up when he took notice of their heads. Was that... were their brains exposed!? He swallowed heavily and took a step back, slowly retreating from the stairwell before turning around and fleeing in a full sprint. He wasn’t sure what they were, but those were definitely *not* normal rats.

He supposed he shouldn’t be so shocked, though – a place like Cyoria attracted more than mages – magical creatures of all breeds found such places just as irresistible. He was just glad the rats didn’t pursue him, because he had nothing in the way of combat spells. The only spell he knew that could be used in a situation like this was the ‘spook animals’ spell, and he had no idea how effective that would have been against such clearly magical creatures.

Somewhat shaken but still determined to get to the fountain, he tried to circle the rat gathering by going through the nearby park, but luck just wasn’t on his side today. He promptly ran into a little girl crying her eyes out on the bridge he had to cross, and it took him five minutes just to get her to calm down enough to find out what happened. He supposed he could have just pushed past her and left her there to cry, but not even he was that cold-hearted.

“T-the b-bike!” she blurted out finally, hiccupping heavily. “It f-fell in!” she wailed.

Zorian blinked, trying to interpret what she was trying to tell him. Apparently realizing she wasn’t making any sense, the girl pointed towards the creek running underneath the bridge. Zorian looked over the edge of the bridge and, sure enough, there was a children’s bicycle half-submerged in the muddy waters.

“Huh,” Zorian said. “Wonder how that happened?”

“It fell in!” the girl repeated, looking as if she was going to cry again.

“All right, all right, no need for waterworks, I’ll get it out okay?” Zorian said, eying the bicycle speculatively.

“You’ll get dirty,” she warned quietly. Zorian could tell from her tone of voice that she hoped he would get it out anyway.

“Don’t worry, I have no intention of wading through that mud,” Zorian said. “Watch.”

He made a few gestures and cast a ‘levitate object’ spell, causing the bike to jerkily rise out of the water and into the air. The bike was a lot heavier than the objects he usually practiced with, and he had to levitate the bike a lot higher than he was used to, but it was nothing outside his capabilities. He snatched the bike by its seat when it was close enough and placed it on the bridge.

“There,” Zorian said. “It’s all muddy and wet but I can’t help you there. Don’t know any cleaning spells.”

“O-Okay,” she nodded slowly, clutching her bicycle like it was going to fly out of her hand the moment she let go.

He bid her goodbye and left, deciding his relaxing time at the fountain just wasn't meant to be. The weather seemed to be worsening pretty quickly too – dark clouds were brewing ominously across the horizon, heralding rain. He decided to simply join the diffuse line of students trudging towards the academy and be done with it.

It was a long way from the train station to the academy, since the station was on the outskirts of the city and the academy was right next to the Hole. Depending on how physically fit you were, and how much luggage you had to drag around, you could get there in an hour or two. Zorian wasn't particularly fit, what with his skinny physique and shut-in ways, but he had purposely packed light in anticipation of this journey. He joined the procession of students that was still streaming from the train station in the direction of the academy, ignoring the occasional first year struggling with excessive baggage. He empathized with them because his asshole brothers didn't warn him to keep the luggage at a minimum either and he was like them the first time he arrived at the train station, but there was nothing he could do to help them.

The threat of rain and bad luck aside, he felt invigorated as he drew closer to academy grounds. He was drawing on the ambient mana suffusing the area around the Hole, replenishing the mana reserves he spent levitating that girl's bicycle. Mage academies are almost always built on top of mana wells for the express purpose of exploiting this effect – an area with such high ambient mana levels is a perfect place for inexperienced mages to practice their spellcasting. Anytime they run out of mana they can supplement their natural mana regeneration by replenishing their mana reserves from their very surroundings.

Zorian took out the apple he still carried in his pocket and levitated it over his palm. It wasn't really a spell, so much as raw mana manipulation – a mana shaping exercise that was supposed to help mages improve their ability to control and direct magical energies. It looked like such a simple thing, but it took Zorian two years before he mastered it fully. Sometimes he wondered if his family was right and he really was *too* focused on his studies. He knew for a fact that most of his classmates had much more tenuous control over their magic, and it didn't appear to be inhibiting them too much.

He dismissed the mana construct holding the apple in the air and let it fall down on his palm. He wished he had some kind of rain protection spell – the first drops of rain were already starting to fall. That, or an umbrella. Either would work just fine, except an umbrella didn't require several years of training to use.

"Magic can be such a rip-off at times," said Zorian gloomily.

He took a deep breath and started running.

- break -

"Huh. So there *is* a rain protection spell," mumbled Zorian as he watched raindrops splattering upon an invisible barrier in front of him. He extended his hand over the edge of the barrier, and it passed unimpeded. He withdrew his suddenly rather wet hand into the safety of the barrier and followed the boundary as far as his eyes could see. From what he could tell, the barrier encircled the entire academy compound (no small feat, as academy grounds were quite extensive) in a protective bubble that stopped the rain – and *only* rain – from penetrating it. Apparently the academy upgraded its wards again, because they didn't have this feature the last time it was raining.

Shrugging, he turned around and continued towards the administration building of the academy. It was too bad the barrier didn't also dry you out when you passed it, because he was soaking wet. Thankfully, his bag was waterproof, so his clothes and textbooks weren't in any danger of getting ruined. Slowing down to a leisurely stroll, he studied the collection of buildings that made up the academy. The wards weren't the only thing that was upgraded; the whole place looked... prettified, for a lack of a better term. Every building was freshly painted, the old brick road was replaced by a much more colorful one, the flower patches were in full bloom, and the small fountain that hadn't worked for years was suddenly functional.

"Wonder what *that*'s all about," he mumbled.

After a few minutes of contemplation, he decided he didn't care much. He would find out sooner or later, if it was of any importance.

The administration building was, predictably, mostly empty of students. Most of them took shelter from the rain instead of pressing on like Zorian, and those that didn't often didn't live on academy grounds and thus had no reason to come here today. That was perfect as far as Zorian was concerned, as it meant he could be done here quickly.

'Quickly' turned out to be a relative term – it took two hours of wrangling with the girl working at the administration desk before he had taken care of all the necessary paperwork. He asked about his class schedule, but was told it wasn't finalized yet and that he would have to wait until Monday morning. Come to think of it, Ilsa had mentioned the same thing. Before he left, the girl gave him a book of rules with which third-year students were expected to familiarize themselves before sending him on his way. Zorian idly flipped through the rule book while he searched for room 115, before putting it into one of the more obscure compartments in his backpack, never to be looked at again.

Academy-provided housing was pretty terrible, and Zorian had had very unpleasant experiences with it, but it was free and apartment space was severely overpriced in Cyoria. Even children of nobles often lived on academy grounds rather than in their own apartments, so who was he to complain? Besides, living so close to the lecture hall cut down on the travel time each morning and put him close to the biggest library in the city, so there were definitely good sides to it.

An hour later, he smiled to himself as he entered a fairly spacious room. He was even more pleased when he realized he had his own bathroom. With a shower stall, no less! It was a welcome change from having to share a cramped little room with an inconsiderate roommate and sharing a single communal bathroom with the whole floor. As far as furniture went, the room had a bed, a closet, a set of drawers, a work desk, and a chair.

Everything Zorian needed, really.

Dropping his luggage on the floor, Zorian changed out of his wet clothes before collapsing on the bed with relief. He had two whole days before the classes started, so he decided to postpone unpacking until tomorrow. Instead he remained motionless on the bed, wondering for a moment why he couldn't hear the raindrops hitting the glass pane of the window next to his bed, before remembering the rain barrier.

"I've got to learn how to cast that," he mumbled.

His spell collection was extremely limited at the moment, consisting of about 20 simple spells, but he had plans to rectify that this year. As a certified first circle mage, he had access to parts of the academy library he didn't before, and he planned on raiding them for spells contained within. Besides, this year's classes were supposed to be much more focused on practical spellcasting now that they'd proven themselves capable, so he should be learning plenty of interesting things in class too.

Tired from the long journey, Zorian closed his eyes, intending to take a short nap. He wouldn't wake up until tomorrow morning.

2. Life's Little Problems

Chapter 002 Life's Little Problems

Although the academy loved saying they were an elite institution thanks to the excellent quality of its teaching staff, the truth was that the main reason for their supremacy was their library. Through contributions of its alumni, generous budget allocations by a number of former headmasters, quirks of local criminal law, and sheer historical accident, the academy had built a library without equal. You could find anything you wanted, regardless of whether the topic was magical or not – there was a whole section reserved for steamy romance novels, for instance. The library was so massive it had actually expanded into the tunnels beneath the city. Many of the lower levels were only accessible to guild mages, so it was only now that Zorian was allowed to browse their contents. Fortunately, the library was open during the weekend, so the very first thing Zorian did when he woke up was descend into these depths to see what he'd been missing these past two years and maybe fill out his spellbook a bit.

He was pleasantly surprised at the sheer number of spells and training manuals available to a first circle mage. There were more books and spells than he could master in a lifetime. Most of the spells were either highly situational or minor variations of each other, so he didn't feel the need to obsessively learn all of them, but he could already see this place would keep him busy all year round. A lot of them looked surprisingly easy and harmless, and he couldn't help but wonder why they were kept on the restricted level instead of being available to everyone. He could have used these during his second year.

He was right in the middle of trying to find the rain barrier the academy incorporated into its ward scheme when he realized he had skipped breakfast and was getting awfully hungry, and that it was past noon. Reluctantly, he checked out a couple of books to pore over in depth in the safety of his room and went to get something to eat.

There was no kitchen in his room, sadly, but the academy had a pretty good cafeteria available to students – the food they offered was cheap yet surprisingly edible. Still, it was something of a poor man's option, and most of the richer kids ate in one of the many restaurants in the vicinity of the academy. That's why Zorian was a bit shocked when he entered the cafeteria and realized that changes to the academy weren't only in exterior appearances – the cafeteria was positively sparkling, and all the tables and chairs were brand new. It was weird to see the place so... clean.

Shaking his head, he quickly loaded a couple of plates on his tray, idly noting the cooks were a lot less stingy with the meat and other expensive parts of the dish all of a sudden, and then started scanning the eating students for familiar faces. Clearly something was happening here, and he hated being left outside the loop.

“Zorian! Over here!”

How fortunate. Zorian immediately set off towards the chubby boy gesturing for him to come over. Zorian had learned over the years that his exuberant classmate was firmly plugged into the academy gossip network, and knew pretty much everything and everyone. If anyone would know what was going on, it would be Benisek.

“Hello, Ben,” Zorian said. “I’m surprised to see you in Cyoria so soon. Don’t you usually come with the last train?”

“I should be asking you that!” Benisek half-shouted. Zorian never understood why the boy had to be so loud all the time. “I came here so early but you’re already here!”

“You came back two days before classes start, Ben,” Zorian said, resisting the urge to roll his eyes at him. Only Benisek would think that coming a couple of days early is some great feat worth mentioning. “That’s not all that early. And I just got back yesterday.”

“So did I,” Benisek said. “Damn. If you had contacted me, we could have arranged to travel together or something. You must have been bored out of your mind here, all alone for a whole day.”

“Something like that,” agreed Zorian, smiling politely.

“So are you excited?” Benisek asked, suddenly changing the topic.

“About what?” Zorian asked. Funny, hadn’t Kirielle asked him the exact same question?

“The start of a new year! We’re third years now, that’s when the real fun starts.”

Zorian blinked. To his knowledge, Benisek was one of those people who weren’t terribly concerned about their success in the arcane arts. He already had a guaranteed post in his family business, and was here simply to obtain the prestige of being a licensed mage. Zorian had half expected him to drop out immediately following certification, yet here he was, just as excited as Zorian to finally start delving into the real mysteries of magic. Now he felt pretty bad about writing him off so quickly. He really shouldn’t be so presumptuous...

“Oh, that. Of course I’m excited. Though I must admit I never knew you actually cared about your education.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Benisek, eying him suspiciously. “The girls, man, I’m talking about the girls. The younger ones *love* upperclassmen like us! The new batch of first years will be all over us.”

Zorian groaned. He should have known.

“Anyway,” said Zorian, recovering quickly, “since I know you’re always gossiping around—“

“Informing myself about the current state of things,” Benisek cut in, his voice assuming a mock-lecturing quality.

“Right. What’s with the academy being all sparkly and clean all of a sudden?”

Benisek blinked. “You didn’t know? Oh man, people have been talking about this for months! Just which rock do you live under, Zorian?”

“Cirin is a glorified village in the middle of nowhere... as you very well know,” Zorian said. “Now spill.”

“It’s the summer festival,” Benisek said. “The whole city is getting ready for it, not just the academy.”

“But there’s a summer festival every year,” Zorian said, confused.

“Yeah, but this year is special.”

“Special?” Zorian asked. “How?”

“I don’t know, some astrological bullshit,” Benisek whined, waving his hand dismissively. “Why does it matter? It’s an excuse to have an even bigger party than usual. Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, I say.”

“Astro-“ began Zorian with a quirked eyebrow when something occurred to him. “Wait, you mean planetary alignment?”

“Yeah, that,” Benisek agreed. “What’s that anyway?”

“Do you have a couple of hours?”

“On second thought, I don’t want to know,” Benisek quickly backpedaled, chuckling nervously.

Zorian snorted. So easy to scare. The truth was that Zorian knew very little about planar alignments, and probably couldn’t speak about them longer than 30 seconds. It was a pretty obscure topic. Zorian strongly suspected that Benisek was right, and that it was being used simply as an excuse to have a bigger party.

“So what did you do over the summer?” Benisek asked.

Zorian groaned. “Ben, you sound like my elementary school literature teacher. ‘Now, children, for your homework you will write a short essay about what you did during the summer holidays.’”

“I’m just being polite,” Benisek said defensively. “No need to snap at me because you wasted your summer away.”

“Oh, and you spent it productively?” Zorian challenged.

“Well, not voluntarily,” Benisek admitted sheepishly. “Father decided it was time I start learning the family craft, so I spent all summer helping him and acting as his assistant.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” Benisek agreed, clacking his tongue. “He also made me choose estate management as one of my electives. I hear it’s a really tough class too.”

“Hm. Can’t say my summer was particularly stressful. I spent most of my time reading fiction and avoiding my family,” admitted Zorian. “Mother tried to dump my little sister on me this year, but I managed to talk her out of it.”

“I feel for you,” Benisek said with a shudder. “I’ve got *two* younger sisters and I think I’d die if they came to live with me here. They’re both utter nightmares! Anyway, what did you take for your electives?”

“Engineering, Mineral Alchemy, and Advanced Mathematics.”

“Eh?” Benisek blanched. “Man, you’re really taking this seriously, aren’t you? I guess you’re gunning for a spot in one of the spell forges, huh?”

“Yeah,” Zorian said.

“Why?” Benisek asked incredulously. “Designing magic items... that’s a tough, demanding job. Surely your parents could find you a spot in their business?”

Zorian gave him a strained smile. Yes, no doubt his parents already had a spot all planned out for him.

“I’d rather starve out in the streets,” Zorian told him honestly.

Benisek raised an eyebrow at him, but then simply shook his head sadly. “I think you’re crazy, personally. Who did you choose as your mentor?”

“I didn’t get to choose,” Zorian scoffed. “There was only one left by the time it was my turn to do so. I’m mentored under Xvim”

Benisek actually dropped his spoon at this, staring at him in shock. “Xvim!? But that guy’s a nightmare!”

“I know,” Zorian said, releasing a long-suffering sigh.

“God, I’d probably transfer if I got assigned to that asshole,” Benisek said. “You’re a lot braver a man than I, that’s for sure.”

“So who did you choose?” Zorian asked curiously.

“Carabiera Aope,” Benisek said, immediately brightening.

“Please don’t tell me you chose your mentor based on appearance?” begged Zorian.

“Well, not *just* based on appearance,” Benisek said defensively. “They say she’s pretty tolerant...”

“You don’t want to do any extra work,” Zorian surmised.

“This whole thing is like a vacation to me,” Benisek admitted sheepishly. “I get to postpone employment for two years and have some fun in the meantime. You’re only young once, you know?”

Zorian shrugged. Personally he found learning about magic and gathering knowledge in general to be fun all by itself, but he knew all too well that very few people shared this opinion with him.

“I suppose,” Zorian said noncommittally. “So is there anything else that everyone knows that I should be familiar with?”

He spent another hour or so conversing with Benisek, touching upon a variety of topics. It was particularly interesting to hear which of their classmates would be joining them this year and which ones wouldn’t. Zorian had thought the certification exam was a bit on the easy side, but apparently he was mistaken, since roughly a quarter of their classmates would not be joining them. He did notice that most of the failed students were civilian-born ones, but this wasn’t terribly unusual – mage-born students had parental support when learning magic, and a reputation to live up to. He was pleasantly surprised that one particular asshole wouldn’t be joining them this year – apparently Veyers Boranova lost his temper on his disciplinary hearing and got himself expelled from the academy. He wouldn’t be missed. Honestly, that boy was a menace and it was a disgrace they hadn’t expelled him sooner. Fortunately, it seemed there were some things that just couldn’t be overlooked, even if you were an heir of Noble House Boranova.

He left when Benisek started discussing pros and cons of various girls in their class, not willing to get dragged into such a discussion, and went back to his room to get some reading done. He hadn’t even opened the first book properly when he was interrupted by a knock on the door. Very few people cared to track him down to his room, so he actually had a pretty good idea of who it was before he even opened the door.

“Hi, Roach!”

Zorian stared at the grinning girl in front of him, contemplating whether to take offense at the insulting nickname before shooing her inside. In the past, while he was still crushing on her, the nickname had kind of hurt... now it was just slightly annoying. Taiven promptly ran inside and jumped on his bed like a little kid. Really, what had he ever seen in her? Beside a beautiful older girl who was fairly nice to him and had a propensity to wear form-fitting clothes, that is.

“I thought you graduated,” he said.

“I did,” she answered, taking one of the spellbooks he borrowed from the library into her lap to leaf through it. Seeing how she had already taken over his bed, he sat down on the chair in front of his work desk. “But you know how it goes – there’s always too many young mages, never enough masters willing to take them under their wing. I’m working as a class assistant for Nirthak. Hey, if you took nonmagical combat you’re going to see me all the time!”

“Yeah, right,” Zorian snorted. “Nirthak blacklisted me in advance, just in case I get any ideas.”

“Really!?”

“Yeah. Not that I would ever sign up for a class like that anyway,” Zorian said. Except maybe to watch Taiven all sweaty and puffed up in that tight outfit she always wore whenever she trained.

“Pity,” she said, seemingly engrossed in his book. “You really should put on some muscle one of these days. Girls like boys who exercise.”

“I don’t care what girls like,” Zorian snapped crankily. She was starting to sound like his mother. “Why are you here anyway?”

“Oh calm down, it was just a thought,” she said with a dramatic sigh. “Boys and their fragile little egos.”

“Taiven, I like you, but you’re really treading on thin ice here,” Zorian warned.

“I came here to ask if you would join me and a couple of others on a job tomorrow,” she said, throwing the book aside and finally getting to the point of her visit.

“A job?” Zorian asked suspiciously.

“Yeah. Well, more like a mission. You know those job postings people tack onto the big board inside the administrative building?”

Zorian nodded. Whenever a mage in the city wanted something done for cheap, he posted a ‘job offer’ there for interested students. The payout was generally miserable, but students had to collect ‘points’ by doing these, so everyone had to do a number of them. Most people didn’t start doing these before their fourth year, unless they really needed the money, and Zorian fully intended to follow this tradition.

“There is a pretty nice one there,” Taiven said. “It’s actually just a simple find and retrieve in the tunnels below the city that-“

“A sewer run!?” asked Zorian incredulously, cutting her off. “You want me to go on a sewer run?”

“It’s good experience!” Taiven protested.

“No,” said Zorian, crossing his arms. “No way.”

“Oh come on, Roach, I’m begging you!” Taiven whined. “We can’t apply until we find a fourth member of the team! Would it kill you to make this tiny sacrifice for your old friend?”

“It very well might!” Zorian said.

“You’ll have three other people to protect you!” she assured. “We’ve been there hundreds of times and nothing really dangerous ever happens down there – the rumors are mostly exaggerated.”

Zorian snorted and looked away. Even if they really did keep him safe, it was still a trek through smelly, disease-ridden tunnels with three people he didn’t really know, and who probably resented having to bring him along for the sake of a formality.

Besides, he still hadn’t forgiven her for that fake date she invited him on. She may not have known he was crushing on her at the time, but it was still a pretty insensitive thing she did that evening.

Also, he might feel a little more inclined to help if she stopped calling him ‘Roach’. It was not nearly as cute as she thought it was.

“Okay, how about a bet?” she tried.

“No,” Zorian promptly refused.

She let out an affronted cry. “You didn’t even hear me out!”

“You want to fight,” Zorian said. “You *always* want to fight.”

“So?” she pouted. “You chickening out? You’re admitting you’d lose to a girl?”

“Absolutely,” Zorian deadpanned. Both of Taiven’s parents were martial arts practitioners, and they had taught her how to fight since she could walk. Zorian wouldn’t last five seconds against her in hand-to-hand combat.

Hell, he doubted anyone in school would do much better.

Taiven waved her hands in the air in a frustrated gesture and promptly collapsed on his bed, and for a moment Zorian actually thought she was accepting defeat. Then she sat up and folded her legs under her until she was sitting in a lotus position. The smile on her face was giving Zorian a bad feeling.

“So,” she began cheerfully. “How have you been?”

Zorian sighed. This was *not* how he intended to spend his weekend.

- break -

Two days later, Zorian was well settled into his new room and it was Monday morning. Rising early was pure torture after he had gotten into the habit of sleeping in, but he managed. He had many flaws, but a lack of self-discipline wasn’t one of them.

If you spot this tale on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

He had managed to fend off Taiven after three hours of verbal wrangling, though he was in no mood for anything after that and put off reading for another day after her visit. In the end he spent the entire weekend lazing around, actually somewhat impatient for the classes to start.

The first class of the day was Essential Invocations, and Zorian wasn’t quite sure what it was supposed to teach. Most of the other classes on his schedule had a clear subject of study visible from the very name of the subject, but ‘invocation’ was a general term. Invocations were what most people thought about when someone said ‘magic’ – a few arcane words and strange gestures and poof! Magic effect. It was actually more involved than that – a *lot* more involved – but that was the visible part, so that’s what people focused on. Clearly the academy felt the class was

important, because they had a period scheduled for it every day of the week.

As he approached the classroom, he noticed a familiar person standing in front of the door with a clipboard in her hands. This, at least, was a familiar sight. Akoja Stroze had been the class representative for his group since their first year, and she took her position *very* seriously. She gave him a harsh look when she noticed him, and Zorian wondered what he had done to annoy her now.

“You’re late,” she stated when he got close enough.

Zorian raised an eyebrow at this. “The class doesn’t start for at least 10 more minutes. How can I be late?”

“Students are supposed to be in the classroom and ready for class 15 minutes before the class starts,” she stated.

Zorian rolled his eyes. This was ridiculous, even for Akoja. “Am I the last person to arrive?”

“No,” she conceded after a short silence.

Zorian walked past her and entered the classroom

You could always tell when you walked into a gathering of mages – their appearance and fashion sense gave them away unerringly, especially in Cyoria where mages from all over the world sent their children. Many of his classmates came from established magical families, if not outright Houses, and many mage lineages produced children with noticeable peculiarities, either because of bloodlines passed down from parents or because of secret enhancement rituals they subjected themselves to… things like having green hair, or always giving birth to soul-bonded twins, or having tattoo-like markings on their cheeks and forehead. And these were real examples exhibited by his classmates.

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, he went towards the front of the classroom, throwing polite greetings to those few classmates he knew a little better than the rest. No one really tried to talk to him – though there was no bad blood between him and anyone in the class, he was not particularly close to any of them either.

He was just about to sit down when frantic hissing interrupted him. He glanced to his left, watching his classmate whisper soothingly to the orange-red lizard in his lap. The animal was staring at him intently with its bright yellow eyes, nervously tasting the air with its tongue, but didn’t hiss again when Zorian carefully lowered himself into the chair.

“Sorry about that,” the boy said. “He’s still a little uneasy around strangers.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Zorian said, waving the apology away. He didn’t know Briam all that well, but he did know his family bred fire drakes for a living, so it wasn’t that unusual for him to have one. “I see your family has given you a fire drake of your own. Familiar?”

Briam nodded happily, scratching the lizard’s head absent-mindedly and causing the creature to close its eyes in contentment. “I bonded with him over the summer holidays,” he said. “Familiar bond is a little strange at first, but I think I’m getting the hang of it. At least I’ve managed to talk him out of breathing fire at people without permission, else I would have to put a fire-suppressant collar on him, and he hates that thing.”

“The school won’t bother you about bringing it to class?” Zorian asked curiously.

“Him,” Briam corrected. “And no, they won’t. You can bring a familiar to class if you’ve reported them to the academy and can get them to behave. And, of course, as long as they’re reasonably sized.”

“I hear fire drakes can get pretty big,” Zorian remarked speculatively.

“They do,” Briam agreed. “That’s why I wasn’t allowed to have one till now. In a few years he’ll get way too big to follow me into the classroom, but by that time I’ll already be finished with my education and back at the ranch.”

Satisfied the creature wouldn’t try to take a bite out of him during class, Zorian let his attention wander elsewhere. He mostly spent his time studying the girls as covertly as possible. He blamed Benisek for this, since he usually wasn’t in the habit of ogling his classmates. No matter how cute some of them were…

“Hot, isn’t she?”

Zorian jumped in surprise at the voice behind him and cursed himself for being caught so unawares.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said quickly, turning as calmly as possible in his seat to face Zach. The cheery, smiling face of his classmate told him he wasn’t fooling anyone.

“Don’t be so flustered,” Zach told him happily. “I don’t think there’s a single boy in class who doesn’t occasionally daydream about our resident red-headed goddess.”

Zorian snorted. Actually, he wasn’t looking at Raynie at all, but at the girl she was talking to. Not that he was going to correct Zach about that. Or anything, really – Zorian had mixed feelings about Zach. On the one hand the raven-haired boy was charming, confident, handsome, and popular – and thus reminded him uncomfortably of his brothers – but on the other hand he was never mean or inconsiderate to Zorian, and would often chat with him when everyone else was content to ignore him. As a result, Zorian was never quite sure how to act around him.

Besides, Zorian never discussed his tastes in women with other boys. The academy rumor mill breathed rumors about who liked who, and Zorian knew all too well how even relatively innocuous rumors could make your life miserable for years to come.

“From your wistful tone, I’m guessing she’s still immune to your charm,” Zorian said, trying to shift the focus of the conversation away from him.

“She’s tricky,” Zach agreed. “But I’ve got all the time in the world.”

Zorian raised an eyebrow at that, not sure what the other boy was implying. All the time in the world?

Thankfully, he was saved from further conversation when the door noisily opened and the teacher entered the classroom. Zorian was honestly surprised to see Ilsa walk into class with the huge green book that all teachers carried, though he really shouldn’t have been – he already knew Ilsa was a teacher at the academy, so there was nothing unusual about her teaching this class. She gave him a smile before setting the book down on her desk and clapping her hands together to silence those students who were too engrossed in their own conversations to notice the teacher in the room.

“Settle down everyone, the class has started,” Ilsa said, accepting the list of present students from Akoja, who remained standing beside Ilsa at attention, like a soldier in front of a superior officer.

“Welcome, students, to your first class of the new school year. I am Ilsa Zileti and I will be your teacher for this class. You are third year students now, meaning you have passed your certification and joined us in our... illustrious magi community. You have proven yourself to be intelligent, driven, and capable of bending mana – the lifeblood of magic – to your will. But your journey is just beginning. As all of you have noticed, and many of you have complained about, you have only been taught a handful of spells so far, and all of them are mere cantrips. You’ll be pleased to know this injustice ends now.”

A cheer erupted from the students, and Ilsa allowed them to go wild for a second before gesturing them to be silent again. She certainly had a flair for theatrics.

Much like the students, really – that cheer certainly wasn’t because they were honestly unable to contain their excitement.

“But what exactly are spells?” she asked. “Can anyone tell me?”

“Oh great,” Zorian mumbled. “A review session.”

Hesitant mumbling erupted in the classroom until Ilsa pointed to one particular girl, who repeated her answer of ‘structured magic’.

“Indeed, spells are structured magic. To cast a spell is to invoke a particular mana construct. A construct that is, by its very nature, limited in what it can do. This is why structured spells are also called ‘bounded spells’. The shaping exercises you have been doing for the past two years – the ones that you all think are a useless chore – are unstructured magic. In theory, unstructured magic can do anything. Invocations are simply a tool to make your life easier. A crutch, some would say. To cast a bounded spell is to sacrifice flexibility and force mana into a rigid construct that can only be modified in minor ways. So why does everyone prefer invocations?”

She waited for a few moments before continuing. “In an ideal world, you would learn how to perform all your magic in an unstructured manner, bending it to your will as you please. But this is not an ideal world. Unstructured magic is slow and hard to learn, and time is precious. And besides, invocations are good enough for most purposes. They can do amazing things. Many of the things you can accomplish with invocations have never been reproduced using unstructured magic. Others...”

She took out a pen from her pocket and placed it on the table before casting what Zorian recognized as a simple ‘torch’ spell. The pen erupted in soft light that illuminated the room. Well, at least now he knew why the curtains were closed in the classroom – it was hard to effectively demonstrate light spells in broad daylight. The spell was nothing new to Zorian, though, since they were taught how to cast it last year.

“The ‘torch’ invocation is one of the simplest spells, and one that you should already know by now. It is comparable to the light-emitting shaping exercise that you should *also* know by now.”

Ilsa then launched into an explanation about the relative advantages and disadvantages of the ‘torch’ spell compared to the shaping exercise, and how it related to structured vs. unstructured magic in general. For the most part, it was nothing that Zorian hadn’t known from books and lectures already, and Zorian amused himself by drawing various magical creatures in the margins of his notebook while she talked. From the corner of his eye he could see Akoja and a number of other people furiously writing everything down, even though this was just a review session and they almost certainly had all of this already written in their last year’s notebooks. He didn’t know whether to be impressed with their dedication or disgusted by their single-mindedness. He did notice, however, that some of the students had animated their pens to copy down the entire lecture while they listened. Zorian personally preferred to write notes himself, but he could see how such a spell would be useful, so he quickly jotted down a reminder to find the spell they used to do that.

Ilsa then began discussing dispelling – another topic they had covered exhaustively during the previous year, and also one of the key areas they had to be proficient in to pass the certification process. To be fair, it was a complex and vital topic. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to effectively dispelling a structured spell, and without knowing how to dispel your own spells, experimenting with structured magic could be disastrous. Still, one would think the academy would assume they knew it by now and move on.

Somewhere along the line Ilsa decided to spice up her explanation with examples and performed some kind of summoning spell that resulted in several stacks of ceramic bowls popping into existence on her table. She told Akoja to distribute the bowls to everyone, and then had them use the

‘levitate object’ spell to make the bowls hover over their tables. Compared to levitating that little girl’s bicycle out of the river, this was insultingly easy.

“I see you’ve all managed to levitate your bowls,” Ilsa said. “Very good. Now I want you to cast the de-illuminator spell on it.”

Zorian raised his eyebrows at this. What would that achieve?

“Go on,” Ilsa urged. “Don’t tell me you have already forgotten how to cast it?”

Zorian quickly made a couple of gestures and whispered a short chant while concentrating on the bowl. The item in question wobbled for a second before finally dropping out of the air like any normal heavier-than-air item. A plethora of clattering sounds informed him that this wasn’t an isolated occurrence. He glanced towards Ilsa for an explanation.

“As you can see, the ‘levitate object’ spell can be dispelled by the ‘de-illuminator’ spell. An interesting development, don’t you agree? What does a spell designed to snuff out sources of magical light have to do with hovering objects? The truth, my young students, is that ‘de-illuminator’ is simply a specialized form of a general-purpose disruptor spell, which breaks down the structure of a spell in order to make it go away. While not designed with ‘levitate object’ in mind, it is still capable of affecting it if you supply it with enough power.”

“Why didn’t you tell us to just dispel it normally, then?” one of the girls asked.

“A topic for another time,” Ilsa said without missing a beat. “For now, I want you to take notice of what happened when you dispelled the spell on the bowl – it dropped like a rock, and if it had not been magically strengthened, it would have probably shattered upon impacting the table. This is the main problem inherent in all disruptor spells. Disruptor spells are the simplest form of dispelling, and virtually every spell can be disrupted if you put enough power into the disruptor, but sometimes disrupting the spell can have worse consequences than letting it run its course. This is especially true for higher-order spells, which almost always react explosively to disruption because of the vast amount of mana that goes into their casting. Not to mention that ‘enough power’ can be far more than any mage can provide. Place your bowls on the table and put a few torn pages from your notebook into it.”

Zorian was somewhat surprised by Ilsa’s sudden request, but did as she said. He always found tearing paper to be somewhat cathartic, so he filled the bowl with a bit more paper than necessary, and then waited for further instructions.

“I want you all to cast the ‘ignite’ spell on the paper, followed immediately by the de-illuminator on the resulting fire to dispel it,” Ilsa said.

Zorian sighed. This time he had caught on to what she was doing, and knew the flames would not be dispelled by the de-illuminator, but he did as she said anyway. The flames didn’t even flicker, and the fire died out on its own when it ran out of fuel.

“I see all of you can cast the ignite spell perfectly,” Ilsa said. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised – heating things is something that is very easy to do with magic. That and explosions. None of you managed to dispel the flames, though. Why do you suppose that is?”

Zorian snorted, listening to several other students trying to guess the answer. ‘Guess’ being the operative word, because they seemed to be throwing random answers around in hopes of making something stick. Normally he never volunteered for anything in class – he disliked the attention – but he was getting tired of the guessing game and Ilsa didn’t seem willing to supply the answer herself until someone figured it out.

“Because there’s nothing to dispel,” he called out. “It’s just a regular fire, started by magic but not fueled by it.”

“Correct,” Ilsa said. “This is another weakness of disruptor spells. They break down mana constructs, but any fundamentally non-magical effects caused by the spell are unaffected. With that in mind, let us return to our immediate problem...”

Two hours later, Zorian filed out of the classroom with his fellow classmates, actually a bit disappointed. He learned precious little during the lecture, and Ilsa said she would spend an entire month rounding out their basics before moving on to more advanced stuff. Then she gave them an essay on the topic of dispelling. It was shaping up to be a relatively boring class, since Zorian had a pretty good grasp of the basics, and they had essential invocations five times a week – that is to say, every day. Joy.

The rest of the day was uneventful, since the remaining four classes were purely introductory, outlining what material would be covered for each class and other such details. Essential alchemy and operation of magical items looked promising, but the other two classes were just more of the same thing they’d had for the past two years. Zorian wasn’t sure why the academy felt that they needed to continue learning about the history of magic and magical law into the third year of their education, unless they were deliberately trying to annoy everyone. This was especially true because their history teacher, an old man by the name of Zenomir Olgai, was very enthusiastic about his subject and gave them an assignment to read a 200-page history book by the end of the week.

It was a poor way to start the week in Zorian’s opinion.

- break -

The next day opened with combat magic, which was taught in a training hall instead of a classical classroom. Their teacher was an ex-battlemage named Kyron. It only took one look at him for Zorian to realize this was not going to be your average class.

The man standing in front of them was of average height, but he looked as if he was chiseled out of stone – bald, grim-faced, and very, very muscular. He had a rather prominent nose and he was completely shirtless, proudly displaying his rather developed chest muscles. He carried a

combat staff in one hand and the ever-present green teacher's book in the other. Had someone described the man to Zorian, he would have thought it funny, but there was nothing funny about facing this person in the flesh.

"Combat magic isn't really a category of spells as such," Kyron said in a loud, commanding voice, more like a general talking to recruits than a teacher talking to students. It was probably the quietest class Zorian had ever been in – even chatterboxes like Neolu and Jade were silent. "More like a way of casting magic. To use spells in combat, you need to cast them fast, and you need to overcome your opponent's defenses. This means they inevitably require a lot of power and that you shape the spell in an instant... which means that classical invocations like you learn them in other classes are *useless!*" He slammed his staff into the floor for emphasis, and his words reverberated throughout the training hall. Zorian could swear the man was empowering his voice with magic somehow. "Chanting a spell takes several seconds, if not longer, and most of your opponents will kill you before you finish. Especially today, in the aftermath of the Splinter Wars, when every fool is armed with a gun and educated in ways to effectively combat mages."

Kyron waved his hand in the air and the air behind him shimmered, revealing a transparent phantasm of a minotaur over him. The creature looked quite angry, but it was clearly an illusion.

"A lot of combat spells used by mages of old relied on people being awed by magic, or unfamiliar with its limitations. Today, every child that went through elementary school knows better than to be scared away by an obvious illusion like this one, much less a professional soldier or a criminal. Most of the spells and tactics you will find in the library are hopelessly obsolete."

Kyron stopped and rubbed his chin in thought. "Also, it is somewhat hard to focus on spellcasting when someone is actively trying to kill you," he remarked offhandedly. He shook his head. "As a consequence of all this, nobody casts combat spells as classical invocations anymore. Instead, people use spell formulas, like the one imprinted on my staff, to cast specific spells quicker and easier. I won't even be teaching you how to cast combat spells without these items, since teaching you how to use classical invocations effectively in battle would take years. If you're really curious, you can always browse the library for the right chants and gestures and practice on your own."

Then he handed them each a rod of magic missile and had them practice firing the spell at the clay dolls on the other end of the training hall, until their mana ran out. While he was waiting for the girl in front of him to run out of mana, Zorian studied the spell rod in his hand. It was a perfectly straight piece of wood that fit well into Zorian's hand and could be grasped at each of the two ends without any change in effect – that being a bolt of force emerging from the tip of the rod pointing away from the caster.

When it was finally his turn, he realized that casting with the aid of a spell formula was almost insultingly easy. He didn't even have to think about it much, just point the rod in the desired direction and channel mana through it – the spell formula in the rod did almost everything by itself. The real problem was that 'magic missile' took a lot more mana than any other spell that Zorian had encountered, and he had burned through his mana reserves in only eight shots.

Drained of mana and a little disappointed in how quickly he ran out, Zorian observed Zach as he fired magic missile after magic missile with lazy confidence. Zorian couldn't help but feel a bit envious of the boy – the amount of mana Zach had to have used by now was easily three or four times bigger than his maximum. And Zach didn't appear to be slowing down at all, either.

"Well, I'm going to let you all go, even though the class isn't officially over yet," Kyron said. "You're all out of mana, with the exception of mister Noveda here, and combat magic is all about practice. As parting words, I must caution you to use your newly acquired combat magic with restraint and responsibility. Otherwise, I will personally hunt you down."

If it were any other professor saying this, Zorian would have laughed, but Kyron might just be crazy enough to do it.

Then it was time for spell formula class, which was the very branch of magic that was used to build the focusing aids they used in their combat magic class. Their teacher, a young woman with gravity-defying orange hair that stood up like the flame of a candle, reminded Zorian of Zenomir Olgai with her enthusiasm for the subject. Zorian actually liked spell formulas, but not quite as much as Nora Boole thought was appropriate. Her 'recommended reading' included 12 different books and she immediately announced that she would be organizing bonus lectures each week for those interested in learning more. Then she gave them 'a short test' (it had 60 questions) to check how much they remembered from their last two years. She then wrapped up the class by telling them to read the first three chapters from one of the books on her recommended reading list for the next class (which was tomorrow).

After that, the rest of the day was like a relaxation period in comparison.

- break -

Zorian knocked on the door in front of him, nervously fidgeting in place. The first week of school was rather uneventful, aside from finding out that advanced mathematics was also taught by Nora Boole, and she was similarly enthusiastic about that subject as well, giving them another preliminary test and more 'recommended' reading. Still, it was now Friday, and it was time to meet his mentor.

"Come in," a voice sounded from the room, and Zorian swore he could feel the impatience in the voice already, like the man felt Zorian was wasting his time before he even saw him. He opened the door and came face to face with Xvim Chao, the notorious mentor from hell. Zorian could tell straight from his facial expression that Xvim didn't think much of him.

"Zorian Kazinski? Sit down please," Xvim ordered, not even bothering to wait for an answer. Zorian barely caught the pen the man threw at him the moment he sat down.

“Show me your basic three,” his mentor ordered, referring to the shaping exercises they were taught in their second year.

He had heard about this part. No one had ever mastered the basic three enough to impress Xvim. Sure enough, Zorian had barely begun levitating the pen when he was interrupted.

“Slow,” Xvim pronounced. “It took you a full second of concentration to snap into a proper mindset. You must be faster. Start over.”

Start over. Start over. Start over. He kept saying that, again and again, until Zorian realized it had been a whole hour since they had started with this. He had completely lost track of time in his attempt to focus on the exercise instead of his growing desire to ram the pen into Xvim’s eye socket.

“Start over.”

The pen immediately rose into the air, before Xvim was even done talking. Really, how could he possibly get any faster than this with the exercise?

He lost focus when a marble collided with his forehead, disrupting his concentration.

“You lost focus,” Xvim admonished.

“You threw a marble at me!” protested Zorian, unable to quite accept that Xvim had really done something so childish. “What did you expect would happen!?”

“I expected you to maintain focus on the exercise *anyway*,” Xvim said. “Had you truly mastered the exercise, such a minor disturbance would not have impeded you. It seems I have once again been regrettably proven right: the inadequacy of current academy curricula has stunted the growth of another promising student. It seems we have to start with the very basics of mana shaping. We will go through each of the basic three until you can do them flawlessly.”

“Professor, I had those exercises mastered a year ago,” Zorian protested. He was *not* wasting his time with the basic three. He had already spent too much time refining those in his opinion.

“You have not,” Xvim said, sounding as if he was affronted Zorian would even suggest such a thing. “Being able to perform the exercise reliably is not the same as mastering it. Besides, doing this will teach you patience and how to control your temper, which is *clearly* something you are having trouble with. Those are important skills for a mage to have.”

Zorian’s lips pressed themselves into a thin line. The man was intentionally pissing him off, Zorian was sure of it. Apparently the rumors were right and these sessions were going to be one giant exercise in frustration.

“Let us start with the levitation exercise,” Xvim said, oblivious to Zorian’s musings. “Start over.”

He was starting to hate those two words.

3. The Bitter Truth

Chapter 003 The Bitter Truth

If someone had asked Zorian at the end of the first week what classes he thought he would have the most trouble with, he would have answered Spell Formulas and Advanced Mathematics. Combat magic maybe. Two weeks later, he could safely say the answer was ‘Warding’.

Warding, the art of protecting things with magic, was a surprisingly complex field. You had to take into account what the thing you’re trying to protect is made of, what its dimensions and geometry were, how the ward is going to react with the already existing magic... or you could just slap a general-purpose warding invocation on your target and hope for the best. But the professor would fail you for that answer, so that wasn’t an option in the classroom.

But these complexities aside, the class should have been a breeze, or at least not this confusing – Zorian was a patient, methodical person when it came to magecraft, and had slogged through worse offenders than warding with decent results. The problem was that their teacher, a stern woman with hair cut so short she might as well have gone all the way and shaved her head completely, didn’t know how to teach. At all. Oh, she clearly knew the subject matter very well, but she simply didn’t know how to translate that knowledge into a proper lecture. She was leaving a lot of things out of her lectures, apparently not realizing that just because they were obvious to *her*, they were not obvious to her students. The textbook she assigned for the class wasn’t much better, and read more like a manual for a professional warden than a student’s textbook.

Question 6: *You are tasked with building a research outpost on a first degree mana well in the Sarokian Highlands. The building is meant to support a staff of 4 at any particular time, and the prospectors have expressed concerns over heavy presence of winter wolf packs and an infestation of borer wasps in the surrounding area. You have a budget of 25.000 pieces and are assumed to be a certified second circle warden.*

Assuming only mana extracted from mana well is available for powering the wards, which combination of wards do you feel would be the best choice for the outpost? Explain your reasoning.

Draw basic floor-plans of the planned outpost and explain how the planned room placement and shape of the building itself affect ward effectiveness.

Do you think the issue of the borer wasp infestation is best resolved by using a vermin repellent ward or by careful choice of building materials? Explain your reasoning.

Assume that you are commissioned to build not one but five outposts. The budget remains the same. How does this change your answer? Do you believe it is better to make the wards identical for all five outposts or do you feel some amount of difference between them is in order? Explain the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

Zorian rubbed his eyes in frustration. How was he supposed to answer a question like this? He didn’t take the architecture elective, and wasn’t aware that you had to take it to do well in your warding class. Not to mention that the question assumed they knew what the market rates were for buying the necessary materials, or that they knew where the Sarokian Highlands were. Zorian was quite good at geography, and he had no idea, though considering the presence of monsters like winter wolves, he suspected they were somewhere in the northern forest.

At the very least he knew how to answer the third part of the question. The correct answer was definitely wards. Even if the outpost was made inedible to borer wasp larvae, it would still make a prime place to build a nest. Considering how territorial those insects were, you didn’t want them living anywhere near you. Theoretically, the ‘careful choice of materials’ options would free up mana that would otherwise be spent on maintaining vermin repellent wards, but those wards required very little mana flow to stay active. Especially if they were keyed specifically to borer wasps.

His thoughts were interrupted by a girlish giggle coming from the back of the classroom. Zorian didn’t even have to turn around to know what was happening – Zach was entertaining the students around him again. He wished the teacher would penalize the guy for the disruption he was causing, especially in the middle of an exam, but Zach was a bit of a darling to the stern woman because he was the only student acing her exams. No doubt the guy had already finished his test with 100% accuracy. Which, by the way, made no sense whatsoever – during their first two years, Zach was a below-average student more distinguished because of his charm than magical talent. Kind of like a nicer version of Fortov, actually. This year, though, he was acing everything. *Everything*. He had a wealth of knowledge and a work ethic he hadn’t had at the end of their second year, far in excess of what could be gained through the normal passage of time.

How does one get so much better in the span of a single summer?

15 minutes later he threw his pencil down on the table, calling it quits. He only filled in eight out of ten questions, and he wasn’t sure how correct these eight were, but it would have to do. He would have to set aside a couple of days for warding self-study, because the lectures were making less and less sense with every passing day. The only other student that stayed in the classroom as long as he did was Akoja, and she handed in her paper only a few seconds after he did and followed him outside. Of course, they stayed in the classroom so long for very different reasons. He stayed so he could scrape in a few stray points. She stayed because she was a perfectionist who wanted to triple check everything to make sure she didn’t forget anything.

“Zorian, wait!”

Zorian slowed down and allowed Akoja to catch up to him. The girl could be insufferable sometimes, but she was a good person overall and he didn't want to snap at her just because the test didn't go the way he wanted.

"How do you think you did back there?" she asked.

"Badly," he answered, not seeing the point in lying.

"Yeah, me too."

Zorian rolled his eyes. His and her definition of 'badly' differed greatly.

"Neolu finished in only half an hour," said Akoja after a brief silence. "I bet she'll get a perfect score again."

"Ako..." Zorian sighed.

"I know everyone thinks I'm jealous but that's not normal!" said Akoja in a hushed but agitated voice. "I'm pretty smart and I study all the time and I'm still having problems with the curriculum. And we've both been in the same class as Neolu for the past two years and she was never this good. And... and now she's beating me in every single class!"

"Kind of like Zach," said Zorian.

"Exactly like Zach!" she agreed. "They even hang out together, two of them and one other girl I don't know, behaving like... like they're in their own private little world."

"Or like they're a couple," said Zorian, before frowning. "Triple? What's the word for a romantic relationship between 3 people?"

Akoja scoffed. "Whatever. The point is the three of them do nothing but waste time together and antagonize the teachers and get perfect scores anyway. They even refused the chance to get transferred to 1st tier groups, can you believe that!?"

"You're too worked up over this," Zorian warned.

"Aren't you a little bit curious how they do it?" asked Akoja.

"Of course I am," scoffed Zorian. "It's hard not to be. But what can I do about it? Besides, Zach has never done anything to me. I don't want to cause problems for him just because he has suddenly discovered his inner prodigy."

Zorian felt Benisek join them suddenly, simply popping up from behind a corner so he could walk beside them. Sometimes Zorian wondered if the chubby boy could *smell* gossip.

"I know what you mean," Benisek said. "I always thought Zach was no good at anything. You know, like me?"

"Hah. Well there's no way he got this good at everything over one summer break," Zorian said. "I guess he was pulling the wool over our eyes all this time."

"Man, that's so stupid," said Benisek. "If I were that good I'd make sure everyone knew it."

"I don't think he was faking lack of skill for two years straight," Akoja huffed. "He would have slipped at least occasionally."

"Well, what's left then?" Zorian asked. He refrained from listing some of the more obscure ways such a rapid growth could be accomplished with magic, because most of them were criminal and he was sure the academy checked Zach to make sure he wasn't a shapeshifting imposter or possessed by the ghost of a long-dead mage.

"Maybe he knows the answers in advance," she suggested.

"Only if he's an oracle," Benisek said. "Boole gave him an oral exam last Tuesday when you went home early, and he was rattling off answers like he swallowed the textbook."

The conversation died down as all three filed into the alchemy classroom, which was really more of a big alchemy workshop than a typical classroom. There were about 20 tables, each one full of various containers and other equipment. All ingredients for the day's lesson were already set out in front of them, though some would require additional preparation before they could be used in whatever process they were learning about that day – he was pretty sure they weren't going to be putting live cave crickets into the boiling solution, for instance.

Alchemy, like warding, was a complicated art, but their alchemy teacher knew her stuff *and* knew how to teach, so Zorian wasn't having any issues with the class. Technically they had to work in groups of 2 or 3 students because there were not enough tables and equipment, but Zorian always paired up with Benisek which translated to working alone in practice. The only problem was getting Benisek to shut up and stop distracting him during class.

"Hey Zorian," Benisek whispered to him not so quietly. "I never noticed it until now, but our teacher is kind of hot!"

Zorian gritted his teeth. The blasted idiot couldn't keep his voice down if his life was on the line. There was no way she didn't hear that.

“Benisek,” he whispered back to his partner. ‘I need good grades in alchemy to get my dream job when I graduate. If you screw this up for me I will never speak to you again.’

Benisek grumbled mutinously before returning to his ogling. Zorian refocused on grinding the borer wasp husks into a fine powder needed for the particular type of glue they were supposed to be making.

Admittedly, Azlyn Marivoski did look surprisingly good for a 50-year-old woman. Some kind of cosmetic treatment probably – she *was* their alchemy teacher, after all. Maybe even a true youth potion, though those were really rare and usually imperfect in some way.

“I don’t see why you like this class so much,” grumbled Benisek. “I’m not even sure I’d call it magical. You don’t need mana for it. It’s all searching for herbs this, cutting the roots the right way that… it’s like cooking. Hell, we’re making glue, of all things. You should leave that to girls.”

“Benisek…”

“It’s true!” he protested. “Even our teacher is a girl. A hot girl, but still. I read somewhere that alchemy traces its roots back to witches’ covens, with their potions and what not. Even now the best alchemical families are descended from witches. I bet you didn’t know that, huh?”

As a matter of fact, he did know that. He was, after all, tutored in alchemy by an honest-to-gods traditional witch before he went to the academy. She was so traditional, in fact, that she scoffed at the name ‘alchemy’ and referred to her skill strictly as ‘potion making’.

But that wasn’t the sort of stuff you wanted people to know, for a wide variety of reasons.

“If you don’t shut up right now I won’t let you partner with me anymore,” Zorian told him seriously.

“Hey!” protested Benisek. “Who’s going to help me with that stuff, then? I’m not good at this!”

“I don’t know,” said Zorian innocently. “Maybe you should find some girl to help you.”

Fortunately, the teacher was currently too busy fawning over Zach’s newest masterpiece to pay attention to Zorian’s table – somehow the boy managed to make some kind of enhancement potion out of the provided ingredients, and that was apparently very impressive. Azlyn didn’t appear to mind that Zach completely ignored the assignment to make magical glue and did his own thing.

Zorian shook his head and tried to concentrate on his own work. He wondered whether he would have gotten the same reaction if he did something like that, or if he would be accused of showing off. The few times Zorian tried to wow the teachers he was simply told to work on his basics and not to get cocky, because arrogance kills. Was it because Zach was the heir of Noble House Noveda? Or something else?

It was in moments like these that he understood exactly how Akoja felt about all this.

- break -

“And that concludes today’s lesson,” said Ilsa. “Before you leave, however, I have an announcement to make. As some of you know, the Academy traditionally organizes a dance on the eve of the summer festival. This year is no exception. The dance will take place in the entrance hall next Saturday. For those of you who are unaware, attendance is *mandatory* this year.”

Zorian groaned, slamming his forehead into the table in front of him, causing the rest of the class to snicker. Ilsa pointedly ignored his reaction.

“For those of you who don’t know how to dance, dance lessons will be held every day at eight in the evening in room six. Those of you who do know how to dance still have to come to at least one of these lessons to prove so – I will not have you embarrass me on the night of the dance. Dismissed. Miss Stroze, mister Kazinski, stay after class please.”

“Oh great,” Zorian mumbled. He probably should have restrained himself from reacting so strongly to the pronouncement. Truthfully, he intended to skip the dance, regardless of how mandatory it was. Did Ilsa realize that? No, he could detect no disapproval in posture, and he was pretty sure she’d be rather annoyed if she sensed his plans.

“Now then…” Ilsa began when he and Akoja were the only students left. “I assume you both know how to dance?”

“Sure,” said Zorian.

“Umm…” Akoja fidgeted. “I’m not very good at it.”

“No matter,” Ilsa said. “We’ll iron out any gaps you may have easily enough. The reason I told you to stay behind is that I want you to help me with the dance lessons.”

Zorian considered refusing outright – it wasn’t something he wanted to spend his time on – but he figured this could be a favor that would make Ilsa forgive him a transgression or two. Like, say, not showing up to the mandatory dance? Before he could express his tentative agreement, however, Akoja decided in his place.

“How can we help?” she said, clearly pleased they were chosen for this ‘honor’. Zorian raised an eyebrow at the way she presumed to speak for him, but let it slide for the moment.

"We only have five days to teach everyone how to dance," Ilsa said. "That's why we're going to use magic to help."

"Animation spells," Zorian guessed.

"Yes," Ilsa said, then quickly moved to explain for Akoja's benefit. "There is a spell that will guide a person's limbs and body through whatever dance it is designed for. It's not really suitable as a substitute for dancing skill, but if you practice dancing while you're under its effects, you will learn a lot faster than you would otherwise."

"How does that work?" Akoja asked curiously.

"The spell moves you around like a puppet on a string until you learn how to move along with it, if only to make the feeling of something jerking you around go away," said Zorian. "Eventually you no longer need the spell to dance correctly."

"I see you have personal experience with this method," Ilsa said with a smile.

Zorian resisted the urge to scowl. Getting put under that spell by Daimen was one of his childhood traumas. It wasn't amusing at all.

"I sincerely hope you intend to give students a choice to refuse," Zorian said.

"Of course," Ilsa agreed. "Though, those who refuse this method will have to attend at least three sessions instead of one, so I expect most will choose this option instead of the traditional one. In any case, I want you two to help me cast the spell on people during the lessons. I expect I'll have to dispel and recast the spell often, and I could use some help."

"And why did you choose us, specifically?" Zorian asked.

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"You both have decent control over your magic and you seem responsible enough to be taught such a spell. Animation spells targeting people are restricted material, after all, and not something normally available to students."

Huh. So how did Daimen get a hold of it then? In his second year, no less?

Well, whatever. At least knowing how to cast the spell will make it easier to counter it in the future.

"Anything else?" Ilsa asked. "Very well, then. Come to my office after the last class and I'll set up some dummies for you to practice on before moving on to people. Poorly controlled, the spell is intensely uncomfortable. We don't want to give anyone traumas."

Zorian narrowed his eyes. He didn't. Not even Daimen would... oh, who is he kidding? Of course he would have. Practicing such a spell on your own little brother was right up Daimen's alley.

"Miss Stroze, you can leave – I have something else to discuss with mister Kazinski."

Ilsa began to speak the moment Akoja was gone, catching Zorian somewhat by surprise. He shook his head to clear his thoughts, trying to ignore his annoyance with Daimen in favor of paying attention to what Ilsa was saying.

"So Zorian," she said with a faint smile. "How are you getting along with your mentor?"

"He's having me work on my basic three," Zorian told her flatly. "We're still on the levitation exercise."

Yes, even after 4 weeks, Xvim was still making him levitate a pencil over and over again. Start over. Start over. Start over. The only thing Zorian learned in those sessions was how to dodge marbles that Xvim kept throwing at him. The jerk seemed to have an endless supply of those things.

"Yes, Professor Xvim likes his students to have a firm grasp of the basics before moving on to advanced topics," Ilsa agreed.

That or he hates his students. Zorian personally thought his theory was a lot more plausible.

"Well, I just wanted to tell you that you might be able to change mentors soon," Ilsa said. "One of my students will be dropping out after the summer festival, and I'll have a vacancy to fill. Unless something comes up, you're almost certain to be the one I pick. That is, if you're actually interested in a transfer."

"Of course I'm interested!" Zorian half-shouted, much to Ilsa's amusement. He frowned for a moment. "Unless you also plan to throw marbles at me? Is that some kind of standard training method?"

"No," Ilsa chuckled. "Xvim is special that way. Well, I just wanted to see how you feel about this before doing anything. Have a nice day."

It was only after he was out of the classroom that he realized this development greatly complicated his plan to skip out on the dance. He couldn't afford to annoy his (potential) new mentor too much, else he'd be stuck with Xvim for the rest of his education.

Well played, professor. Well played.

“Why can’t we just cast that spell ourselves once the dancing starts?”

Zorian let out a long-suffering sigh. “You can’t make an animation spell do something you don’t know how to do yourself. You don’t know how to dance, hence you cannot animate anyone to dance either. Also, how are you going to break the spell once the dance ends if you can’t move your arms where you want them to be? This really isn’t the sort of spell you should be casting on yourself.”

Really, there were so many problems with that idea that Zorian struggled to put them all into words. Are these people thinking about the questions they’re asking at all?

“So how many dances do we have to learn?”

“Ten,” said Zorian, bracing himself for the cries of outrage.

Sure enough, a rumble of complaints erupted after that statement. Thankfully, Ilsa took over the lesson at this point, instructing everyone to pair up and scatter throughout the spacious room to give everyone enough space. Zorian could already feel a headache coming and cursed himself from letting Ilsa talk him into this. Even though room six was fairly spacious, there were a lot of people and the invisible pressure they gave off was particularly strong today.

“You alright?” Benisek asked, putting his hand on Zorian’s shoulder.

“I’m fine,” Zorian said, waving his hand off. He didn’t like to be touched much. “I just have a slight headache. Did you need help with something?”

“Nah, you just looked like you could use some company, standing all alone in your little corner,” Benisek said. Zorian decided not to tell him that he was intentionally standing on the sidelines unless he was needed. Benisek wasn’t the sort of person who understood the need for some breathing room. “Say, who is your date for the dance anyway?”

Zorian suppressed a groan. Of course Benisek would want to talk about *that*.

Relationships weren’t something Zorian thought about often. The chances that one of his classmates would agree to date him were minuscule. For one, such a relationship would quickly be noticed by the rest of their classmates, and the resulting merciless teasing was something few relationships could survive for any appreciable length. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, all teenage girls liked older guys. Dating a guy that was two or three years her senior seemed to be a status symbol for a girl, and a majority of them loudly disparaged the male population their own age as crass and immature. When they were in their first year, all the girls wanted to date third years. Now that they were in their third year, all the girls wanted to date apprenticed graduates. Since there were plenty of guys willing to play along, the chances that some girl in his class would give him the time of day was negligible.

And the girls that weren’t his classmates? To most of them he wasn’t Zorian Kazinski, but ‘that guy who is a brother of Daimen and Fortov Kazinski’. They had this image of what he ought to be like, and once it became obvious that the real him didn’t match their expectations, they inevitably became upset.

Besides, all this romantic stuff... well.

“Well?” Benisek prodded.

“I’m not going,” Zorian said.

“What do you mean ‘I’m not going’?” Benisek said cautiously.

“Just what I said,” Zorian said. “I’m skipping out on the whole dance thing. Turns out I had an alchemy-related accident and had to stay in my room for the evening.”

It was perhaps a bit cliché, but whatever. Zorian had already found a particularly tricky potion that was supposed to make a person more outgoing and sociable – something that was entirely plausible for him to try to make – that would make a person very ill when done wrong but wouldn’t actually kill him. If he does it right it will seem like an honest mistake instead of a way to weasel out of the dance.

“Oh come on!” protested Benisek, and Zorian had to pinch him to make him lower his voice. The last he needed was to have Ilsa overhear him “It’s the summer festival! A special summer festival, with the whole... parallel... thingy...”

“Planar alignment,” Zorian offered.

“Whatever. The point is that you have to be there. Everyone who is anyone is coming!”

“I’m a nobody.”

Benisek sighed. “No, Zorian, you’re not. Look, Zorian, we’re both merchant kids, right?”

“I don’t like where this is going.” Zorian warned.

Benisek ignored him. "I know you don't like to hear this but..."

"Don't. Just don't."

"-you have a duty to your family to put on a good face. Your behavior reflects on them, you know."

"There is nothing wrong with my behavior," snapped Zorian, aware that he was attracting stares of nearby people but not caring at the moment. "You're free to go to whatever you want, but leave me out of it. I'm a nobody. A third son of a minor merchant family from the middle of nowhere. People here don't give a fuck about me. They don't even know who I am. And I like it that way."

"Okay, okay!" protested Benisek, gesturing wildly. "Dude, you're making a scene..."

"Whatever," scoffed Zorian. "Leave me alone and go away."

The nerve! If there was anyone who should take a look at the impression he was leaving to people it should be Benisek! The irresponsible leech would have been dumped into a tier three group if it wasn't for Zorian's constant help, and this is how he repays him? Why was he even hanging out with that guy?

He scoffed, trying to calm down. Stupid summer festival and stupid dance. The funny thing is that unlike most people who hate these kinds of events, Zorian wasn't strictly *bad* at them. He knew how to dance, he knew how to eat without embarrassing himself, and he knew how to talk to people at these kinds of events. He had to know these things, because his parents used to drag him along with them when attending these kinds of events, and they made sure he knew how to behave himself properly once there.

But he hated it. He had no words to describe how much events such as these sickened him. Why should he be forced to attend something he hates when the academy had absolutely no right to demand it of him?

No, they had no right at all.

- break -

Hesitantly, Zorian knocked on the door to Ilsa's office, wondering why she called him here. There is no way...

"Come in."

Zorian peeked inside and was promptly told to have a seat while Ilsa calmly sat behind her desk, drinking something out of a cup. Probably tea. She looked calm and serene but Zorian could detect an undercurrent of disapproval in her posture. Hmm...

"So, Zorian," Ilsa began. "You've been doing quite well in my class."

"Err, thank you, professor," said Zorian cautiously. "I try."

"Indeed, one could say you're one of the best students in your group. A student I intend to take under my wing after this whole festival rush dies down. An example to everyone, and just as much a representative of your class as miss Stroze."

Oh, this is *bad*.

"I don't..."

"So, excited about the dance this Saturday?" asked Ilsa, seemingly changing the topic.

"Yes I am," Zorian lied smoothly. "It sounds like lots of fun."

"That's good," Ilsa said happily. "Because I heard that you plan to boycott the event. It was rather upsetting, I must say. I was rather clear that attendance is mandatory, I believe."

Note to self: find something horrible to do to Benisek. A spell that causes the target's tongue to feel like it's on fire or something... or maybe piercing pain in the genital region...

"Just a bunch of nasty rumors, professor," Zorian said smoothly. "I would never dream of intentionally boycotting the dance. If I am unable to attend..."

"Zorian," Ilsa cut him off.

"Professor, why is it so important that I show up there, anyway?" asked Zorian, a bit of crankiness seeping into his voice. He knew it was a bad idea to blow up on a teacher, but damn this whole thing was *pissing him off*! "I have a medical condition, you know? Crowds give me headaches."

She snorted. "They give me headaches too, if it makes you feel any better. I can give you a potion for that. The fact is I'm one of the organizers of the dance, and if too many students are absent I'll end up with a black mark on my record. Especially if someone as prominent as yourself were to not show up."

“Me? Prominent?! I’m just an average student!” Zorian protested.

“Not nearly as average as you think,” Ilsa said. “Just getting this far requires extraordinary intelligence and dedication – especially for a civilian-born student like yourself, who wasn’t exposed to magic your entire life. People keep an eye out for people like you. Also, you’re Daimen’s younger brother, and we both know how famous he is.”

Zorian’s lips stretched into a thin line. Zorian was sure the last reason was what it all came down to in the end, and all the other arguments were just excuses and attempts to butter him up. Even with his brother on a whole different continent, Zorian still couldn’t escape from his shadow.

“You don’t like to be compared to him,” she guessed.

“No,” Zorian admitted in a clipped tone.

“Why is that?” she asked curiously.

Zorian considered side-stepping the question – his family was a sore subject for him – but uncharacteristically decided to go for honesty. He knew it wouldn’t do much, but he felt like venting at the moment.

“Everything I do is always compared to Daimen and, to a slightly lesser extent, Fortov. It has been that way since I was a child, before Daimen ever became famous. My parents have never been shy about playing favorites, and since they were always interested chiefly in social achievements, I was always found wanting. My family has no use for a withdrawn bookworm, and made that abundantly clear over the years. Until recently, they ignored me completely, treating me more like I was my sister’s babysitter than their son.”

“But something happened recently that caused them to take notice of you?” Ilsa surmised.

“Fortov happened,” Zorian growled out. “He bombed several exams, had to be bailed out by father’s connections. He has shown himself to be generally unreliable, which is a problem, because he was supposed to be the spare heir for the family business, just in case Daimen dies on one of his escapades. So now I am suddenly taken out of the metaphorical closet so they can groom me for the role.”

“But you don’t want to be the spare?” she guessed.

“I don’t want to be involved in Kazinski family politics, period. I am not a part of that family anyway. Never was. At best, I was only ever a loosely aligned associate. I appreciate them feeding me and funding my education, and I’m willing to reimburse them for that when I get a job, but they have no right to ask something like that of me. I won’t hear it. I have my own life and my own plans, none of which involve playing second fiddle to my older brother and wasting time on insipid social events where people suck up to each other non-stop.”

He decided to stop there, because he was just making himself angrier. Plus, he suspected Ilsa didn’t empathize with him much. Most people thought he was simply being overdramatic about his family. They weren’t the ones who had to live with them.

When she realized he wasn’t going to say anything more, Ilsa leaned back and took a deep breath. “I empathize with you, Zorian, but I’m afraid such comparisons are unavoidable. For what it’s worth, I think you’re shaping up to be a fine mage yourself. Not everyone can be a prodigy like Daimen.”

“Right,” said Zorian, refusing to look at her.

She sighed, running her hand through her hair. “You make me feel like the villain here. Family issues aside, why are you so bothered by this? It’s a party. I thought all teenagers liked parties. Are you concerned about finding a date? Just ask some first-years and they’ll jump at the chance – they can’t attend unless invited by an upperclassman, you know?”

Zorian released a sigh of his own. He wasn’t looking for a way to find a date – he had no doubt that simply dropping his last name would net him some impressionable giggly first year for the evening – he was looking for a way out. Something that Ilsa wasn’t willing to provide him with, it seemed.

“I’m not getting a date,” Zorian told her, rising from his seat. “I may have to come to the dance, but I’m pretty sure that bringing a date is not mandatory. Have a nice day.”

He was surprised that Ilsa didn’t try to contradict him as he left. Maybe this whole dance thing won’t be such a chore.

- break -

Zorian trudged through the corridors of his residence building wearily, not in any real hurry to get to his room. The teachers had refrained from giving them any substantial homework over the weekend, knowing that everyone would be too preoccupied with the summer festival to get any work done. Normally all that free time would be a godsend to Zorian, but just thinking about what he would have to endure tomorrow was enough to make Zorian lose the will to do anything fun or productive, so he fully intended to go to sleep the moment he arrived at his room.

As he entered his residence building he noted that someone was already in a celebratory mood, because the walls of the corridor he was passing through were full of colorful splotches in vivid yellow, green, and red.

“Zorian! Just the man I was looking for!”

Zorian jerked in shock at the loud voice behind him and whirled around to face the man who invaded his personal space. He scowled at the grinning idiot in front of him.

“Why are you here, Fortov?” he asked.

“What, I can’t visit my little brother?” he protested. “You too good to hang out with big bro?”

“Cut the crap, Fortov. You never come to *me* when you just want to hang out with someone. What do you need help with, now?”

“That’s totally not true,” he huffed. “You’re my favorite brother, you know?”

Zorian stared at him impassively for a few seconds. “Daimen isn’t here so you’ll settle for me, huh?”

“Daimen is an asshole,” Fortov snapped. “Ever since he got famous he’s always too busy to help out his younger brother. I swear, that guy only thinks about himself.”

“The hypocrisy is thick with this one,” Zorian mumbled.

“Sorry, I didn’t catch that,” Fortov said.

“Nothing, nothing.” Zorian waved dismissively. “So what kind of trouble are you in now?”

“Um, I might have promised a friend I’ll make her an anti-rash potion,” Fortov said sheepishly.

“There is no such thing as an anti-rash potion,” huffed Zorian. “There is, however, an anti-rash *salve*, which is applied directly to the affected skin instead of being imbibed like a potion is. This just shows what a total dunderhead you are when it comes to alchemy. What the hell were you thinking, promising your friend something like that?”

“I kind of pushed her into a purple creeper patch during our wilderness survival class,” Fortov admitted. “Please, you have to help me! I’ll find you a girlfriend if you do!”

“I don’t want a girlfriend!” snapped Zorian irritably. Least of all the kind of girlfriend Fortov would set him up with. “Look, why are you bothering me about this? Just go to the apothecary and buy some.”

“It’s Friday evening. All stores are closed in preparation for the celebration tomorrow.”

“Well that’s too bad, because I can’t help you,” said Zorian. “First two years are all theory and lab safety, and I’m just starting my third year. We haven’t done any serious alchemy in class so far.”

So true and yet such a bald-faced lie. He hadn’t done all that much alchemy in class but he had done quite a bit of private study in his free time. He could make an antidote for the purple creeper rash easily, but why should he spend his expensive alchemical ingredients?

“Oh man, come on. You can speak three different languages and you know all the silly shaping exercises they make us learn, but you can’t even do something so basic? What the hell are you doing in your room all day long if not learning how to do stuff like that?”

“You’re one to talk!” Zorian snapped. “You’re a year older than me, you should be perfectly capable of doing this yourself.”

“Eh, you know I never cared for alchemy. Too fiddly and boring for me,” Fortov said with a dismissive wave. “Besides, I can’t even make vegetable soup without ruining mom’s kitchenware, do you really want me around alchemical equipment?”

Well, when he put it that way...

“I’m tired,” Zorian said. “I’ll make it tomorrow.”

“Are you crazy!? Tomorrow is too late!”

“Oh come on, it’s not like she’ll die of a goddamn rash!” said Zorian irritably.

“Please, Zorian, I know you don’t care about these kind of things but she’s crushing on this boy and-“

Zorian groaned and tuned him out. That’s pretty much all he needed to know about this ‘emergency’.

“-and if my friend’s rash isn’t fixed by then she won’t be able to go and she’ll *never forgive me!* Please, please, please-“

“Stop it.”

“-please, please, please, please-“

“I said stop it! I’ll do it, okay? I’ll make the damn salve, but you owe me big time for this, you hear?”

“Yup!” he said cheerfully. “How much time do you need?”

“Meet me at the fountain in about three hours,” Zorian sighed.

Zorian watched him as he ran away, probably so he wouldn’t change his mind or make some concrete demands. He shook his head and went back to his room to retrieve the necessary alchemical reagents. The academy had an alchemical workshop students could use for their own projects, but you had to bring your own ingredients. Fortunately, he had everything he needed for this particular task.

The workshop was totally empty aside from him, but that wasn’t very unusual. Most people were preparing for the dance tomorrow and were unlikely to do some last-minute alchemy practice. Unfazed by the eerie silence of the workshop, Zorian scattered the reagents across the table and set to work.

Ironically, the main ingredient of the anti-rash salve was the very plant that was the cause of this mess – the purple creeper, or more accurately its leaves. Zorian had already left them to dry in the sun, and now they only had to be ground to powder. This was generally the most annoying part of the procedure, as purple creeper leaves released a cloud of irritating dust into the air if they were simply crushed with a standard mortar and pestle set. The textbooks he read had all sorts of fancy ways to deal with this, usually involving expensive equipment, but Zorian had a much simpler solution: he wrapped the leaves in a slightly wet piece of cloth, then wrapped the whole thing in a piece of leather, and then hammered the resulting lump until he felt no resistance. The irritating dust would bond with the cloth and the leaf pieces wouldn’t.

After mixing the leaf dust with 10 drops of honey and a spoon of oblia berry juice, he put the whole thing over a low fire, stirring the contents until they achieved uniform color and consistency. Then he removed the bowl from the fire and sat down while he waited for the stuff to cool.

“That was very impressive work,” a rather feminine voice sounded behind him. “Nice improvisation with the creeper leaves. I’ll have to remember that trick.”

Zorian recognized the owner of the voice though, and Kael wasn’t really female, despite some nasty rumors. He turned around to face the morlock boy, studying his bone white hair and intense blue eyes for a moment before returning his attention to cleaning the alchemical equipment he had used. No reason to get barred from using the workshop because he failed to clean up after himself.

He struggled to formulate a response while Kael was inspecting the salve with a practiced eye. The boy was rather mysterious, having only joined their group this year by transferring from gods know where, and not being very talkative. Plus, you know, he was a morlock. How long had the boy been watching him? Sadly, he had a tendency to lose track of his surroundings when he worked on something so he couldn’t tell.

“It’s nothing special,” Zorian finally said. “Now your work... that’s impressive. I get the notion that you’re on a whole different level from the rest of us when it comes to alchemy. Even Zach can’t beat you most of the time, and he seems to be acing everything these days.”

The white-haired boy smiled mildly. “Zach doesn’t have the passion for the subject. Alchemy requires a craftsman’s touch and a lot of patience, and no matter how extensive his knowledge is, Zach just doesn’t have the mentality for it. You do. If you had as much practice with alchemy as Zach apparently does, you’d surpass him for sure.”

“Ah, so you think he has prior experience, too?” Zorian inquired.

“I do not know him as well as yourself and the rest of your peers, having only recently joined your group. Still, one does not get as proficient in this field as Zach apparently is in a matter of months. He works with the practiced ease of someone who has been doing alchemy for years.”

“Like you,” tried Zorian.

“Like me,” Kael confirmed. “I hate to be rude, but are you finished here? I’d like to make something myself today.”

Zorian apologized to the boy for the hold-up, which the morlock waved off as something of little importance, and bid him goodbye.

As he walked away, it occurred to Zorian that he should have probably made some kind of sleeping potion for himself while he was at it – he had to get plenty of rest tonight, because he certainly wouldn’t get any tomorrow.

4. Stars Fell

Chapter 004 Stars Fell

“I’m coming, I’m coming.” Zorian grumbled, stomping towards the door. Really, what’s with all the frantic knocking? Who exactly was so desperate to get into his room? He wrenched the door open and found himself staring at Akoja’s disapproving face. “Ako? What are you doing here?”

“I should be asking you that,” she said. “Why are you still at home? The dance is—”

“Two hours away,” Zorian interrupted. “I can get to the dance hall in 10 minutes.”

“Honestly Zorian, why do you always have to wait for the last possible moment to do something? Don’t you realize what a bad example you’re setting?”

“Time is precious,” Zorian said. “And I will repeat my question: what are you doing here? I don’t think it’s your usual habit to seek people out when they’re not early enough for your tastes.”

“Miss Zileti told me to get you,” Akoja admitted.

Zorian blinked. It seems Ilsa wanted to make sure he didn’t ‘forget’. Hah. While the idea *had* occurred to him, he knew that would never fly.

“She also said you couldn’t find a date, so that will be me for the evening,” Akoja continued in a more subdued tone, suddenly finding the doorframe interesting enough to merit examination.

Zorian scowled. How does ‘refuse to bring a date’ become ‘couldn’t find a date’? It seemed that Ilsa, like his mother, had a tendency to ‘translate’ his words into whatever was most convenient to her purposes. The two of them would get along quite well, Zorian suspected.

“Anyway, get dressed so we can go already,” she said, suddenly regaining her confidence. “You might be alright with cutting things close, but I’m not.”

Zorian stared at her for a full second, trying to decide what to do. He was half-tempted to slam the door in her face and refuse to participate in this farce, but he supposed it wasn’t Akoja’s fault that she got roped into this. In all likelihood she had more pleasant plans for the evening than accompanying a surly boy who loathed the experience. He shooed her into the room and went into the bathroom to get dressed.

He really had to marvel at Ilsa’s manipulation skills, though – if it was just him going to this thing, he would have come dressed in casual clothes, spent the absolute minimum of time there before leaving, and avoided people like a plague throughout the entire evening. Now? He didn’t want to ruin Akoja’s evening, which meant he would have to make at least a token effort. Yes, Ilsa and his mother would get along like two peas in a pod...

The walk to the dance hall was a quiet one. Zorian refused to strike up a conversation, despite sensing that Akoja found the silence awkward. The silence suited him just fine, and he knew he would be comfortable with very few things this evening. He would enjoy the peace while it lasted.

Which wasn’t long – the hall that the academy set aside for this event was about 10 minutes away from his residence building. The moment they approached it they were greeted with the sight of a large gathering in front of the entrance, full of excited students engaged in animated discussions.

Zorian paled a little at the sight of the dense throng – he was getting a headache just by looking at them.

Sadly, no matter how much he pleaded with Akoja, she refused to let them wait on the outskirts of the gathering until the start of the dance. As revenge, Zorian ‘accidentally’ managed to get separated from Akoja when they were ushered inside and got himself lost in the crowd. He chuckled to himself, wondering how long it would take her to find him again. He’d be shocked if it was less than half an hour, since he was quite adept at avoiding the notice of a particular person at a party without drawing attention from the other party goers.

For a supposedly simple school dance, the entire event was surprisingly lavish. The tables were overflowing with food, much of it so exotic that Zorian couldn’t identify it, and the hall was decorated with high-quality paintings and animated carvings that moved in a pre-programmed manner. Hell, even the tablecloths were full of complicated lace and so soft they had to have been made of something monstrously expensive. Many of his fellow students were openly gaping at their surroundings and even Zorian, who had been at these kinds of events many times before, was a little shocked. Then he shrugged and did his best to blend into the crowd so Akoja couldn’t find him.

He meandered through the tables overflowing with food, occasionally sampling one of the dishes when he saw something interesting, observing the other people and painstakingly avoiding notice from anyone who might be inclined to strike up a conversation with him. He could see why Ilsa was so determined to make everything about the dance run smoothly – the sheer expense of the thing aside, it wasn’t just the students that were present. There were also representatives from various guilds, Houses, societies, and organizations. And not just from the Alliance, but also from abroad, even other continents – he could see at least one man in the distinctive light blue Abnazia military uniform, a small delegation from Hsan, and a dark-skinned woman in a garb so colorful Zorian doubted anyone failed to notice her by now. He idly wondered what this dance was *really* about, since these people wouldn’t be here for a simple school dance, before deciding he didn’t really care. People like this lived in their own world, and had different standards of ‘important’ from mere mortals like him.

An hour later the first dance was about to start and Zorian made his way to Akoja. She was fuming, and didn't appear to believe him when he claimed he had honestly gotten lost and couldn't find her until now, but she managed to restrain herself from blowing up at him. He led her to the dance floor and didn't retaliate when she 'accidentally' stepped on his toes a couple of times.

"People were asking for you," she said finally, having tired of abusing his toes for the moment.

"Well I was around," Zorian said with a small smirk. "All they had to do was look for me."

"No reason why you can't seek them out now, though," Akoja remarked.

"But Ako, we're dancing. There is no way I'd leave a beautiful girl like you for anything. I've left you unattended for too long as it is," Zorian said, not a trace of mocking in his voice. It was a practiced skill.

She glared at him, but Zorian could see she liked the compliment.

Sadly, it didn't stop her from dragging him off to meet one group of people after another soon afterwards. Zorian hated being put on display like that, but he suspected Akoja was under orders from Ilsa, so he didn't snap at her. He was surprised his stalling had worked for as long as it did, really. Zorian found himself memorizing various faces, names, and titles, despite not caring much. It was instinctive to him by now, and he did it even when he didn't mean to – the legacy of his family's failed attempt to turn him into a party animal.

"Kazinski? Oh, are you by chance related to–"

"Daimen and Fortov Kazinski, yes," Zorian said, doing his best to keep the annoyance out of his voice.

"Oh my, how fortunate," she said. "I must say your brother isn't half bad with the violin." She gestured towards the stage, where the academy music club was playing a slow, relatively quiet song. Fortov was officially an ordinary orchestra member, but was obviously the most prominently placed musician on the stage. His presence, as usual, attracted attention and comments. "What instrument do you play?"

"None," Zorian deadpanned. His family had tried to teach him how to play an instrument, since it was a fashionable thing to learn among the rich (and those pretending to be), but were thwarted by the fact that Zorian was almost entirely tone-deaf. He had no ability to play music at all. Truth be told, he wasn't particularly interested in it either, though he could certainly feign interest when doing so was polite. It was one of his mother's bigger disappointments that he had no talent in this area, since Daimen and Fortov were both relatively decent at music – Daimen at playing the piano and Fortov at playing the violin. They weren't prodigies by any means, but they were skilled enough to impress the kind of people that frequented events like this. "I don't have much of an ear for music, unlike my brothers. Personally, I'm more interested in how the orchestra fills the entire hall evenly with sound, with everyone hearing them at the right volume, regardless of how near or how far they're sitting in relation to the stage."

Sadly, neither the woman nor anyone else gathered around them could answer that question – apparently nobody else even noticed it until he mentioned it. In fact, Zorian got a distinct notion that people felt it was an irrelevant detail and that he was weird for even mentioning it. Bah – no appreciation for magic from these people. Why were they attending a dance at a mage academy, again?

Thankfully, Akoja decided to have mercy on him at this point and led them to a nearby table to get something substantial to eat. A couple of other students from their class joined them and a casual conversation settled in around them. Zorian didn't contribute much, since he found the conversation to be mostly aimless drivel that was of no interest to him. He still nodded and chuckled at appropriate times, of course, brushing off an occasional comment about him being 'too quiet' and needing to 'lighten up'.

He was just about to dig into the piece of cake in front of him when Akoja nudged him with her knee. He glanced at her with an unvoiced question.

"Wrong fork," she mumbled.

Zorian looked down at the fork in his hand and realized he was supposed to use the tiny fork reserved for desserts. He shrugged and stabbed the cake with the giant fork in his hand anyway.

"I know," he mumbled back.

That seemed to be the straw that broke the camel's back.

"Zorian," she burst out, her voice carrying a pleading note in it. "Why are you being so difficult? It's just one night. I know I'm not what you wanted for your date..."

"It's not that," Zorian interrupted her. "It's not like I wanted a date, anyway. I was going to come alone to this thing."

She stared at him in shock. She seemed emotionally crushed, and Zorian didn't understand why.

"Y-You'd rather go alone than with me?" she asked.

Aw crap.

All this time he thought Akoja was roped into this to keep an eye on him, but what if she had *wanted* to go with him? That...

She fled before he could figure out something to say.

He swore under his breath and buried his face in his hands. This is why he hated these kind of events.

- break -

An hour later he was pretty sure Akoja was no longer in the dance hall and that she wasn't going to come back. He didn't really want to chase her through the streets in the middle of the night, so he refrained from following her outside. Besides, what was he supposed to say to her? He wouldn't know where to even start. He thought about going home himself, but in the end he simply climbed up onto the roof of the dance hall and observed the stars. He wasn't going to get much sleep tonight, anyway.

To keep his mind occupied, he silently named all the stars and constellations he could see. Due to his interest in the topic as a child and the Astronomy class they had in their first year at the Academy, he knew quite a bit. It was a full hour before he ran out of things to name and describe.

Monday was going to be awkward. Zorian had no doubt their little drama was overheard and would be *the* topic of conversation for several weeks to come. Considering that Akoja was a bit of a teacher's pet in most of the subjects, the teachers could very well decide to make his life more difficult in the days to come as well.

Damn it all.

It was the sound of fireworks that broke him out of his thoughts. It was midnight apparently, and the festival had officially started. Zorian relaxed a little as he watched various fireworks blossom against the night sky, each exploding in its own unique way. It was beautiful. Most of them dissolved into quickly fading motes of light after the initial explosion, but a couple of them remained whole and consistently bright, more like flares than fireworks. They arced through the sky before dipping down and falling back to earth like falling stars. He frowned. Weird. Shouldn't they be exploding by now?

The flare falling closest to him slammed into the nearby academy residence building and detonated. The explosion was so loud and so bright that Zorian was momentarily blinded and deafened, stumbling back and collapsing to his knees as the entire building shook beneath his feet.

Blinking spots out of his vision, his ears still ringing from the sound of the explosion, Zorian scrambled back to his feet. He stared at the spot where the stricken residence building once stood. Virtually the entire building had been leveled to the ground, everything flammable in the vicinity of the impact site was burning, and strange flaming shapes were emerging from the epicenter of the destruction.

Wait a minute... that's *his* residence building!

He collapsed to his knees again as the implications of this hit him. If he had opted to stay in his room like he had originally planned, he'd have been dead right now. It was a sobering thought. But what the hell was happening here!? That was no firework, that's for sure! It looked and sounded more like a high level artillery spell.

It was hard to tell if it was simply a consequence of his hearing being damaged, but he noticed the faint sounds of celebration had stopped. Looking over the city he noticed that what happened to the residence building wasn't an isolated occurrence – wherever one of the flares hit, it left devastation in its wake. He only had a few seconds to ponder this before he noticed another batch of flares start ascending into the sky from the distance. This particular barrage was not masked by fireworks, so it was pretty obvious that they *were* artillery spells. They were under attack.

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As the flares started dropping back to earth, Zorian began to panic. What the hell was he supposed to do!? Running away would be pointless since he didn't know what the flares were targeting. He could very well be running straight into the area of effect if he ran blindly. Wait a minute, why does *he* have to do anything? There are a bunch of capable mages in the building, he should just notify them and have them handle it. He rushed down into the dance hall.

He had barely stepped on to the stairway when he ran into Ilsa and Kyron.

"Zorian! What are you doing here?" Ilsa demanded.

"Err, I just went out for some fresh air," Zorian fumbled. "But that's not important right now!"

"I agree," Kyron said. "Kid, what was that blast? Don't tell me this is something you did?"

"Hardly," Zorian said. "Some kind of flares are falling all over the city, destroying everything they hit. Looks like some kind of powerful artillery spell."

Ilsa and Kyron shared a look between each other before turning back to him.

"Go join Akoja and the others in the dance hall," Ilsa told. "We'll see what is happening and teleport everyone into the shelters if necessary."

The both pushed past him and rushed to the roof, leaving Zorian to stumble into the dance hall in a daze. Akoja... Akoja wasn't in the dance hall.

She left. Because of him. She was out there, maybe even already dead...

He shook his head and banished such thoughts out of his mind. He took out his divination compass and quickly cast a divination spell to locate her. He wasn't sure if it was going to work, since the spell he used could only find people you were 'familiar with' – in other words, friends and family. Thankfully, it seemed that being classmates with her was enough of a connection for the spell to work.

He took a deep breath to steel his nerves. He was liable to get himself killed, but... well, it was kind of his fault. He didn't think he could live with himself if Akoja ended up dead because of him.

Like an intangible ghost, he weaved between agitated students and foreign dignitaries, ignored and unhindered, until he was near the exit. He slipped out of the building and then broke into the run in the direction indicated by the needle of his divination compass.

- break -

Trolls were pretty nasty creatures. There were several subspecies, but all of them were large 3-meter tall humanoids with tough leathery skin and supernatural regenerative abilities so strong they were able to reattach severed limbs simply by holding them to the matching stump for a few moments. The most numerous and famous subspecies was the forest troll, which had vivid green skin and roamed throughout the great forested expanse in the north. As Zorian watched a troupe of trolls strut through the streets, smashing windows and howling unintelligibly, he reflected that it was fortunate the acrid smoke wafting from the nearby burning buildings masked his scent. His textbooks all said a forest troll's sense of smell was frighteningly good.

Normally he would have wondered what such a large gathering of forest trolls was doing in the middle of a human city, relatively far away from their native lands, but the blades and maces they were holding told him all he needed to know. Those were weapons too advanced to have been produced by the trolls themselves, who were highly primitive and lacked such high metal working skills. They were war trolls. Somebody armed these creatures and set them loose on the city.

Once they were gone, Zorian relaxed a little and tried to figure out what to do. He was such an idiot. Why, oh why did he have to run off without getting some help from the teachers first? Then again, he assumed the flares were the only danger, in which case getting to Akoja wouldn't be an issue, assuming a stray flare didn't get him. Instead he found the city overrun with monsters. This wasn't some kind of a terrorist attack like he assumed, it was a full-blown invasion! Sadly, the option to return to the dance hall was closed to him – a lot of the invading forces were converging towards the academy, cutting off his retreat path. With that in mind, Zorian set out towards Akoja. He kept himself in the shadows, knowing the invaders would quickly notice anyone caught in the open, such as that boy standing... over... there...

Is that Zach?

"Over here!" Zach shouted, waving his hand in the air. "I'm over here you stupid animals! Come and get me!"

Zorian gaped at the reckless stupidity of what he was witnessing. What the hell was that idiot doing!? No matter how talented a student he was, there was no way Zach could stand up to the sort of monstrosities that were stalking the city at the moment. But it was too late to do anything – attracted by Zach's shouting, the trolls came running back, giving a single collective battle cry before charging at the boy foolish enough to attract their attention. Zorian could tell from Zach's posture that he intended to fight the trolls, which he thought was pretty crazy – what could he do against a creature that regenerates from virtually any wound done to it? Only fire and acid could do permanent harm, and they didn't-

Zach grasped his staff firmly in his hand, his other hand outstretched in the direction of the charging trolls – a roaring fireball erupted from his hand and exploded right in the middle of the troll formation. When the flames cleared, only charred corpses remained.

Zorian was shocked. A proper fireball like that was a 3rd circle spell, and required a sizable amount of mana to cast, much more than any academy student had. Even Daimen could not have cast that spell when he was Zach's age. Yet not only had Zach successfully done it, he didn't even appear drained from the action. Indeed, when a flock of iron beaks attacked soon after, raining their deadly feathers at the boy, Zach simply erected an aegis – a freaking aegis! – around himself and peppered the birds with tiny fireballs that homed in on their targets, like magic missiles made out of fire. Zorian was transfixed by the sight of his classmate effortlessly fighting off hordes of monsters single-handedly. So much so that he almost failed to notice one of the winter wolves attacking Zach had stealthily broken off from the main pack and was sneaking up on him. Almost. Thankfully, some primal instinct alerted him to the danger and he threw himself to the side, narrowly avoiding the creature's deadly pounce.

Zorian cursed himself as he watched the winter wolf reorient itself with startling ease for something so large, ready for another pounce. He really should have expected to be targeted, considering the amount of attention Zach was drawing to himself. He should have used Zach's fighting as a distraction and fled while he had the chance. Now it was too late - Zorian knew he was not fast enough to outrun a winter wolf, and he had no combat spells with which to defend himself. Or rather, no spell rods and such. If he survived the evening, he would definitely learn a few combat invocations, obsolete as they may be. It was a big if, though.

A shining bolt of force slammed into the winter wolf's head, causing it to explode in a gory mess of blood and bone fragments. Zorian didn't know whether to be disgusted that he was showered by some of the bloody mess or relieved he would live for a little while longer. He also noted that the effects of the bolt were a bit strong for a regular magic missile. He supposed this was just another example of Zach's baffling proficiency with combat magic.

"Zorian? What the hell are you doing here?"

Zorian looked at Zach speculatively. Noticing the trail of corpses left in the other boy's wake, Zorian eyed the staff in his right hand and the belt full

of spell rods. For all his seeming recklessness, Zach certainly came prepared. He was half tempted to ask the boy the very same question, but decided that would be needlessly antagonistic. Zach did just save his life, after all. He decided to go for honesty – maybe the other boy would be willing to help him get to Akoja, considering his awe-inspiring fighting skills.

“Searching for Akoja. She left the dance a while before the attack and it’s kind of my fault.”

Zach groaned. “Man, and I even went to the trouble of making sure you go to the dance, too. It’s like you want to get killed or something!”

“You?” asked Zorian incredulously. “You’re the one that told Ilsa I wasn’t planning to go? All this time I’ve blamed Benisek! How did you even know about it?”

“You always stay in your room and get killed in the initial barrage if I don’t do something to stop it. And let me tell you, convincing you not to stay in your room without resorting to violence or getting Ilsa involved is a damn chore. You can really be a stubborn ass when you want to be,” Zach said with a sigh.

Zorian stared at him, confused. The way Zach was talking, you’d think this kind of thing happens every day or something!

“But enough of that,” said Zach cheerfully. “Let’s go find Akoja before something eats her. You know the way?”

And so they did. They traveled through the burning streets of the city, leaving a trail of dead invaders behind them. Zach didn’t even try to avoid the monsters, simply plowing through them like an angry god out for vengeance. At one point they were even attacked by a horde of skeletons and an enemy mage, but Zach simply made the earth beneath their feet open up and swallow them. Zorian dutifully kept his mouth shut and never questioned Zach about his seemingly inexhaustible mana reserves or his knowledge of advanced magic that should be beyond his access level and proficiency, content to enjoy the benefits of Zach’s skill and talent. He would never have come this far without Zach’s help, and he was honestly grateful for the boy’s assistance. Zach could keep his secrets, whatever they were.

They eventually found Akoja barricaded in the upper floor of one of the houses. Apparently she was chased there by a pack of winter wolves and then refused to leave for fear that the creatures were waiting for her to come out. Smart, really. Smarter than what Zorian had done, that’s for sure. Fortunately, there was no trace of winter wolves around the house at this point – not that Zach was likely to have had any trouble with them if they *were* present – so they moved to the slightly frustrating task of convincing Akoja that it was safe to unbarrier the door. Apparently her experience with the winter wolves had shaken her up pretty badly.

Zorian was certain she would blame him for causing her to leave the safety of the dance hall, so he was quite surprised when Akoja immediately latched onto him when she finally opened the door, hugging him and sobbing into his shoulder.

“I thought I was going to die!” she wailed. “There were these huge birds flinging iron feathers everywhere and the winter wolves and...”

Zorian opened his mouth in confusion, unsure how to deal with such an emotional outburst. He shot Zach a pleading look, but the boy merely grinned at him cheekily, apparently amused by the reaction.

“Ah, young love,” Zach nodded to himself knowingly. “But I’m afraid you’ll have to continue your heart-felt reunion back in the shelters.”

“Yes!” Akoja shouted immediately, raising her face out of Zorian’s shoulder. She totally ignored Zach’s jab about them being in love, though Zorian suspected it was because she hadn’t even heard that part. She was still clutching his torso with an iron grip, as if afraid he’d disappear if she let go. It was kind of painful but he refrained from telling her so. “The shelters! We’ll be safe there!”

Zach flinched back for a moment before catching himself. It was so quick Akoja didn’t appear to have noticed, but Zorian did. So the shelters weren’t safe either? But apparently they were still safer than where they were right now, because Zach appeared determined to go through with it.

“Great!” said Zach cheerily, clapping his hands in satisfaction. He took one of the spell rods out of his belt and handed it to Akoja. “You hold on too, Zorian.”

“What is that?” Zorian asked suspiciously. The rod had none of the markings that might identify what it was for, which made Zorian a bit leery of it. Using unknown magical objects without identifying what they’re for was a big no-no if you wanted to remain healthy and alive into your old age.

“It’s a teleport rod,” Zach said. “It’s programmed to transport whoever is holding it to the shelters. I’ve set it to a 30 second delay, so hold it before you’re left behind.”

“But what about you?” Akoja asked. “You need to hold on too before it activates!”

“Ah, no,” Zach said, waving her off. “I still have unfinished business here.”

“Unfinished business!?” Akoja protested. “Zach, this isn’t a game! These things are going to kill you!”

“I’m perfectly capable-“

Zorian wasn’t sure what tipped him off, exactly – he just got a vague feeling of dread and knew he had to react immediately, much like what happened when the winter wolf tried to get a jump on him earlier. Wrenching himself free from Akoja’s grip with a sudden jerk, he pushed Zach out of the way of the incoming spell. An angry red ray surged through the air in front of them, passing right where Zach’s head was only a few

moments ago, and hit the wall behind them. The jagged beam of red light bit deep into the wall, gouging a deep trench in it and shrouding the area in a cloud of fine dust.

“Crap,” Zach said. “He found me. Quick, hold the rod before—“

Akoja winked out of existence as the rod teleported her away to safety.

“—it activates,” finished Zach in a long-suffering tone. “Damn it, Zorian, why didn’t you hold on?!”

“You’d be dead, then!” Zorian protested. He wasn’t going to let a person who helped him so much tonight die from a stray spell if he could help it. Besides, whoever had cast it would surely fall to Zach’s magical might, just like the rest of the creatures and enemy mages they had encountered so far. Just how bad could this enemy caster be, really?

A sudden gust of air blew the dust away and a gaunt humanoid figure stepped into view. Zorian actually gasped in surprise as he took in the appearance of the thing in front of them. It was a skeleton wreathed in sickly green light. Its bones were black with a strange metallic sheen, as if they were not bones at all, but rather a facsimile of a skeleton made out of some kind of black metal. Encased in gold-decorated armor, with a scepter held tightly in one of its skeletal hands and a crown full of purple gemstones, the creature looked like some long-dead king risen from the dead.

It was a lich. It was a thrice-damned *lich*! Oh, they were so going to die...

The lich swept its empty eye sockets over them. As Zorian’s eyes met the black pits that once held the lich’s eyes, an uncomfortable feeling washed over him, like the lich was peering into his very soul. After less than a second, the lich lazily shifted its attention to Zach, apparently dismissing Zorian as something of no consequence.

“So...” the lich spoke, its voice resonant with power, “You’re the one that has been killing my minions.”

“Zorian, run away while I deal with this guy,” Zach said, clutching the staff in his hand.

Without waiting for a response, Zach launched a barrage of magic missiles towards the lich, who retaliated with a trio of purple beams as it erected an aegis around itself with a single wave of its bony hand. Two of them were aimed at Zach, but sadly enough the lich saw fit to aim one towards Zorian’s retreating form. While it failed to hit Zorian directly, the beam’s impact with the nearby ground created a sizeable explosion that drove stone shrapnel into his legs. The pain was immense, and Zorian collapsed on the ground in an instant, unable to take a single step further.

Over the next five minutes, Zorian painfully dragged himself behind a nearby cart, hoping that it would shield him from at least some of the destructive power that was being thrown around in the battle. Zach was keeping the lich occupied enough that it didn’t send any more spells after Zorian, which was fortunate because Zorian was no longer in any state to evade them. He watched with growing unease as Zach and the lich exchanged various destructive spells that Zorian couldn’t even identify, realizing with rising dread that his prediction of their grisly death was well founded – no matter how good Zach was, he was not even in the same league as the lich. The thing was toying with the other boy, and was bound to tire of the game sooner or—

He winced as a spear-like red bolt punched straight through Zach’s aegis and impaled the boy through his flank. He suspected the hit was in a non-vital spot only because the lich wished to gloat a little more, and his suspicions were all but confirmed when the creature didn’t finish Zach off with anything destructive, opting instead to hurl Zach into the air with a single casual gesture. Zach collided with the wall near where Zorian was taking cover, and groaned in pain.

Apparently not in any sort of hurry, the lich approached slowly. It seemed unconcerned that Zach was rising shakily to his feet, a spell rod clenched tightly in his left hand. Zorian could see that his right hand was pressed tightly against the bleeding wound on his flank.

“You put up quite a fight, child,” the lich said. “Impressive for someone who is supposed to be a mere academy student.”

“Not... impressive enough,” Zach gasped out, the spell rod dropping from his hand as he clutched the wound on his flank with both hands, apparently in great pain. “I guess... I’ll have to... try harder... next time.”

The lich chuckled. It was strange sound, hardly fitting the creature. “Next time? Silly child, there will be no next time. There is no way I’m letting you live, surely you know that?”

“Bah,” Zach spat, straightening himself with a grimace. “Enough talking, just get it over with.”

“You seem surprisingly unconcerned considering you’re about to die,” the lich remarked conversationally.

“Ah, whatever,” said Zach, rolling his eyes. “It’s not like I’ll be dead for good.”

Zorian looked at Zach incredulously, not really understanding what Zach was getting at. The lich seemed to understand, though.

“Aaah, I see,” the lich said. “You must be new to soul magic if you think this makes you invulnerable. I could just trap your soul in a soul jar, but I have a much better idea.”

The lich casually gestured towards Zorian, and he suddenly felt his entire body freeze up as if it was encased in some alien force. Another wave

and Zorian was hurled with great speed towards the shocked Zach, where he painfully slammed into the other boy. They both ended up on the ground in a tangle of limbs, and Zorian was relieved that at least the unknown force paralyzing him was gone.

"It doesn't matter if your soul can be reincarnated elsewhere if someone mutilates it beyond recognition before it gets there," the lich said. "After all, the soul may be immortal, but no one said it cannot be altered or added to."

Dimly, Zorian could hear the lich chanting in some strange language that definitely wasn't standard Ikosian used in traditional invocations, but any curiosity about this was washed away by a wave of pain and unidentifiable *wrongness* that suddenly slammed into him. He opened his mouth to scream but then his world suddenly erupted into bright light before suddenly going completely black.

5. Start Over

Chapter 005 Start Over

Zorian's eyes abruptly shot open as sharp pain erupted from his stomach. His whole body convulsed, buckling against the object that fell on him, and suddenly he was wide awake, not a trace of drowsiness in his mind.

"Good morning, brother!" an annoyingly cheerful voice sounded right on top of him. "Morning, morning, *MORNING!!!*"

Zorian stared at Kirielle in shock, trying to understand what happened. The last thing he remembered was the lich casting that spell at him and Zach, and then blackness. His eyes darted left and right, taking in his surroundings and confirming his suspicions – he was in his room, back in Crin. That didn't make any sense, though. He was pleased that he survived the whole experience, but at the very least he expected to wake up in the hospital or something. And Kirielle shouldn't be this casual with him after he went through so harrowing an experience – not even she was this inconsiderate. Besides, this entire scene was... eerily familiar.

"Kiri?"

"Um, yes?"

"What day is it?" Zorian asked, already dreading the answer.

"Thursday."

He scowled. "I meant date, Kiri."

"First of Chariot. You're going to the academy today. Don't tell me you forgot," Kirielle prodded. Literally – she accompanied her words with a well-placed jab at his flank, sticking her bony little index finger in between his ribs. Zorian slapped her hand away, hissing in pain.

"I did not forget!" Zorian snapped. "I just..."

He stopped there. What was he supposed to tell her? Frankly, he had no idea what was going on himself!

"You know what?" he said after a moment of silence. "Never mind that, I think it's high time you got off of me."

Before Kirielle could answer, Zorian unceremoniously flipped her over the edge of the bed before jumping up himself.

He snatched his glasses from the set of drawers next to his bed and his eyes swept through his room with more attention to detail this time, seeking anything out of place, anything that might unmask this as a giant (if rather tasteless) prank. While his memory wasn't flawless, he had a habit of arranging his belongings in very specific ways to detect nosy family members rummaging through his belongings. He found nothing massively out of place, so unless his mysterious re-enactor knew his system inside and out (unlikely) or Kiri finally decided she'd respect the sanctity of his room while he was away (hell would sooner freeze over), this really was his room like he left it when he went to Cyoria.

Was it all a dream, then? It seemed altogether too real for a dream. His dreams had always been vague, nonsensical, and prone to evaporate out of his memory soon after he woke up. *These* felt exactly like his normal memories – no talking birds, floating pyramids, three-eyed wolves and other surreal scenes his dreams usually contained. And there was so much of it, too – surely a whole month worth of experiences is too much for a mere dream?

"Mom wants to talk to you," Kirielle told him from the floor, apparently not in any great hurry to get up. "But hey, can you show me some magic before you get down? Please? Pretty please?"

Zorian frowned. Magic, huh? Come to think of it, he learned quite a bit of magic. Surely if this was all a particularly elaborate dream all the magic he learned there would be completely bogus, right?

He made a couple of sweeping gestures and words before cupping his hands in front of him. A floating orb of light promptly materialized above his palms.

Huh. Not just an elaborate dream, then.

"That's amazing!" Kirielle gushed, poking the orb with her finger only to have it pass straight through it. Not surprising, really, since it was just light. She withdrew her finger and curiously stared at it, as if expecting to find it changed somehow. Zorian mentally directed the orb to fly around the room and circle Kirielle a few times. Yep, he definitely knew the spell – he retained not just the memory of the casting procedure, but also the fine control he developed with repeated practice with it. You don't get things like that from a mere vision, even a prophetic one.

"More! More!" demanded Kirielle.

"Oh come on, Kiri," sighed Zorian. He really wasn't in the mood for her antics at the moment. "I indulged you, didn't I? Go find something else to amuse yourself now."

She pouted at him, but he was thoroughly immune to such things by now. Then she frowned for a moment and suddenly straightened as if remembering something.

Wait...

"No!" Zorian shouted, but he was already too late. Kiri already ran into the bathroom and slammed the door behind her. "Damn it, Kiri, why now? Why not before I woke up?"

"Sucks to be you," she answered.

Zorian leaned forward until his forehead collided with the door. "I had forewarning and I still fell for it."

He frowned. Forewarning, indeed. Whatever his 'future memories' were, they seemed to be fairly reliable. Was Cyoria really going to get invaded during the summer festival, then? What should he do about that? What *could* he do about that? He shook his head and marched back to his room. He would not even contemplate that sort of question until he found out more about what had happened to him. He locked the door so he would have some privacy and sat on his bed. He needed to think.

Okay. So he lived through a whole month of school before... something happened... and then he woke up in his room back in Cirin, as if the entire month never happened. Even with magic factored in, that was preposterous. Time travel was impossible. He didn't have any books in his room that discussed the topic at any appreciable length, but all of the passages that dealt with time travel agreed that it couldn't be done. Even dimensional magic could only warp time, speeding it up or slowing it. It was one of the few things mages agreed was beyond the ability of magic to accomplish.

So how, then, was he living through it?

He was just in the process of consulting the books in his room for any type of magic that could 'fake' time travel in some way when a knock on his door interrupted his thoughts, and he suddenly realized he was still in his pajamas and that mother wanted to talk to him quite a while ago. He quickly changed and opened the door, only to find himself under the scrutiny of two women, only one of which was his mother.

He almost greeted Ilsa by name, but he caught himself in time.

"A teacher from the academy has come to talk to you," his mother said, her disapproving stare telling him she was going to give him an earful once Ilsa left.

"Greetings," Ilsa said. "I am Ilsa Zileti, from Cyoria's Royal Academy of Magical Arts. I was hoping to speak to you about some matters before you leave. It won't take long."

"Of course," said Zorian. "Um, where do you..."

"Your room shall suffice," Ilsa said.

"I'll bring you something to drink," his mother said, excusing herself.

Zorian watched Ilsa as she unpacked various papers and placed them on his desk (what was she doing with those, anyway?), trying to decide how to proceed with this. If his future memories were valid, she should be handing him the scroll right about...

Yeah, there it is. Knowing what's going to happen in advance is weird.

For the sake of appearances Zorian gave the scroll a cursory examination before channeling mana into it. It was exactly how he remembered it – the calligraphy, the flowery official-sounding phrases, the elaborate crest at the bottom of the document – and Zorian felt a wave of dread wash over him. What the hell had he gotten himself involved in? He had no idea what was happening to him, but it was big. *Very* big.

He had the urge to tell Ilsa about his predicament and seek her advice, but he restrained himself. It sounded like the most sensible thing to do – surely a fully trained mage like her was far more qualified for tackling this than he was – but what could he possibly tell her? That he was remembering things that hadn't happened yet? Yeah, that would go over well. Besides, considering the nature of his future memories, he could easily see himself arrested if a conspiracy to invade Cyoria was really discovered thanks to his warnings. After all, it's far more likely his shocking knowledge comes from being a defector of the conspiracy than him being some kind of weird time traveler. An image of a couple of government agents torturing him for information briefly flittered through his mind and he shuddered.

No, best to keep all this to himself for now.

So for the next 10 minutes, Zorian basically reenacted his memories of his initial interaction with Ilsa, not seeing the point in choosing differently this time – all of his choices were made for reasons that were currently every bit as valid as they were in his future memories. He didn't argue with Ilsa about Xvim this time around, though, since he already knew arguing over that topic was pointless, and he didn't request a bathroom break, since he already knew what electives he wished to take. Ilsa seemed completely indifferent to his strange decisiveness, apparently just as eager as he was to get this whole thing out of the way. Then again, why would she be surprised at his decisiveness? She had no future memories to compare this entire encounter to, unlike him. Hell, she didn't even know him up until now.

Zorian sighed and shook his head. They really did feel just like normal memories, and it was hard to ignore them. This is going to be one long

month.

“Are you alright, Mr. Kazinski?”

Zorian glanced at Ilsa curiously, trying to divine why she asked him that. She glanced towards his hands – only for a moment, but Zorian caught it. His hands were shaking. He balled them into fists and took a deep breath.

“I’m fine,” he said. A second or so of uncomfortable silence ensued, Ilsa apparently unwilling to continue with her closing speech while she continued to study him. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course,” Ilsa said. “That’s why I’m here.”

“What do you think about time travel?”

She was clearly taken aback by the question – it was probably the last thing she expected him to ask, or at least close to the bottom of the list. She composed herself very quickly though.

“Time travel is impossible,” Ilsa said firmly. “Time can only be dilated or compressed. Never skipped or reversed.”

“Why?” asked Zorian, honestly curious. He had never actually seen an explanation for the impossibility of time travel, though that might be because he wasn’t terribly interested in the topic up until now.

Ilsa sighed. “I admit I’m not particularly knowledgeable about the details, but our best theories indicate that going against temporal currents is utterly impossible. As in ‘draw a square circle’ impossible, not ‘leap over the ocean’ impossible. The river of time flows only in one direction. Beyond that, innumerable attempts have been made in recorded past, all ending in failure.” She gave him a sharp look. “I sincerely hope you won’t waste your talents on such a fool’s quest.”

“I was just curious,” Zorian said defensively. “I was just reading a chapter discussing limitations of magic and wondered why the author was so certain time travel is impossible.”

“Well now you know,” Ilsa said, getting up. “Now if that’s all, I really should be going. I’ll be happy to answer any further questions on Monday after class. Have a nice day.”

Zorian watched her leave and shut the door behind her before collapsing back on his bed. Definitely a long month.

- break -

For once the train ride didn’t put Zorian to sleep. He had subtly prodded mother with some sensitive topics when she tried to scold him and he was pretty sure this wasn’t some kind of elaborate illusion, unless the illusionist was aware of some very closely kept family secrets. And he seemed far too lucid for this to be some kind of induced hallucination. As far as he could tell at the moment, he really did travel back in time. He had spent most of the train ride writing down everything of importance he could think of in one of his notebooks. He didn’t really think the memories were going to fade any time soon, but it helped him organize his thoughts and notice details he might have otherwise missed. He noted that he forgot to retrieve his books from under Kir’s bed in all the confusion, but decided it didn’t matter. If the classes were anything like they were the last time around, he wouldn’t need them for the duration of the first month.

It was that last spell the lich performed on him and Zach, Zorian was sure of it. The trouble was, Zorian had no idea what the spell was. Even the words were unfamiliar. Standard incantations used Ikosian words as their base, and Zorian knew enough of Ikosian to get a general feel of a spell just by listening to what the caster’s chanting, but the lich used a different language for his incantation. Fortunately, Zorian had a really good memory and remembered most of the chant, so he wrote it down in his trusty notebook in phonetic form. He was pretty sure he wouldn’t find the spell itself anywhere within his clearance level, as the spell was probably highly restricted and kept out of reach of first circle mages like him, but he would see about identifying the language and finding a proper dictionary in the academy library.

The other clue to this whole thing was Zach himself. The boy was capable of fighting a lich – a freaking *lich*! – for several minutes before succumbing to it. Even though the lich had been toying with him, it was still pretty impressive. Zorian would put Zach on par with a 3rd circle mage, and probably more. What the hell was that guy doing with academy students then? Something was definitely strange about Zach, though Zorian had no intention of confronting the guy directly until he found out more about what’s going on. For all he knew, it could be one of those ‘you know about us, so now we have to kill you’ sort of things. He would have to tread carefully around the Noveda heir.

Zorian slammed the notebook shut and ran his hand through his hair. No matter how he looked at it, this whole situation seemed utterly crazy. Did he really have memories from the future or was he simply going insane? Both possibilities were terrifying. He was in no way qualified to tackle something like this on his own, but he didn’t know how to get other people to help him without being carted off either to a madhouse or an interrogation chamber.

He resolved to think about it later. As in, tomorrow later. This whole thing was simply too weird, and he needed to sleep on it before he decides anything.

“Excuse me, is this seat free?”

Zorian glanced at the speaker, recognizing her after a second of recollection. The nameless green turtleneck girl that joined him in his compartment

when they took a stop at Korsa. Of course, the last time she didn't bother to ask for permission before taking a seat. What changed? Ah, it didn't matter – what *did* matter is that last time she was soon followed by four other girls. Very loud, very obnoxious girls. No way he'd be spending the rest of the train ride listening to their banter... *again*.

"Yeah," he nodded. "In fact, I was just leaving. We're stopping at Korsa, right? Good day, miss."

The story has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the violation.

And then he quickly grabbed his luggage and went to search for another compartment, abandoning the girl to her fate.

Maybe these future memories are good for something, after all.

- break -

Bam!

"Roach!"

Bam! Bam! Bam!

"Roach, open the thrice damned door! I *know* you're in here!"

Zorian rolled over in his bed and groaned. What the hell was Taiven doing here this early? No wait... He snatched the clock from his dresser and brought it in front of his face... she wasn't early, he just slept past noon. Huh. He distinctly remembered going straight to the academy from the train station and falling asleep minutes after reaching his room, yet he still overslept like this. Apparently dying and then awakening in the past is tiresome business.

Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam!

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" shouted Zorian. "Stop banging on my door, already!"

Naturally, she just kept banging on it with more enthusiasm. Zorian rushed to make himself presentable and stomped towards the door. Wrenching the door open, he gave Taiven a withering look...

...which she promptly ignored.

"Finally!" she said. "What the hell took you so long!?"

"I was sleeping," Zorian ground out.

"Really?"

"Yes," ground out.

"But..."

"I was tired," Zorian snapped. "Very tired. And what the hell are you waiting for? Get inside."

She rushed inside and Zorian took a moment to collect himself before he confronted her. In his future memories, she never visited him once after he refused to go along with her mission to the sewers, which spoke volumes about her true feelings about this 'friendship' of theirs. Then again, he hardly even thought about her himself until now, so he probably shouldn't judge. In any case, he was even less inclined to join her on this mission now than he was in his future memories – he actually had more pressing matters to attend to this time, in addition to general apprehensiveness that was still as valid now as it was then. Accordingly, he felt a lot less reluctance in simply blowing her off, and it only took him an hour to convince her to leave him alone.

That done, he immediately set out for the library, making a short detour to a nearby bakery for a quick bite to tide him over. Once in the library he started searching for books on the topic of time travel and trying to identify the language the lich used in his spell.

To call it disappointing would be calling it mildly. For one thing, there were no books on time travel. The topic was not considered a serious field of study, what with it being impossible and all. What little was written about it was scattered across innumerable volumes, hidden in unmarked sections and paragraphs of otherwise unrelated books. Piecing together these scattered mentions was an absolute chore, and not all that rewarding either – none of it was useful in solving the mystery of his future memories. Finding the language the lich used in his spell was even more frustrating, since he failed to even identify the language, much less translate the chant.

He spent the entire weekend fruitlessly sifting through library texts, finally abandoning that avenue of research when it became obvious it wasn't producing any results. Plus the library workers were starting to give him weird looks at his choice of literature and he didn't want to create any unfortunate rumors. Hopefully he would be able to trick Zach into revealing what the hell was going on when school started.

- break -

“You’re late.”

Zorian stared at Akoja’s stern face in quiet contemplation. He was glad he wouldn’t have to deal with any drama because of his disastrous evening with her – almost as glad as he was about the fact that he wasn’t dead – but he couldn’t help but wonder what her outburst had been about. She didn’t really look like she had a crush on him, so why did his comment hit her so heavily?

“What?” she asked, and Zorian realized he had been staring at her a little too long. Oops.

“Ako, why are you telling me this when more than half the class isn’t even here yet?” he asked.

“Because there is at least a chance you will listen, unlike them,” Akoja admitted. “Also, someone like you should be an example to other students, not descend to their level.”

“Someone like me?” inquired Zorian.

“Just get inside,” she snapped irritably.

He sighed and went inside. It was probably for the best to leave things be – he had other problems to deal with, and she was far too rule-bound for his tastes anyway.

He didn’t know what he was expecting to happen when he walked into the class. Everyone to stop what they were doing and stare at him, maybe? At least then he would have a reason for feeling so unnerved at attending his first class of the year for the second time. But of course they did no such thing. It wasn’t a second time for them, and there was nothing visibly irregular about him for them to take notice. He quashed his unease and sat down in the back of the class, discreetly scanning new arrivals for signs of Zach. He was sure the other boy was connected to this somehow, and the mysterious boy appeared to be Zorian’s best chance at understanding what was happening to him.

There was a brief commotion when Briam’s fire drake familiar hissed up a storm and started chasing Briam’s terrified neighbor across the classroom before Briam calmed it down. Apparently the magical reptile liked the unfortunate boy even less than it did Zorian. In any case, Ilsa came in soon after and started the class.

Zach never showed up.

Zorian spent the entire class in a daze, shocked at this turn of events. Where the hell was Zach? Everything happened almost exactly as it did in his future memories so far, with Zach’s absence being the first major deviation. This firmly cemented Zach as somehow connected to this madness, but it also put the boy out of Zorian’s reach for the moment.

The lecture was even more annoying now than it was the first time he listened to it, since from his perspective he went through these review sessions less than a month ago. Apparently Ilsa worked off some kind of a script, because the lecture was virtually identical to the one from his memory, the only difference being that Zach wasn’t there to compete with Akoja for answering Ilsa’s questions to the class.

Funny how things seem clearer in retrospect. Zach was acting strange right from the start, in that very first lecture, but Zorian thought nothing of it. Sure, Zach volunteering to answer the teacher’s questions was out of character for the boy, but not completely implausible. It was just a review session anyway, and they had to know these things to pass the certification. It took two weeks before people really began to take notice the extent of Zach’s sudden improvement.

So many questions, so few answers. He could only hope that Zach would show up soon.

- break -

Zach didn’t come to class that day, or the next, or the day after that. By Friday, Zorian was pretty sure the other boy wouldn’t be showing up at all. According to Benisek, Zach simply disappeared from his family mansion on the very same day that Zorian took the train to Cyoria, and nobody had seen a hint of him ever since. Zorian didn’t think he could cook up anything the investigators hired by the boy’s guardian hadn’t thought of doing, and he didn’t want to attract attention to himself by asking around, so he reluctantly put the mystery of Zach aside for the moment.

His schoolwork was going well, at least. Thanks to his foreknowledge, he aced Nora Boole’s surprise tests and didn’t really have to study for any subject – a small refresher was sufficient to coast him through pretty much anything. Once his warding class really gets going that’s probably going to change, but for now he had all the free time he wanted to deliberate on what he should do about the rapidly approaching summer festival and the accompanying assault.

Sadly, with Zach absent, Zorian had hit dead ends in all the clues he had, and was now at loss how to proceed.

“Come in.”

Zorian opened the door to Xvim’s office and defiantly met the man’s gaze. He was pretty confident in the accuracy of his ‘future’ memories by now, Zach’s mysterious absence aside, so he knew this was going to be another exercise in frustration. He was tempted to boycott the meetings, but he suspected it was his stoic perseverance in the face of the man’s antagonism that eventually convinced Ilsa to take him under her wing. And besides, he felt that he would be doing Xvim a favor if he quit – Zorian had a distinct feeling that the man was trying to get him to quit the last time around – and he was far too spiteful to do that. He sat down without prompting, a little disappointed that the man hadn’t remarked upon his intentionally rude gesture.

“Zorian Kazinski?” Xvim asked. Zorian nodded and expertly snatched the pen that the man had throw at him out of the air, having expected it this time.

“Show me your basic three,” the man ordered, not in the least bit surprised at the feat of coordination.

Instantly, without even an extra deep breath, Zorian opened his palm, the pen practically jumping out of his palm and into the air.

“Make it spin,” Xvim said.

Zorian’s eyes widened. What happened to ‘start over’? His current attempt wasn’t any worse than what he displayed during their last session before that fateful dance, and Xvim’s only response that night had been ‘start over’, just like any other time. What changed *now*?

“Are you having problems with hearing?” Xvim asked. “Make it spin!”

Zorian blinked, finally realizing he should be focusing on the current session instead of his memories. “What? What do you mean ‘make it spin’? That’s not part of the basic three...”

Xvim sighed dramatically and slowly took another pen and levitated it over his own palm. Instead of just hanging in the air like Zorian’s, however, Xvim’s pen was spinning like a fan.

“I... have no idea how to do that,” Zorian admitted. “We weren’t taught how to do that in classes.”

“Yes, it is criminal how badly the classes are failing our students,” Xvim said. “Such a simple variation of a levitation exercise should not be beyond the grasp of a certified mage. No matter, we shall correct this deficiency before we move on to other matters.”

Zorian sighed. Great. No wonder no one ever mastered the basic three to Xvim’s liking if the man keeps redefining what ‘mastered’ means. There were probably hundreds of ‘small variations’ of each of the basic three, enough to spend decades learning them all, so little wonder no one could exhaust them all in two measly years. Especially considering Xvim’s standards for labeling the skill ‘mastered’.

“Go on,” Xvim urged. “Start.”

Zorian focused intensely on the pen hanging above his palm, trying to figure out how to do that. It should be relatively simple. He just had to affix a stabilization point in the middle of the pen and put pressure on the ends, right? At least, that’s the first thing that popped into his head. He had just managed to get the pen to move a bit when he felt a familiar object impact onto his forehead.

Zorian glared at Xvim, cursing himself for forgetting about the man’s damnable marbles. Xvim glanced at the pen that was still hovering over Zorian’s palm.

“You didn’t lose focus,” Xvim remarked. “Good.”

“You threw a marble at me,” Zorian accused.

“I was hurrying you up,” Xvim said, unrepentant. “You’re too slow. You must be faster. Faster, faster, faster! Start over.”

Zorian sighed and returned to his task. Yup, definitely an exercise in frustration.

- break -

Between his unfamiliarity with the exercise and Xvim’s constant interruptions, Zorian only managed to get the pen to wobble by the end of the session, which was... a little humiliating, actually. His above average shaping skills were one of the few things that set him aside from his fellow mages, and he felt he should have done much better, despite Xvim’s repeated sabotage attempts. Fortunately, a book describing the exercise in detail was easy to find in the academy library, so he would hopefully master it by next week. Well, not *master* it – not in the sense that Xvim wanted him to – but he at least wanted to know what he was doing before he tackled his next session with Xvim.

Of course, normally he wouldn’t be willing to pour that much effort into a lousy shaping exercise, but he needed a distraction. At the beginning, the entire time travel situation was so patently ridiculous that he found it easy to remain calm and collected. Some part of him kept expecting that the whole thing was a double dream or something, and that he would wake up one day and not remember a thing. That part was becoming panicked and agitated now that it became obvious that the situation he faced was real. What the hell was he supposed to do? Zach’s mysterious absence weighted heavily upon him, inflaming his paranoia and making him reluctant to tell anyone about the invasion. Zorian was not a fundamentally selfless person and didn’t want to save people only to screw himself over in the end. Whatever his future memories really were, they were in essence his second chance at life – he was pretty sure he died at the end of his future memories – and he had no intention to squander it. He did consider it his ethical duty to warn people of the danger threatening the city, but there had to be a way to do it without destroying his life or reputation.

The simplest idea would be to warn as many people as possible (thus ensuring that at least some of them take the warnings seriously) and do so face-to-face, since written communications can be ignored in a way that is not really possible in personal interactions. Unfortunately, that would almost certainly paint him as a madman until he’s eventually vindicated by the actual assault. *If* there is an assault, that is – what if the conspirators decide to lay low upon having their plans unmasked and the invasion doesn’t happen? What if nobody takes him seriously until it’s too late and then decide to turn him into a scapegoat in order to shift responsibility away from themselves? What if one of the people he tries to warn is part of

the conspiracy and has him killed before he can tell anyone else? What if, what if... way too many what ifs. And he had a sneaking suspicion that one of those what ifs was responsible for Zach's disappearance.

As a result of these musings, the idea of staying anonymous appealed to him more and more with each passing day. The problem was that sending a message to a bunch of people without having it traced back to you was not at all simple when magic got involved. Divinations weren't all-powerful, but Zorian had only academic understanding of their limitations, and his precautions probably wouldn't hold against a motivated search by a skilled diviner.

Zorian sighed and started outlining a tentative plan into his notebook, completely ignoring their history teacher's enthusiastic lecture. He had to figure out who to contact, what to put into the letters, and how to ensure they couldn't be traced back to him. He somehow doubted the government would allow authors to publish instructions on how to evade detection from law enforcement, but he would still check the library to see what they have on the topic. He was so caught up in his self-appointed task he barely noticed when the class ended, furiously scribbling away while everyone else packed and filed out of the classroom. He definitely didn't notice Benisek peering over his shoulder.

"What are you doing?"

Zorian slammed his notebook shut in a reflexive maneuver as soon as Benisek started talking and gave the other boy a nasty glare.

"It's impolite to look over other people's shoulders," Zorian remarked.

"Jumpy, aren't we?" smiled Benisek, loudly dragging a chair from the nearby table so he could sit on the other side of Zorian's table. "Relax, I didn't see anything."

"Not for the lack of trying" remarked Zorian. Benisek only grinned wider. "What do you want, anyway?"

"Just wanted to talk for a bit," Benisek shrugged. "You've been really withdrawn this year. You've got this frustrated look on your face all the time, and you're always busy even though it's the start of the school year. Wanted to know what was bothering you, you know?"

Zorian sighed. "This isn't something you can help me with, Ben..."

Benisek made a strangled noise, apparently outraged by his remark. "What do you mean I can't help you!? I'll have you know I'm an expert on girl trouble."

Now it was Zorian's turn to make a strangled noise. "Girl trouble!?"

"Oh come on," Benisek laughed. "Constantly distracted? Spacing out in the middle of the class? Making plans for sending anonymous letters? It's obvious, man! Who's the lucky girl!?"

"There is no 'lucky girl,'" Zorian growled. "And I thought you didn't see anything?"

"Listen, I don't think sending anonymous letters is a good idea," Benisek said, completely ignoring his remarks. "That's so... first year, you know? You should just walk up to her and tell her how you feel."

"I don't have time for this," Zorian sighed, getting up from his seat.

"Hey, come on..." protested Benisek, trailing after him. "Man, you're one touchy guy, did anybody tell you that? I was just..."

Zorian ignored him. He really didn't need this right now.

- break -

In retrospect, Zorian should have known that simply ignoring Benisek wasn't such a good idea. It only took two days for most of the class to 'know' that Zorian has a crush on someone, and their loud speculation was annoying as hell. Not to mention distracting. Still, his displeasure at the rumors evaporated when Neolu approached him one day and gave him a short list of 'books he might find useful'. He had half a mind to set the list on fire, especially since the list was decorated with dozens of little hearts, but in the end his natural curiosity won over and he went to the library to check them out. He figured that at the very least he'd get a good laugh out of them.

He got more than a good laugh, though – instead of silly love advice like he expected, the books Neolu recommended were all about making sure your letters, gifts, and such couldn't be traced back to you with divinations and other magic. Apparently if you call such advice *Forbidden Love: Mysteries of Scarlet Letters Revealed* and phrase it as relationship advice you can get straight past the usual censorship such topics would normally be subjected to.

Of course, he had no idea how reliable the advice in those books really was, and the librarian looked at him funny when he checked out books like that, but he was still pleased to have found them. If this whole thing worked out in the end he'd have to do something nice for Neolu.

So as the summer festival approached, Zorian prepared and plotted. He bought a whole stack of generic paper sheets, pens, and envelopes in one of the stores that looked too poor and disorganized to track their customers' purchases. He worded the letters carefully to avoid revealing any personal details. He made sure not to touch the paper with his bare hands at any point, and that none of his sweat, hair, or blood ended up in the envelope. He deliberately wrote in a blocky, formal script that looked nothing like his normal handwriting. He destroyed the pens, the excess

paper, and envelopes he didn't use in the end.

And then, a week before the festival, he put the letters in different public postal boxes all over Cyoria and waited.

It was... nerve-wracking, to say the least. Nothing happened, though – no one came to confront him about the letters, which was good, but also nothing out of the ordinary seemed to be happening. Did no one believe him? Did he mess up somehow and the letters ended up not reaching their intended recipients? Are they being so subtle in their reaction that no disturbance is being made? The wait was killing him.

Finally, he had enough. On the evening before the dance he decided he'd done everything he could and took the first train out of the city. His letters may or may not have worked, but this way he'll be alright regardless. If anyone asked (though he doubted they would), he'll use his trusty 'alchemical accident' excuse. He messed up a potion and breathed in some hallucinogenic fumes, only coming to his senses when he was already outside of Cyoria. Yes, that's exactly what happened.

As the train sped away from Cyoria in the dead of a night, Zorian suppressed his unease and feelings of guilt for doing so little to warn anyone of the approaching attack. What else could he have done? Nothing, that's what. Nothing at all.

After a while he fell into uneasy sleep, the rhythmic thumping of the train his lullaby, visions of falling stars and skeletons wreathed in green light haunting his dreams.

- break -

Zorian's eyes abruptly shot open as sharp pain erupted from his stomach. His whole body convulsed, buckling against the object that fell on him, and suddenly he was wide awake, not a trace of drowsiness in his mind.

"Good morning, brother!" an annoyingly cheerful voice sounded right on top of him. "Morning, morning, *MORNING!!!*"

Zorian gaped at his little sister incredulously, his mouth opening and closing periodically. What, again?

"Oh you've got to be kidding me!" Zorian growled, and Kirielle quickly got off of him and scooted away fearfully. Apparently she thought his ire was directed at *her*. "Not you, Kiri, I... I just had a nightmare, that's all."

He couldn't believe it, it happened *again*! What the hell? He was glad it happened last time, since it meant he wasn't... you know, *dead*. But now? Now it was just *freaky*. Why was this happening to him?

Oh, and while he was lamenting his fate internally, Kirielle barricaded herself in the bathroom again. God damn it all!

6. Concentrate and Try Again

Chapter 006 Concentrate and Try Again

Zorian stared at the endless fields blurring past him, the silence of the otherwise empty compartment only broken by the rhythmic thumping of the train's machinery. He looked calm and relaxed, but it was only a practiced façade and nothing more.

His mask of stoicism might have seemed silly, as there was no one around to judge him, but over the years Zorian had found that acting calm on the outside helped him achieve calm more easily on the inside as well. He needed any help he could get in achieving inner peace now, because he was about to start panicking like a headless chicken.

Why was this happening again? The first time it had happened, he was dead sure the lich was responsible. The spell had hit him, and then he woke up in the past. Cause and effect. He hadn't been hit by some mysterious spell this time, though – not unless someone had snuck into the train compartment while he was sleeping, which he found very unlikely. No, he had just dozed off and woke up in the past again, as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

Then again, it did highlight some things that had been bothering him until now. After all, why had the lich cast a time travel spell on him? It seemed rather counterproductive to the whole 'secret invasion' plot. Time travel seemed too purposeful and complex to be an accidental side effect, and he seriously doubted the lich had used a spell whose effects it did not understand. Even a neophyte like him knew what a horrible idea it was to use a spell you don't understand in an uncontrolled environment, and the undead spellcaster wouldn't have reached the level it did if it was willing to do something so foolish for the sake of a couple of brats it had already defeated anyway. No, there was a simpler explanation: the lich wasn't responsible for his time traveling problems. It really *had* been trying to kill them 'Them', plural, because Zach had also been the target. The same Zach that had been shockingly good in all his classes all of a sudden. The same Zach that was wandering around the city armed to the teeth with combat magic that should be beyond any academy student. The same Zach that had been making very curious offhand comments all month long...

Perhaps it was Zach, not the lich, who had cast the time travel spell?

Zach being a time traveler would explain his vast abilities and inexplicable academic improvement quite nicely. Since this particular method of time travel seems to just send a person's mind into their younger body, he could be of an arbitrarily large age, and what Zorian remembered of Zach's various comments led him to believe the boy had lived through this particular time period many times over. A mage with decades of experience and detailed foreknowledge would no doubt find 3rd year curriculum laughably easy.

Though even if Zach had been the one to cast the time travel spell, there was still left the question of why Zorian was thrown back too. It could have easily been an accident – he knew that grabbing a mage while they're in the process of casting a teleport spell could pull you along for the ride, and they were basically tangled with one another – but that didn't explain why Zorian was repeating this month for the *second* time. Zach had been absent all month long, and thus hadn't had the opportunity to cast *anything* at Zorian.

He didn't know what to think. Hopefully Zach would be present for questioning this time around.

"Now stopping in Korsa," a disembodied voice echoed, the faulty speakers crackling with signal noise every once in a while. "I repeat, now stopping in Korsa. Thank you."

What, already? A glance through the window revealed the familiar white tablet confirming his arrival at the trading hub. He was half-tempted to get off the train and spend the entire month fooling around and trying to forget this whole time travel business, but quickly dismissed it. Blowing off the beginning of the school year like that would be really irresponsible and self-destructive, even if going through another identical month of classes was anything but appealing. There *was* a possibility that he would be flung back into the past for the *third* time, of course, but that wasn't something he should be relying on. There was no way the spell could keep sending him back indefinitely, after all – it was bound to run out of mana sooner or later. Probably sooner, since time travel must be pretty high level.

...right?

"Um..."

Zorian snapped out of his thoughts and finally noticed the boy peering into his compartment. He frowned. He specifically chose this compartment because it was completely empty during his... second attempt at life. After he had left the green turtleneck girl to her giggling fate, he had come here for some peace, so this time he decided to be proactive and went here right from the start. Apparently it wasn't that simple. He supposed that his very presence attracted the boy – some people just plain liked company, and would avoid empty compartments.

"Yes?" Zorian said politely, hoping the boy just wanted to ask him something instead of trying to find a seat.

He was mistaken.

"Do you mind if I sit here?"

"No, go right ahead," said Zorian, giving the boy a forced smile. Damn.

The boy smiled brightly at him, and quickly dragged his luggage in. A lot of luggage.

“First year, right?” Zorian asked, unable to help himself. So much for his plan on remaining silent and creeping the boy out into leaving the compartment. Oh well.

“Yeah,” the boy agreed. “How did you know?”

“Your luggage,” Zorian remarked. “You do realize the academy grounds are pretty far from the main station? Your arms are going to fall off by the time you get there.”

The boy blinked. Apparently he *didn’t* know. “Um, it’s really not that bad, right?”

Zorian shrugged. “You better hope it doesn’t rain.”

“Ha ha,” the boy laughed nervously. “I’m sure I’m not that unlucky.”

Zorian smirked. Ah, the benefits of foresight. Or was it hindsight? Language really wasn’t designed with the possibility of time-travel in mind.

“Ah! I didn’t introduce myself!” The boy suddenly blurted out. “I’m Byrn Ivarin.”

“Zorian Kazinski.”

The boy’s eyes lit up immediately. “Like-“

“Like Daimen Kazinski, yes,” Zorian said, suddenly finding the window incredibly interesting.

The boy stared at him expectantly, but if he had expected further elaboration from Zorian on the subject, he was about to be sorely disappointed. The last thing Zorian wanted to do was talk about his eldest brother.

“So, um, are you related to Daimen Kazinski or is your last name just a coincidence?” asked the boy after a lengthy pause.

Zorian pretended he couldn’t hear him, and instead retrieved his notebook from the neighboring seat and studied it intently. It was almost completely empty, since all his previous notes about the invasion and the mystery of his ‘future memories’ were now gone, lost in a future he left behind him. It wasn’t much of a loss, since the vast majority of those notes had been worthless – hollow speculations and dead-end leads that hadn’t got him any closer to solving this mystery. Still, he had written down a few things he remembered from his previous notes, like the spell chant the lich had uttered before killing him. Yes, Zach was likely responsible for all of this, but he couldn’t be *sure*...

After judging the silence to have lasted for a fittingly awkward amount of time, Zorian looked up from his notebook to fixate a look of confusion at the waiting boy.

“Huh? Did you say something?” Zorian pretended, frowning slightly as if he honestly hadn’t heard a word of the question he was asked.

“Err, never mind,” the boy backpedaled. “It’s not important.”

Zorian gave the boy a genuine smile. At least he could take a hint.

He talked to the boy for a while, mostly just answering the boy’s questions about first year curriculum, before growing bored with it and starting to feign interest in his notebook again, hoping he will take the hint.

“What’s so interesting about that notebook, anyway?” He asked, either oblivious to Zorian’s disinterest in continued conversation or deliberately ignoring it. “Don’t tell me you’re studying already?”

“No, these are just notes on some personal research,” said Zorian. “It’s not going too well so I’m a little frustrated with it. My mind keeps drifting to it.” Especially when the alternative was talking to an overly inquisitive first year.

“The academy library-“

“First thing I tried,” Zorian sighed. “I’m not stupid, you know?”

The boy rolled his eyes at him. “Did you search for the books yourself or did you ask the librarian to help you? Mother works as a librarian, and they have these special divination spells that let them find things in minutes that would take you decades if you search by title and skimming alone.”

Zorian opened his mouth before closing it. Ask the librarian for help, huh? Okay, maybe he *is* stupid.

“Well... it’s not really a topic I want to bother the librarian with,” Zorian tried. Which was true, but he knew he’d end up trying it anyway. “Maybe I could find the spells themselves in the spell repository? But no, if they are anything like other divination spells it’s using them correctly and interpreting the results that’s the problem, not casting them...”

“You could always get a job in the library,” the boy offered. “If the academy library is anything like the one my mother works in, they’re always desperate for help. They teach their employees how to use those spells as a matter of course.”

“Really?” Zorian asked, rather intrigued by the idea.

“It’s worth a try,” he said, shrugging.

For the rest of the ride, Zorian stopped trying to evade conversation. Byrn had definitely earned some respect from him.

- break -

“Of course! We’re always looking for help!”

Well... that was easy.

“We can’t pay you much, understand – that miserable gnome of a headmaster cut our budget again! – but we’re very flexible about work time and we’ve got a pretty friendly atmosphere here...”

Zorian waited patiently for the librarian to run out of steam. She was an unassuming middle aged woman at first glance, but the moment she had begun speaking he realized her looks were rather deceiving – she was cheerful and had a sort of indescribable energy about her. Just standing around her made Zorian feel the same sort of pressure he felt when stuck in a crowd of people, and he had to rein in his instinct to step back as if from a raging fire.

“I’m guessing you don’t get many work offers, then?” Zorian tried. “Why is that? Shouldn’t people be fighting tooth and nail to work in a place like this? It’s a pretty famous library.”

She snorted, and Zorian could swear he could *feel* the derision and a touch of bitterness in the seemingly innocuous sound. “Academy regulations require us to only hire employees that are first circle mages or higher. Most graduates have better paying and more glamorous options than this,” she waved her hand towards rows of bookshelves around them, “reducing us to hiring students. Who are...”

She suddenly stopped and blinked, as if remembering something. “But anyway, enough of that!” she said, clapping her hands and beaming at him. “From this day on, you’re one of the library assistants. Congratulations! If you have any questions, I’ll be glad to answer them.”

It was only through superhuman willpower that Zorian stopped himself from rolling his eyes at her. He never agreed to anything, merely inquired about the *possibility* of employment... and she undoubtedly knew that. But oh well, he *did* want the job, and not just because he was hoping to learn some nifty new spells and translate the lich’s chant – he suspected that library employees got to access parts of the library that would normally be restricted to him as a first circle mage, and that was just too much of a temptation to pass up.

“Question one,” said Zorian, “How often do I come to work?”

She blinked, surprised for a moment. No doubt she expected him to protest her presumptuousness. “Well... when *can* you come? Between the classes, and the need for study time and other commitments, most of our student employees work once or twice a week. How much time can you set aside for this?”

“The classes are pretty easy at this point,” Zorian said. “We’re mostly doing the review of our second year, which I know like the back of my hand. Setting aside one day for unexpected developments, I could be here 4 times a week. My weekends are mostly free too, if you need any help then.”

Zorian mentally berated himself for talking like that – the classes hadn’t even started yet, so how would he know what they consisted of? Luckily, the librarian didn’t call him out on it. Instead her eyes immediately lit up upon hearing this and she started shouting.

“Ibery!” she called out. “I’ve got a new partner for you!”

A bespectacled girl carrying an armload of books popped out of the small room adjacent to the information desk to see what was going on. Oh. It was the green turtleneck girl (she was wearing it even now) that he shared a compartment with...

...except he had chosen a seat on the other side of the train this time, so they never met on the train. Oh well, probably wouldn’t have mattered anyway.

“Anyway, I believe some introductions are in order,” the librarian said. “I am Kirithishli Korisova, one of the few actual librarians in this place. This pretty lady,” she gestured towards the turtleneck girl, who blushed at the praise and shifted uncomfortably, clutching the stack of books tighter in her arms, “is our resident busy little bee, Ibery Ambercomb. Ibery has been working here since last year, and I don’t know what I’d do without her. Ibery, this is Zorian Kazinski.”

The girl suddenly perked up at this. “Kazinski? As in...”

“As in, younger brother of Daimen Kazinski,” Zorian said, unable to suppress a small sigh.

“Um...”

“Actually, I’m pretty sure she meant your *other* brother,” Kirithishli said with a sly smile. “She’s in class with Fortov and has a bit of a crush...”

She and a dozen other girls. Fortov never had a shortage of women throwing themselves at him.

“Miss Korisova!” Ibery protested.

“Oh, lighten up,” Kirithishli said. “Anyway, Zorian here will be working with us pretty heavily for the foreseeable future. Go show him what to do.”

And just like that, he was employed at the library. Only time would tell if he was wasting his time.

- break -

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been unlawfully taken from Royal Road. Please report it.

Much like the last time, Zach hadn’t come to class. Zorian was half-expecting it, but it was no less annoying because of it. It cemented Zorian’s suspicion that Zach was heavily involved in this mess, but the boy’s absence made it impossible for Zorian to confront him about it. What was he supposed to do now?

For that matter, was he supposed to do *anything at all*? Last time he had been operating on the belief that if he didn’t do something about the invasion, no one would. No one else had the strange future memories he did, after all. If his speculations were correct, though, Zach had probably traveled through time *specifically* to stop the invasion – what other reason did he have to frequent this particular time period? Besides, he had been wandering the city during the attack, picking off attackers. So all in all, there just might be an experienced time-traveling mage on the job already, and he would only get in the way.

The problem with that idea was that he was ultimately just guessing, and had no idea if it was true or not. He could be dooming himself and the city through inaction, relying on a boy who, quite frankly, didn’t inspire too much confidence in him. Zach reminded him of his brothers a little too much. And besides, didn’t Zach *lose* against the lich? Yeah.

Not knowing how to unravel the mystery presented to him, or even where to start, Zorian had thrown himself into schoolwork and his job at the library. Of course, thanks to going through this for the third time, the only issue he had with schoolwork was Xvim’s grating insistence that his grasp on the pen-spinning (as Zorian affectionately called it) exercise was abominable and that he had to do it over and over *and over again*. His time at the library, on the other hand, was… interesting, though not really in the way he hoped it would be.

He hadn’t learned any spells yet, though he suspected this was because there were so many other, more pressing things he had to learn before Kirithishli and Ibery decided to invest that kind of effort in him. Simply put, he wasn’t very good at his job. The seemingly simple job of shuffling some books around was made immensely more complicated by the various library protocols and the all-important book classification scheme. Zorian had hoped to demonstrate basic proficiency with his duties before asking for favors, but it had been two weeks and he was beginning to understand that it would take him at least a couple of months to reach that level, and he didn’t have that. The summer festival was getting closer.

That’s why he proceeded to corner Kirithishli after she had dismissed him for the day to ask her about the coveted book divinations. Ibery lingered, pretending to be busy so she could eavesdrop. She sure was nosy for such a shy girl.

“Say, I’ve been meaning to ask a small favor of you,” Zorian began.

“Go ahead,” Kirithishli said. “You’ve helped us a lot, so I’ll be happy to help if I can. It’s not often we get such a competent worker.”

“Eh!” barked Zorian. “Competent? I barely know what I’m doing – if it weren’t for your and Ibery’s help I would wander around like a headless chicken.”

“That’s why I paired you with Ibery – to learn. And boy are you learning fast! Faster than I did when I first started at this job, that’s for sure. To be honest I usually give only the simplest and most tedious jobs to student employees, but since you’re more dedicated than them I’ve given you the advanced course.”

“Ah,” Zorian said after a short silence. “I’m flattered.” And he really was. “Anyway, I was wondering about book-finding divinations. I’ve been searching for a pretty obscure topic and I’m not going anywhere with it.”

“Ah!” Kirithishli said, slapping her forehead. “How could I forget about that!? Of course I’ll teach you, we teach all our long-term workers those. They’re a bit tricky to use, though, so it will take a while to learn how to use them properly. Ibery will show you how. Though you can always tell me what exactly you’re looking for and I’ll do my best to help you out. I know this library like the back of my hand, you know?”

Zorian debated the merit of showing her the lich’s chant, since he suspected it was something that could get him into a lot of trouble just for asking about it, but saw no other way. No doubt learning how to use those divinations took months – months he didn’t have. He took out his notebook and ripped out the corresponding page, handing it to her.

Kirithishli arched her eyebrow at the text, and Ibery gave up on all pretenses of not paying attention and peered over her shoulder to see what was on the slip of paper.

“It’s an unknown language,” Zorian clarified. “I don’t even know which one, really.”

“Hm, tricky,” Kirithishli remarked. “Finding a written reference based on a phonetic pronunciation of a word you don’t even understand is a tall order, even with divinations. You should just find an expert in languages to help you if it’s so important.”

“You should try Zenomir,” piped in Ibery.

“Our history teacher?” asked Zorian incredulously.

“He also teaches linguistics,” Ibery said. “He’s a polyglot. Speaks 37 languages.”

“Woah.”

“Yeah,” Ibery agreed. “He should at least know what language that is, even if he can’t read it. He’s pretty helpful if you approach him nicely, I doubt he’ll turn you away.”

Interesting.

- break -

“Ah, mister Kazinski, what can I do for you?”

Zenomir Olgai was old. *Really* old. He wore blue robes – actual robes, like the magi of old – and had a carefully sculpted white beard. Despite his advanced age, he moved with a spring in his step and his eyes had sharpness that most people half his age lacked. Zorian hadn’t taken the linguistics elective, but he knew from his history class that Zenomir cared about his subject almost as much as Nora Boole did about runes and mathematics – though he at least understood that most students didn’t share his passion for the subject.

“I was told you can help me with some translation,” Zorian said. “I have a pretty fragmentary recording of an unknown language in phonetic form, and I was hoping you could at least tell me what kind of language it is. It’s nothing like any language I’ve encountered so far.”

Zenomir perked up at the notion of an unknown language and gingerly took the paper slip with the lich’s chant from Zorian’s hand. His eyes widened barely a second afterward.

“Where did you get this?” he asked quietly.

Zorian debated internally what to do and then settled for a measure of truth.

“I was attacked by someone a while ago. They used a spell with that chant as the incantation. I just wanted to know what it does.”

Zenomir took a deep breath and leaned back. “You’re lucky it didn’t hit. It’s some kind of soul magic spell.”

“Soul magic?”

“Necromancy,” clarified Zenomir.

Zorian blinked. Necromancy? Well, it sort of made sense for the lich to use that sort of spells, but what did necromancy have to do with time travel? Nothing. This was pretty much a definite confirmation of Zach as a primary cause of his predicament.

“So, wait, what is that language anyway?” asked Zorian.

“Hm? Oh! Yes, the language... it’s old Majara language, spoken by many of the cultures that shared the continent of Miasina with Ikosians before their rise to prominence. Many of the ruins in Koth are written in it and, sadly, it is the language in which many of the blackest rituals and necromantic spells are formulated. You won’t find any books about it available in public circulations, I’m afraid. But let’s return to the matter of this assailant. This is the darkest of magic they used, and they can be up to no good if they’re throwing spells like that on academy students.”

Deciding he couldn’t just backpedal now, Zorian nonetheless decided against mentioning time travel in any way and settled for making something up. He told Zenomir about him overhearing a plan to invade the city during the summer festival. At first he dismissed it as some kind of prank because of its ludicrous nature, but when the two cloaked figures noticed him eavesdropping and started throwing spells he didn’t recognize at him, he grew concerned. Zenomir took him a lot more seriously than Zorian thought he would, and told him to go home and leave everything up to him from now on.

Huh. That went surprisingly well – at least Zenomir hadn’t dragged him off to the police station to give a statement right away, though he suspected something like that might be in his near future. He paced nervously around in his room, unable to sleep and steadily losing the fight to keep his growing apprehension in check. Smart or not, the deed was done, and now the only thing he could do was wait and see what the consequences of his decision would be. For him and for everyone.

A knock on the door interrupted him. Strong, confident knocking that nonetheless only lasted for a second or two – completely unlike the knocking of anyone he knew.

“Coming!” Zorian called out, suspecting it was someone coming to talk to him about the story he told Zenomir. “What can I- urk!”

Zorian stared dumbly at the blade sticking out of his chest, his mouth opening in an unvoiced scream. He had just enough time to look at his assailant – a short figure dressed in loose black clothes and a faceless white mask – before the blade was painfully wrenched out of his body and then immediately inserted again into his chest cavity. Again and again and again...

When darkness consumed his vision he was actually glad he was dying. Being repeatedly stabbed in the chest *hurts*.

- break -

Zorian's eyes abruptly shot open as sharp pain erupted from his stomach. His whole body convulsed, buckling against the object that fell on him, and suddenly he was wide awake, not a trace of drowsiness in his mind.

"Good m-!"

Kirielle was cut off as Zorian shot upright, eyes wide in fright, gasping for breath. He was killed! They killed him! He told someone about the attack and he was killed that very evening! How the hell had they even found out that fast!? Was Zenomir in on the attack or were they just that well informed!?

"Nightmare?" Kirielle asked.

Zorian breathed deeply, ignoring the phantom pain in his chest as he did so. "Yeah. Definitely a nightmare."

- break -

Zorian knew he should focus on what Ilsa was saying, but for the life of him his mind wouldn't stop dwelling on what had happened. In retrospect, he shouldn't be so surprised at that particular turn of events – an invasion of that scale cannot be kept secret without some hefty inside help, so of course they'd find out about anyone raising an alarm about them! And besides, if stopping the invasion had as simple a solution as notifying the law enforcement, surely Zach would have already done it and Zorian wouldn't be repeating this month for the third time.

Although, he was starting to develop a healthy dose of respect for these... restarts. This was the second time he died and he only went through this month thrice. He seemed prone to dying. Didn't Zach say something about him always getting blown up in that initial barrage unless he did something about it?

He snapped back into the real world when he realized Ilsa had stopped talking and was looking at him intently. He gave her a questioning look.

"Are you quite alright?" she asked, and Zorian noticed her glancing at his hands. Why would she-

Oh.

His hands were shaking. He was probably quite pale too, if the skin on his hands was of any indication. He rubbed his hands together a few times and then balled them up into fists to reassert control over them.

"Not quite," Zorian admitted. "But I will be. You don't have to worry about it."

She stared at him for a second longer and then nodded.

"Very well," she said. "Do you want me to teleport you to the Academy? I can't imagine riding the train in the state you're in is going to be very pleasant for you."

Zorian blinked, at loss what to say. He disdained train travel at the best of times, so an offer like this was a godsend at the moment, but... why?

"I don't want to inconvenience you..." he tried.

"Don't worry, I was going there anyway," she said. "It's the least I could do for getting to you so late and taking the choice of your mentor away from you."

Well, that much was true. Xvim really was a horrible, useless mentor.

Zorian excused himself to tell mother he was leaving – which took way too long in his opinion, since mother wouldn't stop bombarding him with questions about teleportation, suddenly concerned about his safety – before picking up his luggage and following Ilsa outside. He was actually a little excited, since he'd never teleported before. He'd have been even more excited, but the memory of being stabbed to death was still uncomfortably fresh, dampening his enthusiasm somewhat.

"Ready?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Don't worry, the rumors about the dangers of teleporting are mostly exaggerated," Ilsa said. "You can't get stuck inside solid objects – the spell doesn't work that way – and if something goes wrong I'll immediately know it and collapse the spell before dimensional ripples tear us apart."

Zorian scowled. He already knew that, but saw no point in pointing that out – she obviously heard his little exchange with mother.

Ilsa started chanting and Zorian stood straighter, not wanting to miss-

The world rippled, then changed. Suddenly they were both standing in a well lit circular room, a large magical circle carved into the marble floor

they stood on. There was no disorientation, no flash of colors, no nothing – almost disappointing. He studied the room they were in a little more closely, trying to understand where they were.

“This is the teleport redirection point,” Ilsa said. “The academy wards shunt every incoming teleport into this place for security reasons. Of course, that’s assuming you’re properly keyed in and have sufficient authorization to teleport in at all.” She fixed him with a penetrating gaze. “Teleporting into a warded space is just one of the many dangers of the spell. Don’t experiment with it on your own.”

“Err... I’m pretty sure teleport is *far* above my access level,” pointed out Zorian.

She shrugged. “Some students are capable of reconstructing a spell after seeing it performed only once. Once you know the chant and gestures, 80% of the work has already been done for you.”

Zorian blinked. Now why didn’t he think of that?

“Would you mind casting that spell one more time?” he asked innocently. “Strictly for academic purposes, you see...”

She chuckled. “No. If it makes you feel any better, I doubt you have enough mana reserves to cast the spell even once.”

As a point of fact, it *didn’t* make him feel any better. He didn’t care how dangerous it was, he’d learn the teleport spell as soon as he was able. He just shaved off an entire day of train travel from his journey in an instant – the ability to do that kind of thing at will would be worth quite a lot of trouble to acquire. He let out a sigh and left Ilsa to her own devices to get settled in.

“I could get used to this kind of travel,” Zorian mumbled to himself as he unlocked the door to his room and dropped his luggage to the floor in relief. “Too bad I could never fake distress convincingly enough, or else I’d convince Ilsa to take me along at the beginning of every restart.”

He froze mid-step. He shouldn’t be thinking like that. That was dangerous thinking. He had no proof that the restarts would keep happening indefinitely. In fact, everything he knew about magic told him it *couldn’t* be true – whatever spell had been put on him was going to run out of mana at some point and then there’d be no restart, no second chances... no return from the dead. He had to treat every restart as if it were his last, because it might very well be.

Though he had to admit that, despite it ending with him getting stabbed to death, the previous restart wasn’t a complete disaster – at least he had all but confirmed it was Zach, and not the lich, that was responsible for this. Instead of researching unknown languages and time travel, it would probably be wiser to find out where Zach keeps disappearing to every time.

But not right now. He deserved a little rest after being brought back from the dead.

- break -

He really should have known it wouldn’t be that easy. The moment he tried to track down Zach, he was reminded of why he didn’t do that in his very first restart. Zach was not only an heir of Noble House Noveda – he was the *only* still living member of that House, the rest of his family having been killed in the Splinter Wars. Zach stood to inherit a sizeable financial empire and a legacy of several generations of mages once he came of age, so everything about him was scrutinized closely by a great number of interested parties. Consequently, his disappearance was a Big Deal, and a lot of people wanted to know where he went. Zorian was just one of these people, and if those people (and the people they hired) hadn’t managed to track him down, he had very little chance to do so. Needless to say, he didn’t get anywhere. Like he suspected, the two girls Zach hung out with during Zorian’s original month were nothing special without the Noveda heir there to help them out and hang out with them (and asking people about them led to some pretty annoying rumors being spread around; honestly, can’t a guy ask about a girl without everyone assuming he’s got a romantic interest in her?), his house was sealed with some pretty heavy ward-work, his legal guardian could not be reached, and if he had any close friends they weren’t among his classmates. Zorian wasn’t a detective, and had no idea what else to look for. And considering that many professional detectives had already failed (and continued to fail) to track the boy down, he suspected it wouldn’t help even if he *did* know a thing or two about tracking people down.

A month went by with little to show for it. Summer festival came, and Zorian once again boarded a train out of Cyoria, awake and alert as the night deepened and minutes ticked away. He brought a pocket watch with him this time, and kept glancing at it every once in a while, silently praying that he wouldn’t have to start over once again but wanting to know exactly when he got thrown back in case he did. Sure enough, his prayers wouldn’t be answered. Somewhere around 2 past midnight he blacked out and woke up with Kiri on top of him, wishing him a good morning.

He probably should have admitted it to himself right then and there. He was a fairly smart person, after all, and not prone to deluding himself. Instead it took 4 more restarts before he accepted the truth of his predicament: he was stuck in some kind of a time loop, and it wasn’t going to end any time soon.

He didn’t know how it was possible. Maybe the spell was powered by Zach’s seemingly inexhaustible mana reserves instead of being limited to a fixed amount at the moment of casting. Maybe it was one of those rare self-sustaining spells. Hell, maybe it reached into the Heart of the World and drew power from the World Dragon itself! It didn’t really matter how it did it, only that it did.

But that’s retrospect – at the time he just refused to accept it, and instead tried to live like he normally would. It was rather boring, yes, but what if this particular restart was the one where it ended? The restart where the consequences of his choices would not magically disappear at 2 past midnight on the night of the festival (He checked and yes, it was consistent across all 4 restarts).

He was through with that though - he couldn’t go on like this. Excluding the invasion bit, the month had been a bore even the first time around, and

he had lived through it eight times already. He knew the first month curriculum well enough by now to get near-perfect scores in all subjects, even warding. It had little effect on how people treated him, as he found out. He was known to be capable, and his grades had always been very good, so people weren't really surprised if he aced all the exams or effortlessly performed a perfect magic missile on their very first combat magic class. It was within the realm of people's expectations, unlike Zach's sudden improvement. The only people whose behavior changed in response to his improvement were Akoja and Xvim. Akoja had gotten twice as annoying now that she apparently found a kindred soul, always insisting that they check each other's work and asking him for help whenever she didn't understand something. Zorian had thought she'd be green with jealousy that he was beating her scores, but it seemed she was a lot less bothered to be outdone by *him*, as opposed to by the likes of Zach and Neolu. Xvim took his superb scores as an indication that he should be held to an even higher standard. As such, not only did he not declare his pen-spinning good enough to move on to something else, he had *demoted him back to the regular levitation exercise*. In all honesty, Zorian wasn't terribly bothered by that – even if he did master the pen-spinning exercise to Xvim's satisfaction, no doubt he'd get nothing more than *another* minor variation of the basic three to practice.

So all in all, going through *another* boring month like that was out of the question. He took different electives this time – Astronomy, Architecture, and Geography of the Global Mana Flow – and he fully intended to bring down his academic scores back to normal so Xvim and Akoja would remain their normal, more tolerable selves. He also intended to skip quite a few time-consuming homework projects to focus on his own personal studies, and he was going to spend a sizeable portion of his savings on alchemical supplies. Should this restart be the final one, he was going to be seriously inconvenienced, but it wouldn't be the end of the world, and he suspected the disruptions following in the wake of the invasion would render many of the normal concerns moot.

Then he walked into the essential invocations classroom on the first day of school and realized his plans would have to be adjusted.

Zach was finally back in class.

7. Of Gaps And Pretending

Chapter 007 Of Gaps And Pretending

At first, Zorian hadn't even noticed him. That was noteworthy by itself, as Zach wasn't an easy person to overlook. The boy loved attention and seemed to have trouble staying still and quiet, something that remained consistent even after Zach suddenly turned into some kind of a weirdo time traveler. Today, however, the normally loud and exuberant boy remained eerily silent. He also eschewed his typical tactic of sitting in the back of the classroom to occupy a seat near the front. If his out of character behavior hadn't caused people to glance at him a bit too often, Zorian would have probably overlooked him.

He was so shocked to see the boy finally present in class that he momentarily halted in his tracks, standing like an idiot in the middle of the classroom. Then, after a moment's thought, he set off towards the likely cause of his predicament.

His first instinct was to immediately march up to the boy and drag him away into some forgotten corner to clear everything up, but Zach's subdued appearance gave him pause. Zach's skin was pale and bloodless, and he was breathing a little too quickly and shallowly for a healthy person. He looked sick. Thinking about it a little more carefully, approaching the boy so directly would be a reckless and possibly dangerous course of action. His loss to the lich aside, Zach was vastly more powerful than Zorian, and Zorian had no idea how the other boy would react if he knew there was another person tagging along in his time traveling adventure. He'd need to confront him sooner or later, though, so he fully intended to make at least tentative contact with the boy. He scanned the front of the classroom, looking for a free seat near Zach that would allow him to study the boy during the lecture.

He didn't have to look hard – Zach was sitting very close to Briam, and every seat around Briam was empty. The cause was easy to divine: people were reluctant to get close to the angry-looking fire drake he was holding. As someone with future knowledge, Zorian knew their fears were well founded. While the young fire drake didn't torch anyone (and sometimes Zorian wondered how much of that was thanks to the drake's youth and lack of ability, as opposed to having self-restraint) it didn't hesitate to bite and scratch, and it was hard to tell what would set it off. Fortunately, it seemed to tolerate Zorian better than most people, so he simply plopped down into the seat next to Briam, silencing the lizard's hissing with an annoyed glare. He stared at the fire drake's slitted yellow eyes until the reptile turned its head and left him alone.

"Wow, you shut him down in an instant," remarked Briam. "I wish I could control him that easily."

The fire drake snapped its jaws at the air in front of Briam's face, causing the boy to flinch back. Briam huffed in annoyance and apparently let the matter drop. Not for the first time, Zorian wondered just how smart that creature really was.

Then, doing his best to appear natural, Zorian turned to Zach sitting a bit further away from him.

"You look like hell," Zorian remarked.

Zach groaned and buried his face into his hands. "I *feel* like hell," he moaned. "What did that pile of bones do to me?"

Zorian's heart quickened. Zach no doubt expected his comment to be disregarded as a weird metaphor, but to Zorian it was definite confirmation that Zach was also a time traveler. No points for guessing who or what the mysterious 'pile of bones' was.

Now... how could he get Zach to talk more without revealing that he knew more than he should?

"Pile of bones?" Zorian asked, his voice curious.

Zach opened his mouth to respond but Ilsa chose that exact moment to walk into the classroom and Zach dropped the issue.

Zorian had to restrain himself from glaring at Ilsa as she smiled at him. Couldn't she have waited a few more minutes?

Ignorant and uncaring of Zorian's internal grumbling, Ilsa accepted the list of present students from Akoja and began introducing herself and her class. It wasn't anything that Zorian hadn't heard eight times already, so he mostly ignored her in favor of keeping an eye on Zach and plotting how to extract time travel related information out of him.

Suddenly he realized that Ilsa had stopped talking and was looking in his direction. After a few moments he realized she was looking at Zach.

"Mr. Noveda, you look quite ill. Please tell me you didn't come to my class with a hangover."

The class erupted into laughter and Zach winced, either because loud noises bothered him in the state he was in or because he noticed the undercurrent of agitation in Ilsa's question. Either way he recovered quickly.

"It's not a hangover," protested Zach. "I just woke up like this, I swear."

"And you thought that coming to class like this was a good idea... why?" Ilsa prodded.

"Err... I honestly didn't think it would last this long. I figured it would pass in an hour or two," said Zach sheepishly.

Zorian frowned. If the sickness was a consequence of the spell the lich had targeted them with that evening (and Zach certainly seemed to think so, if his previous comment was any indication), that would mean Zach had been suffering its effects for the past 8 months or so, as Zach had been absent for that long. Why would Zach expect a condition that serious to pass ‘in an hour or two’?

Why couldn’t there be any simple answers in all this?

“Well it didn’t,” Ilsa concluded. “While I appreciate your dedication to your studies,” Zorian distinctly heard Ako snorting derisively in the background, ‘I must insist you go home or, better yet, visit a healer. You look like you’re going to collapse any moment.’

Before Zach could say anything, Zorian rose from his seat.

“I’ll get him home, teacher,” he said. Zach gave him a surprised look, but Ilsa just nodded and shooed them away.

Zorian picked up his bag and left with Zach in tow, very pleased with himself. He got a legitimate excuse to talk to Zach in private *and* a permission to skip a class he had already attended 8 times by now. Could a victory be more complete?

“You didn’t have to do that, you know?” Zach remarked, trailing behind him. “I can get back home on my own. I don’t feel *that* sick.”

“But if I *hadn’t* done that, I would’ve had to sit through 2 hours of boring review,” countered Zorian.

Zach laughed, but his laughter quickly collapsed into a painful sounding cough.

“Damn,” he wheezed. “He really did a number on me.”

“Who is this someone you keep mentioning?” prodded Zorian.

“It’s not important,” Zach mumbled. He took a deep breath and fixed Zorian with a speculative look. “Hey. Want to go to the cafeteria and grab something to eat?”

“You think your stomach can handle it?” Zorian asked.

“You bet,” Zach nodded. “I’m starving!”

Zorian shrugged and gestured for Zach to lead the way.

That was how Zorian found himself sharing a table with the cause of his time traveling problems, trying to think of a good opening for a conversation he wanted to have with the boy. Or should he wait for a few days to make Zach get used to his presence? Hmm...

“You know, I find this whole situation very amusing.” Zach said between mouthfuls, shoveling noodles into his mouth and attempting to talk at the same time. Now *that* was very amusing. His mother always insisted he should aspire to behave ‘like a noble’. She would have a heart attack if he ever adopted Zach’s eating manners. “A good little student like you, skipping class to have lunch with a class delinquent... what is the world coming to? What would your mother say if she saw you now?”

“First of all, I’m not skipping class – I’m escorting you home,” Zorian pointed out, ignoring a snort from Zach. “We just stopped for a meal so you wouldn’t collapse from starvation before we get there.” Another snort. “And my mother would go all sparkly-eyed at who I’m having lunch with and promptly forget I’m supposed to be in class.”

“Ah. A social climber,” Zach said, a sour expression on his face. “Say no more. At least you’re male so she wouldn’t try to pair us.”

“Well, I do have a 9-year-old sister...”

“Don’t go there,” Zach warned.

“Fine,” agreed Zorian. He didn’t particularly want to continue in that avenue, anyway. “So are you going to tell me who roughed you up or what?”

“You’re a lot nosier than I remember,” Zach huffed. “What makes you think someone roughed me up?”

“Your offhand comments aren’t as oblique as you imagine them to be,” Zorian said.

“Whatever,” Zach scoffed. “I just breathed in some weird fumes while I was messing with my alchemy set yesterday, that all.”

Ah, the trusty ‘alchemical accident’ excuse. So cliché, yet so effective. Zorian had used it quite a few times himself. In any case, he wasn’t willing to let go so easily. He decided to risk it and try to provoke a reaction from the boy.

“Must have been some *really* weird fumes – the aftereffects almost look like soul magic exposure,” Zorian speculated loudly.

Zorian had expected *some* kind of reaction from Zach, but what he got was quite a bit stronger than what he had imagined. Zach immediately sat straighter in his seat, eyes wide in realization. “Of course! That’s why I’m still suffering the effects, even after the revert! The son of a bitch targeted the very thing that gets sent back – my soul!”

There was an eerie silence in the cafeteria as everyone stared at the crazy boy shouting nonsense in a crowded dining hall. Zach slowly lowered his

hands (he had been gesticulating wildly during his little speech) and mumbled an apology that was too quiet for anyone but Zorian to hear. Scattered laughter rippled through the gathered students for a few moments before everything finally returned to normal.

“Err...” started Zach. “Maybe we should continue this at the fountain, yeah?”

“I don’t know,” remarked Zorian carefully. “If you intend to be this loud, I don’t think it will do much.”

“Oh ha ha,” grumbled Zach. “So I got a little excited... not everyone is an ice cube like you Zorian.”

“Ice cube?” asked Zorian, an undercurrent of warning in his voice.

But Zach was already packing, and Zorian could do nothing but huff in annoyance and follow after him. Still, Zach’s little outburst answered a few of his questions. So it wasn’t his memories, or even his mind that got sent back – it was his *soul*. That would certainly explain why his spellwork and shaping skills didn’t disappear every time he started over. It was common knowledge that magic was heavily connected to the soul, even if no one really knew the exact mechanism of their interaction.

When they finally reached the fountain, Zach seemed to be in a contemplative mood so Zorian took a moment to study the schools of colourful fish swimming in the basin of the fountain. He actually pitied the poor things, since they were unlikely to last long. For years the fountain had been in disrepair, and it was only due to the grander-than-usual summer festival that it was renovated. How likely was it that the Academy would continue to maintain it after the occasion passed? Not very. And it was even less likely it would be kept in a good enough condition for the fish to survive. Their days were numbered.

“Zorian...” Zach prodded.

“Hm?”

“Tell me... what do you know about time travel?”

Zorian blinked. Well. That was direct.

“Time travel?” Zorian asked with as much confusion as he could fake. “Not much, I guess. What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Ugh, well...” Zach fumbled with words, scratching his chin nervously. “You’ll probably think I’m insane, but I’m a time traveler of sorts.”

Wow, Zach really didn’t have a subtle bone in his body, did he?

“You don’t look very old,” Zorian remarked. “If you come from the future it must not be a very far one.”

“No, no, it’s more like... the whole world resets itself on the night of the summer festival, and I’m the only one who remembers what happened.”

That was an interesting way of explaining it, though the idea of a spell affecting the whole world was even more ridiculous than the idea of working time travel magic.

“I’ve lived through this month... god, at least 200 times by now,” continued Zach. “Honestly, I’m starting to lose count.”

“Wait, you’re talking about it like you can’t stop it,” said Zorian, unable to keep a tiny bit of alarm out of his voice. Luckily, Zach appeared to be too agitated to notice.

“That’s just it, I don’t know if I can stop it!” Zach shouted, before he realized what he was doing and quieted down so as to not attract unneeded attention. “I was hit by this spell in the previous revert, and its effects didn’t completely go away when I reverted into the past.”

Zorian frowned. ‘Previous revert’? What about the other 7? Did Zach somehow skip those or did he simply not remember them? It occurred to Zorian that the after-effects of the lich’s spell could have been even more serious than what he was currently looking at – what if Zach had spent the past 7 restarts in a coma? Though that begged the question of why his guardian had reported him as missing instead of bringing a healer.

“I guess it really was a soul magic spell like you said,” continued Zach. “I need to watch out for those from now on. Anyway, at first I thought it’s just some nasty sickness that’ll pass, and to a degree I was right. I already feel a lot better than I did this morning. It’s just that it wasn’t only my body that was affected – my mind has been a little spotty ever since I woke up.”

Oh no...

“I don’t remember how I started this time loop,” concluded Zach, confirming Zorian’s fears. “Or whether it was me who started it in the first place. My memory is full of blanks like that at the moment. I’m hoping it will all come back to me but...”

Zorian stared at the other boy, stony faced. Basically, they were both in deep shit.

Zach seemed to interpret Zorian’s serious look a little differently, though.

“You don’t believe me,” he concluded.

"It's pretty far-fetched," Zorian said. If he hadn't lived through it, he wouldn't have believed him, no. "But I'm a pretty open-minded guy. Let's pretend you're right for the moment. What's that got to do with me?"

Zach arched an eyebrow at him, apparently incredulous about something.

"Huh," he said. "You're really different from your other self."

"My other self?" Zorian asked curiously.

"Yeah," Zach nodded. "My memory may be spotty about some things, but I definitely remember you. Mostly because you kept dying at the start of the attack..."

Zach mumbled the last sentence in a quiet voice that probably wasn't meant to carry but did. Zorian pretended he didn't hear it.

"You're different than you used to be," Zach said. "You were more irritable, and always busy with something or other. You never believed me when I tried to tell you about the whole time travel thing – you thought I was trying to make fun of you."

Well... that kind of story sounded *exactly* like something his brothers would try to fool him with. And Zach did have a great many things in common with those two already.

"You've changed," Zach concluded. "You're a lot calmer. More laid-back, I guess."

Zorian frowned. He didn't think he changed that much in personality, but he supposed it would be hard to *not* change when going through something like this. To say nothing of the fact that more than 8 months had passed since the restarts started for Zorian.

"So, wait... why did I change then?" Zorian asked. "Didn't you say the whole world resets itself?"

"Don't know," Zach shrugged, then gave him a speculative look. "Come to think of it, you were there too, weren't you?"

Zorian gave him a confused look. He wasn't going to get baited that easily.

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"No, of course you don't remember," Zach sighed. "Do you at least feel a little different lately or something?"

"Come to think of it... yes," confirmed Zorian. "I chose different electives than I intended to, for no good reason really, and I did a bunch of other strange things ever since I came to Cyoria."

Zorian's motivation for saying that was two-fold. First of all, he wanted to see how Zach would react to the idea of another person going through the time loop with him. Secondly, he wanted to lay the groundwork for an explanation why he'd be acting differently in every restart, in case he decided not to tell Zach about himself.

He was surprised that Zach was so willing to believe him, though. Apparently even after all this time (nearly 17 years, if the other boy was to be believed), Zach still hasn't developed an ability to effectively read people. That, or Zorian really was that good of an actor.

"Strange," was all Zach said.

"Yeah," Zorian agreed. "So... any advice a time traveler can tell a mortal like me? A secret spell of awesomeness, maybe?"

"To be honest, most of the spells I know are combat ones," Zach admitted. "I'm really good at combat magic, which is good because I need to be good at it. There is... something I'm trying to stop."

"Something involving the mysterious adversary that messed you up?" tried Zorian. He really wanted to work the invasion into the conversation but didn't know how to justify knowing anything about it. "Do you remember how *that* happened, at least?"

"Ugh," grunted Zach. "Mostly. I distinctly remember you being there, but you probably died right at the start of the battle – no offense Zorian, but you aren't much of a fighter – and then I stupidly charged in, thinking myself invulnerable."

"Why would you ever think that?" Zorian asked, honestly confused. "That you're invulnerable, I mean. Doesn't it strike you as dangerously arrogant to perceive yourself as invincible?"

"Do you know how many times I've died in these reverts?" protested Zach. "My memory is failing me again, but it was a lot. You tend not to take it too seriously after a while. And it's not like I was too far off – I just have to watch out for necromancy next time, right?"

"Not just necromancy," Zorian replied with a heavy sigh. "There is also mind magic to worry about. Aside from the obvious possibility of ending up as a mind thrall, you could also end up with more than a few gaps in your memory – you could have your whole mind blanked out. Then there is a possibility of having a geas forced upon you if you're too careless, which also bind to the soul as far as I know. Some creatures, such as wraiths, eat souls – that's another thing to worry about. And there are a couple of methods of sealing away a mage's ability to do magic, which might very well stay with you when you... 'revert'."

Zach was silent, but Zorian could have sworn he had gotten even paler as he listened to Zorian speak.

“And that’s just a couple of points off the top of my head,” finished Zorian. “I’m only an academy student, and I don’t know anything. It’s obvious w- err, *you* are not invulnerable. Okay?”

Zorian swallowed heavily. That was close. It was fortunate that Zach was so oblivious, because had the situation been reversed, he would have called Zach out on it ages ago.

“Wow, you almost sound like you care,” Zach finally said with a nervous chuckle. “You really *do* believe I’m a time traveler now, huh?”

Zorian shrugged. “I’m not completely convinced, but it’s not something that’s worth fighting over in my opinion. If you say you’re a time traveler, then we’ll pretend you’re a time traveler.”

Yes. Until he got a better feel for Zach’s character and understood what the deal was with the time loop, he would pretend.

- break -

When Zorian finally returned to school, having missed both the remainder of essential invocations and the following lecture about magical law, he was beset by curious classmates and Ako. Ako was easy to deal with, since she only wanted to scold him for taking too long and warn him she recorded his absence in the attendance record. Zorian was pretty sure the only person, teachers included, who cared about what was written on that list was Akoja. The ones that wanted to know what’s wrong with Zach were also easy. It was an alchemical accident.

What? It’s the excuse Zach used!

Unfortunately, many people also wanted to know why he had suddenly volunteered to take him home, or what had taken him so long. Nosy, nosy people. And they were persistent too, refusing to leave him alone for the rest of the day. When Zorian finally reached his room he immediately locked his door and breathed a sigh of relief. He finally had enough time to think about what he found out today.

Zach was confident he would be fine by tomorrow, and that his memory would come back to him. Zorian was not nearly as confident. That Zach had a 7-month gap in his memory (and possibly existence) suggested something very serious had been done to him. Why hadn’t Zorian suffered anything of the sort? Well... maybe he had. He had felt uncharacteristically tired in his first restart, but had written it off as mental stress. Maybe he had only been caught at the very edge of the spell and thus only suffered minor damage, or maybe his ‘first restart’ was only the first one he had memory of.

It was a disturbing possibility, but there was not much point in dwelling on it much.

It really wasn’t that unexpected, when you really thought about it. The strange time travel effect he and Zach were under had essentially turned them into soul entities. A lich was, at its core, *also* a soul entity. They were mages that ritually killed themselves and tethered their souls to an object – their phylactery – before it could move on into the afterlife. If the form they currently inhabited ever got destroyed, they’d snap back to their phylactery, and simply possess someone. It would make sense for a lich to know how to fight another lich. And a method that worked against a lich would work just as well against him and Zach.

And Zach had stupidly said as much to the lich at the end of their battle! ‘It’s not like I’ll be dead for good,’ indeed! The lich may not have known what Zach was exactly, but a statement like that strongly suggested he was either a lich himself or some kind of a possessor entity, and from a practical standpoint it wasn’t that far off.

But that was all neither here nor there. The real question was: what was he going to do now? Even if Zach regained his memories (doubtful), he would no doubt want to keep the time loop going until he found a way to defeat the lich. If the boy’s previous altercation with the undead mage was of any indication, that could take a while. And that was assuming Zach was the originator of the spell in the first place. If it happened once, it could have happened twice. He had a sneaking suspicion that Zach might be as much of a stowaway as Zorian was. Was there a *third* looping person running around?

Suddenly, he didn’t feel as desperate to get out of this thing as he was at the start of it. Getting out might not necessarily mean going back to normal. The invasion was clearly more than a random terrorist attack, and Zorian somehow doubted that stopping it would be the end of it. Something very big was happening, and Zorian was a very small fish. A roach, as Taiven would charmingly say. Inside the time loop, he had a chance to secure his future. Outside of it, he was just another victim.

Besides, if Zach was to be believed, ‘normal’ for Zorian meant getting killed at the start of the invasion. He didn’t care much for that kind of ‘normal’. In fact, the more he thought about it the more it seemed to him this whole thing was a giant opportunity rather than an annoyance. Once upon a time, when Zorian was younger, he dreamt of being a great mage. The sort that legends were made of, the kind that revolutionized whole fields of magic all by themselves. In time this dream died as it became clear he didn’t have the talent, the work ethic, or the right connections to make that happen. He was just a slightly above average civilian-born student with no special advantages to his name. But now? He had all the time he needed to build up an advantage over his peers and become truly great. Greater than Daimen.

He shook his head, abandoning that train of thought. He was getting ahead of himself. He needed something more concrete than a fuzzy notion of greatness to guide him – a clear set of goals to achieve, and courses of action to pursue. Right now, the only thing he could think of was harassing Zach for some tips, raiding the library for more spells, and leveraging his curious monetary situation to improve his alchemical skills.

He was leery about relying on Zach for help. Even if the boy would be cooperative, there was only so much he could learn from the other time

traveler without revealing that he too retained his memories each time they reverted to the past.

The library was full of spells, of course, but anything ‘serious’ (that is, that could be used for combat, crime, or spying) was restricted, and he knew from talking to older students that teachers were really stingy with permission slips. Not even Fortov succeeded in getting one, and he could charm a troll into not eating him.

Honing his alchemy skills was definitely an option. The only reason he focused more heavily on invocation thus far was because he had to buy any ingredients he wished to work with, and he was trying to save money. Any serious study of alchemy required a lot of funds – alchemical ingredients were expensive. With his saving account spontaneously refilling after each restart, however, monetary concerns didn’t limit him as much as they did before.

It wasn’t much, to be honest. He needed a better plan. With another sigh, Zorian pulled out his trusty notebook and began to plot and write.

- break -

“Something I can do for you, sonny?” asked Kyron. “The class has been dismissed, in case you didn’t notice.”

“Err, I noticed. I just wanted to talk to you about something.” Zorian said. Kyron gestured him to keep talking. “I hope you don’t find it insulting, but your stated program seems a bit... easy. Practicing magic missile for a whole month seems rather pointless to me, since I already have a pretty good grasp on it.”

Kyron stared at him for a few seconds. Zorian suppressed the instinct to shuffle nervously in place and returned the man’s stare. Kyron seemed like a sort of person who would be impressed by that.

“I hope *you* don’t find it insulting, sonny, but you just don’t have enough power to be a proper battle mage,” Kyron finally said. “Your shaping skills are rather impressive for your age, but you tire after only 10 shots from the rod. And that just won’t do in any serious combat.”

“Well, I kind of know that,” admitted Zorian. His reserves had increased slightly from what they were when he first tackled this class, so 10 shots was actually an improvement. “Incidentally, is there anything I can do about that?”

“Nothing I would recommend,” Kyron said, shaking his head. “Your mana reserves will grow as your proficiency in magic grows, of course, but so will everyone else’s. You will always be at a disadvantage against naturally powerful opponents, which would be most of the professional battle mages. Of course, I cannot forbid you from pursuing a career as a battle mage, but I definitely advise you against it. There are plenty of magical disciplines where great shaping skills are an asset, but combat magic is mostly about power.”

“I see,” said Zorian. He didn’t intend to become a battle mage, but he had a feeling he was going to need some combat magic, whether he liked it or not. At the very least he wanted to be able to deal with any stray winter wolves or trolls he might encounter during the invasion. “Though my point still stands. Since I can already do the spell well enough, and that’s the only thing you intend to instruct us in for the foreseeable future, I can see little point in attending the class for the foreseeable future.”

“Hmph,” Kyron snorted. “Trying blackmail on me, sonny?”

“Er...”

“It’s fine, I don’t mind. And I *do* understand your point of view here...” Kyron rubbed his chin for a second, mulling something over in his head. “Wait here.”

15 minutes later Kyron returned with another spell rod, a small booklet, and four ceramic plates. He threw the plates towards Zorian, who hastily caught them before they shattered upon the ground.

“Good reflexes,” Kyron complimented. “They’re actually reinforced, so you don’t have to worry about dropping them too much.” He took one of the spell rods they used in class and grasped it firmly in his hand. “Let me demonstrate something to you. Throw one of the plates to my left.”

Zorian immediately complied, and Kyron wordlessly pointed the rod in the plate’s general direction and fired. He was wide of the mark, but the bolt of force actually homed in on the plate anyway, curving through the air to intercept it. The plate shattered into dust and sharp fragments.

“Again,” Kyron snapped.

Zorian threw another plate, and another bolt of force sped towards it. This one was different, however – it was longer and thinner, like an oversized needle. It hit the plate, but instead of smashing it to pieces it went right through it, punching a hole through the center before dissipating.

“Throw the last two together,” Kyron instructed.

Two plates flew into the air, and Kyron once again pointed the rod in their general direction. Zorian waited for the bolt of force, but none was forthcoming. Instead, both plates were suddenly cut in half by some unseen blades.

Kyron lowered his hand and began to speak.

“The reason I’ll be spending so much time on magic missile is because it’s a very versatile spell,” Kyron spoke. “In its simplest form, it takes the form of a shining bolt of force that travels in a straight line, delivering concussive blasts of force to whatever it impacts. This variant is often called

the smasher, and it is a very simple and effective spell. A skilled mage can do so much more with it, however. You can use animation magic to make it home in on a target. You can sharpen it into a point that will pierce things instead of batter them, or a line to cut them – the piercer and cutter, respectively. You can fire multiple missiles instead of one – a swarm, even, if you have the reserves and skill to pull it off. And, of course, you can make the projectile invisible.”

“Invisible?” asked Zorian.

“Yes,” Kyron agreed. “A perfectly cast force spell is completely transparent. The lightshow you usually see is magical leakage resulting from an imperfect spell boundary. The speed with which combat magic is cast virtually guarantees that some mistakes in constructing the spell boundary will be made, and even if no mistakes are made the large amounts of mana pumped into the constructs can easily distort or unravel some of the pieces.”

“So I’m messing the spell up?” summarized Zorian, thinking of the brightly shining projectiles he always got when he used the rod. “Wait, your missiles normally shine too. Is that-“

Kyron chuckled. “Like I said at the start – there are plenty of magical disciplines where great shaping skills are an asset, but combat magic is mostly about power. Most battle mages can’t even make a simple magic missile transparent, much less one of the higher level force spells. It doesn’t hold them back any. Even I usually don’t bother, since the benefits are so marginal. You, on the other hand, need every advantage you can get.”

Kyron pushed the spell rod and the accompanying booklet into Zorian’s hands.

“You are right that you won’t learn much in class in the next month or so. The smasher may be simple, but more than half of your classmates are having trouble with it as it is, and you’re the only one that truly has a good grasp on it. So read the booklet, find some targets to practice on, and make sure there is a friend nearby while you practice to get help if you screw up big. Oh, and don’t hurt anyone with the rod I’m loaning you or I’ll be mad. Come back to me in two weeks so I can see how you’re progressing.”

“Right,” agreed Zorian enthusiastically. This went a lot better than he thought it would.

“Now get lost,” Kyron gestured towards the door. “You’ve wasted my entire coffee break already.”

- break -

Zorian dropped the stack of books on a nearby table and surveyed the shelves. He had decided to try his luck as a library employee again, hoping he would find a way to get around spell restrictions as an employee. Zach had been absent from class for a couple of days at this point, probably still suffering from the aftereffects of the soul spell, so he couldn’t simply trick the answer out of his fellow time traveler. And besides, he wanted to learn those book divinations he was promised before being brutally murdered, and all.

He wasn’t in a hurry to get Kirithishli to teach him those divination spells, though – the magic missile variations Kyron gave him to practice were giving him enough problems as it was. Like Kyron had said at the beginning of the lecture, the problem was that shaping had to be done in an instant and involved shoving a great deal of his mana reserves into a hastily constructed spell boundary. That was easy enough when you just wanted a bolt that traveled in a straight line and smashed things, but trying to weave, say, a homing function into the spell was a chore to do in a fraction of a second. To say nothing of trying to eliminate all the little imperfections and make the bolt transparent.

Which is not to say he made no progress! He could make the bolt curve towards a target even if his aim was a little off, and he managed to make a flawless piercer yesterday. Progress!

“You’re pretty good at this stuff,” Ibery remarked beside him, putting a book on the shelf. “I’m surprised. Usually it takes a while for people to really understand the system we use here. I guess you worked in a library before, huh?”

“Uh, yeah,” agreed Zorian. It *was* technically true. “It was... surprisingly similar to this one in organization.”

“It’s not really surprising,” Kirithishli said behind him, causing him to jump in surprise. “All state libraries use the same organizing system. It’s a standard enforced by the Society of Librarians. Hell, even the systems of other Splinter Nations are pretty similar.”

“Because they all used to be part the same country?” guessed Zorian.

“It is debatable whether or not the Old Alliance could be considered a unified state,” Kirithishli said. “The name says it all, really – it was an alliance more than anything. Arguably it was the attempt to turn it into a state that led to the Splinter Wars. But yes, being once part of the Old Alliance, the Splinter Nations inherited much of its administrative legacy, including library organization.”

Zorian was starting to understand why Kirithishli had such strained relations with the current headmaster. He knew very little about the man, but what he did suggest he was very politically involved and... well, *patriotic*. And the country they were living in made its official position clear – there was no ‘Old Alliance’, because the Alliance of Eldemar never ended. It simply shrank. That this was a completely ridiculous claim was self-evident to citizens domestic and foreigner alike, but most found it easier to humor the politicians. Kirithishli apparently went a step further and denied there was a predecessor state to be an inheritor of in the first place. A fiery, opinionated woman that she was, she probably said something of the sort within the headmaster’s earshot. That must have been a fun conversation.

“Hey!” called a familiar voice. “Is Zorian here? I heard-“

“Don’t shout in the library, Zach,” Zorian sighed. “Since you’re back to your usual exuberance, I’m guessing you’re alright now?”

“Yup!” Zach said happily, thumping his chest a few times. “Healthy like an oak. Got an hour to grab something to eat?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, I’m working at the moment,” Zorian protested.

“It’s not an issue, Zorian, we’re mostly done for the day,” Kirithishli pointed out. Then she leaned towards him and whispered into his ear. “Unless you wanted to get rid of him and I’m interfering?”

Zorian waved her concerns away and followed Zach outside. As amusing as it would be to see what Kirithishli would say to Zach to get rid of him, he actually wanted to talk to the boy.

“So how come you sought me out?” Zorian asked. He thought he’d have to hound the boy to get more information, but it seemed Zach had taken a liking to him. He didn’t know whether to be pleased or annoyed by that. It was convenient, but it increased the chances that he’d realize something was off with Zorian.

“You’re the most interesting person I know of at the moment, and the only other person who believes me about time travel except Neolu,” Zach said.

“Neolu?” asked Zorian incredulously.

“She’s an avid reader of speculative fiction and mysteries and is very imaginative and open-minded,” said Zach. “A naïve dreamer, her father would say. It was surprisingly easy to convince her I’m really a time traveler. I guess she wants to believe it’s true.”

“Ah,” said Zorian. He supposed that he knew now why Zach involved Neolu so much the first time he went through this month. He still didn’t know who the other girl was, though, and didn’t know how he might work her into the conversation. “How many people did you try to convince, anyway?” asked Zorian.

“All of our classmates and teachers, the headmaster, and the heads of every police department in the city. A couple of nobles and other influential people.”

How... persistent.

“Not very successful, I imagine,” Zorian guessed.

“That’s putting it mildly,” Zach sighed.

Zorian frowned, suddenly realizing something. Why did Zach try to convince all those people he was a time traveler? That didn’t sound like something a time traveler that came specifically to stop the invasion would do. It sounded more like something Zorian briefly considered when he realized how utterly over the head he was, but ultimately decided to scrap the idea because he expected the results to be more or less identical to what Zach got.

“Zach,” began Zorian carefully, “what about those gaps in your memory? Are they...”

“They’re still there,” Zach scowled. “I’m pretty sure they’re not increasing anymore though, thank the gods.”

“Hmm,” agreed Zorian. “So you don’t know how you achieved this time travel magic, then? I looked it up, and it’s supposed to be impossible, you know? As impossible as drawing a square triangle, in fact.”

“Well it’s clearly not that impossible, is it?” Zach countered. “But no, I have no idea how I did that. *If* I did that.”

“If you did that,” agreed Zorian. “From your comments I’m getting a feeling you started these reverts as a common academy student. And I mean no offense, but the Zach I remember wasn’t really the kind of person capable of inventing any spell, much less something as concept-breaking as time travel.”

“Eh heh...” Zach chuckled nervously. “You’re probably right. I used to be really bad at this whole mage business, didn’t I? But enough of such depressing topics, because I’ve got good news for you!”

“Oh?” Zorian asked curiously.

“Yes,” Zach confirmed. “I heard you’ve been trying to learn combat magic.”

“Eh!? Where did you hear that?” protested Zorian.

“Kyron told the rest of the teachers, the teachers told the administrative staff, the administrative staff told the janitors and other low paying workers, they told the students, and the students told me,” finished Zach. “What does it matter? What matters is that I’m very good at combat magic thanks to the reverts, and that I’ve decided to teach you. Think of it as a reward for believing me.”

Zorian gave Zach an incredulous look. He was going to help him out on his own free will? Just like that? No need for any plotting or subtle maneuvering?

Almost disappointing.

“What?” Zach protested. “It’s true, I really am good at combat magic! In fact, that’s the field I’m most talented at!”

Oh, now that’s a wonderful opening...

“Not that I don’t believe you, but how exactly did you get so good at combat magic?” asked Zorian. “I mean, mages are really stingy about sharing combat magic. Even with these... revert... why would they share them with an academy student like you? Especially since you’re... uh...”

“Known to be irresponsible,” Zach finished for him. “To be honest, I didn’t get the spells I know legally. I wouldn’t recommend my methods of acquiring combat magic to anyone who isn’t a time traveler. You tend to die a lot.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. But you have me, so there’s that.”

Quietly wondering what he was getting himself into, Zorian followed after him.

8. Perspective

Chapter 008 Perspective

“Here we are!” said Zach happily, twirling around with his hands outstretched. “What do you think?”

Zorian studied the meadow in front of him, his eyes darting back and forth with suspicion. At first glance the area was just a large patch of grass surrounded by a ring of trees, but Zorian couldn’t help but notice signs of obvious neglect. The grass was too wild and tall, and the space between trees was full of young saplings fighting for their own place under the sun. It was a good place to practice combat magic at, but also a good place to hide a body in. In an even remotely normal situation, Zorian wouldn’t be caught dead following a complete stranger into a creepy, isolated place like this one. Oh how far his perspective had shifted...

“I wonder what’s keeping the saplings confined to that ring of trees,” wondered Zorian aloud. “This meadow should be a copse of trees by now.”

Zach blinked. “I never thought about that,” he admitted. “You notice the strangest things, Zorian.”

“I also wonder how a place like this can exist at all,” Zorian continued. “I mean, we’re in Cyoria. Land is very expensive here. Why is someone letting this place deteriorate like this instead of selling it?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” Zach said. “It’s my land. Or rather, it’s part of the Noveda family estates. It’s supposed to be a private garden for the Head of House, or something like that, so no one could do anything with it unless they had my explicit permission. But since I hadn’t even known this place existed before the reverts... yeah.”

“Hm,” Zorian agreed. “I guess I should have expected something like that. Your home is pretty close from here, isn’t it?”

“You know where I live?” Zach asked, surprise evident in his voice.

Crap. What to say, what to say...

“Of course I know where you live,” Zorian said, looking at Zach like the boy was an idiot for asking. “Who *doesn’t* know where the Noveda estate is located?”

A lot of people, probably. Zorian himself certainly hadn’t known, not until he tried to track Zach down in one of the restarts.

“Heh. I’m pretty famous, aren’t I?” Zach said, grinning widely.

Note to self: Zach is easy to distract by appealing to his pride.

“Yeah, yeah,” sighed Zorian. “So is the great Noveda going to help me learn combat magic like he promised or not? Daylight’s burning.”

Zach snapped his fingers, apparently remembering just why they came here in the first place. His hands blurred into a sequence of gestures, and several humanoids made of earth rose from the ground on the other side of the clearing.

Zorian gaped. Now *that* was impressive. Zach didn’t even have to chant anything to cast that spell, and he went through the gestures with such speed Zorian had trouble remembering what they even were. Plus, those earthen constructs weren’t just immobile statues – they *moved*. It was in times like this that Zorian remembered he was dealing with a vastly superior mage that had him beat in virtually every conceivable way. It was humbling, to say the least.

“Wow,” he said out loud.

“It’s not as impressive as it looks,” Zach said. “They’re nearly useless in actual battle. They make good targets though, since they’re pretty resilient and reform each time you mess them up.”

Zach fired a quick magic missile at one of the statues to demonstrate, hitting it square in the chest. The earthen construct took a step back from the force of the bolt, and a web of cracks erupted from the impact point, but the cracks quickly sealed themselves shut and the construct otherwise completely ignored the attack.

“I don’t believe this,” Zorian stated incredulously.

“What do you mean?” Zach asked. “They’re just animated earth so it’s—”

“Not them,” Zorian protested. “The magic missile! No chant, no gestures, no spell formula, no nothing! You just pointed your finger at the target and produced a magic missile!”

Which, admittedly, was a gesture. Not one that should be sufficient to produce a magic missile, though.

“Oh, that,” Zach said, waving his hand dismissively. “That’s not terribly special either. That’s just reflexive magic. When you cast a spell enough times—”

"Mana shaping becomes instinctive and you can start leaving out spell components," finished Zorian for him. Any serious mage had at least a couple of spells they knew so intimately they could leave out a couple of words and gestures and still get it working. "But getting a spell to work with something as simple as pointing a finger would take *years*!"

Zach simply grinned from ear to ear.

"Which, uh, I guess you had," Zorian concluded, feeling rather stupid. "This time travel thing is really convenient, isn't it? How many reflexive spells do you have, anyway?"

"You mean, how many are as reflexive as the magic missile I just showed you? Shield, hurl, recall, flamethrower, and a couple of other easy combat spells. There are a lot of spells I'm familiar with, but I can't exactly throw fireballs by pointing my fingers."

"Right," said Zorian sourly. He was getting way past 'humbling' and straight into 'feeling mightily inadequate' territory. Better steer the conversation back to the lesson before Zach completely demoralized him. "So where do we start?"

"Kyron gave you a spell rod and told you to practice magic missile, didn't he?" asked Zach.

"Yeah," confirmed Zorian.

"Well, let's see how that's working out for you first," said Zach, waving his hand in the direction of the earthen constructs. "Fire a couple of missiles at the mud people."

"Mud people?" asked Zorian incredulously. "Is that—"

"Probably not," Zach admitted. "I kind of forgot the official name of the spell, so I just refer to it as 'Create Mud People'. It doesn't matter all that much since the spell is obscure and obsolete, and virtually no one except me uses it."

"I guess," agreed Zorian. He was tempted to ask more, but figured he would never get to actual spell practice if he kept distracting Zach with his questions. He pointed the spell rod Kyron gave him at the closest... 'mud person'... and fired. He was a bit surprised when the construct tried to side-step his magic missile instead of soaking the spell like it did when Zach targeted it, but that didn't save it – he had enough control of the spell to alter the missile's flight path accordingly, even if he couldn't get the bolt to home in on the target on its own. Of course, the bolt did very little actual damage to the construct, and even that repaired itself quickly. Undeterred, Zorian kept firing. His next shot was a piercer aimed at the head of the construct, which succeeded in hitting it squarely in the forehead but failed to actually punch through the animated earth. He tried to shape the next bolt into a cutter, but all he got was a diffuse blob of multicolored light that popped like a soap bubble half-way to the target. The next two were regular smashers, one of which missed when its target leaned to the side at the last moment before the bolt hit him.

Zorian stopped at this point, not wanting to completely deplete his mana reserves. He demonstrated pretty much everything he achieved so far, anyway.

Zach clapped overdramatically, completely ignoring the mild glare Zorian sent his way.

"You've only been practicing, what, for a couple of days?" asked Zach. Zorian nodded. "And you can direct your bolts already? You're a lot better than I thought you'd be."

"Oh?" asked Zorian, a hint of warning in his voice. "And why is that?"

"Let me ask you this instead: how many magic missiles can you cast before you run out of mana?" asked Zach.

"10," answered Zorian. He didn't see what that... oh. "Ah. Normally learning time corresponds to mana capacity, doesn't it?"

"Yup! The bigger your mana reserves, the longer you can train each day," confirmed Zach. "It means mages with larger reserves tend to learn faster than their less gifted compatriots."

"Assuming everyone is equally dedicated and equally good at shaping mana," noted Zorian.

"Assuming that," agreed Zach. "Though the difference in mana reserves tends to overshadow almost everything else. Do you know how many magic missiles I can cast before I run out of mana?"

Zorian hadn't forgotten Zach's seemingly inexhaustible mana reserves that he demonstrated during the invasion, and was aware that the number must be pretty high. Still, there was a limit to how big your mana reserves could get. The booklet Kyron gave him said average mages can fire somewhere between 8 to 12 magic missiles before running out of mana, while very gifted ones could manage as much as 20 or 30. Furthermore, while mana reserves increased with age and practice, they were not unlimited in potential – most people's maximum was roughly 4 times the amount of mana reserves they started with, and usually less. Assuming Zach was in the above average range (something his comments and attitude strongly suggested), and that he achieved his maximum due to the time loop...

"50?" he tried.

"232," said Zach smugly.

Zorian almost dropped the spell rod in shock, but in the end settled for staring at Zach like he just swallowed a live chicken. 232? What the hell!?

“Admittedly I’m at the extreme high end when it comes to mana reserves,” Zach said. Understatement of the century! “And unlike you, I’ve spent years building them up, so they’re as high as they’re ever going to be. Still, even if you had a lifetime of practice, you’d probably never go over 40. That would make my reserves almost 6 times larger than yours. Quite a disadvantage to make up for.”

“No kidding,” agreed Zorian. “I’m guessing that’s where you come in. Unless you’ve brought me here just to tell me how much I suck compared to you?”

“Hah! I admit the look on your face when you realized how awesome I am was absolutely priceless, but that’s just a bonus,” said Zach.

He beckoned for Zorian to come closer and Zorian complied, allowing Zach to cast a completely unfamiliar spell on him.

Zorian felt the spell seep into his eyes, foreign mana straining against the innate magical resistance possessed by every living creature, and briefly considered snuffing the spell out before it took root. Not because he thought the spell was harmful, mind you, but out of principle. Zach just cast a spell on him without asking for permission or explaining what the spell did, which was a major breach of magical etiquette no matter how you looked at it. In the end he decided not to be that spiteful and simply reeled in his magical resistance, allowing the spell to do its work unopposed.

“You already have control over your magical resistance?” asked Zach. “Sweet! I usually have to teach people how to do that, first. Hell, I didn’t know how to do that before the reverts.”

Zorian frowned, ignoring Zach’s comments in favor of trying to figure out what the spell actually did. It was concentrated in his eyes, so he should... see...

Oh.

A glowing, mind-bogglingly huge pillar rose into the sky, warping and undulating like a living being, occasionally spawning short-lived whorls of glowing matter along its length. It only took Zorian a moment to realize what he was looking at.

“That’s how the Hole looks like under mage sight?” he asked, focusing back on Zach.

“Magnificent, isn’t it?” Zach said. “Watching that huge geyser of mana rising into the sky always puts things into perspective for me.”

“Mage sight shouldn’t work in Cyoria, though,” remarked Zorian. “Too much ambient mana saturating everything. Why aren’t I blinded by painful glow emanating from everything in sight?”

“It’s an experimental variation that tries to filter out such ‘noise’, showing only the important stuff,” said Zach. “It’s not terribly reliable, but it will do for our purposes.”

“Those being?” asked Zorian.

“I’ll cast magic missile repeatedly and you’ll watch what I’m doing for a while before trying to copy me,” Zach said. “I’ll be using the proper invocation this time, and go at it as slowly as I can. Try to memorize the words and gestures, because you’ll be using them instead of the rod Kyron gave you. A spell rod is more useful in combat, but for training purposes it’s better to work with actual invocations.”

Zorian was completely on board with the idea – he had been trying to find invocations for combat spells for a while now, anyway. Zach was underestimating him, though. ‘Try’ to memorize? Zorian might not have Zach’s absurd mana reserves, but his memory was quite good. It took only one proper casting from Zach and Zorian had already burned the casting procedure into his memory.

Unfortunately, the rest of the session was a lot less impressive. Zach kept performing the spell a few more times before instructing Zorian to give it a try, upon which he found out that performing combat magic with classical invocations wasn’t only slower than using a spell rod – it was a lot harder too. Thankfully, the fact that he actually *saw* how the mana was supposed to be shaped during Zach’s demonstration drastically improved his learning speed, so he managed to fire off a passable magic missile in the end. He was completely out of mana by then, however, and Zach decided that was a good time to stop for the day.

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Walking back to his apartment, Zorian was lost in thought. Zach’s comment about the giant pillar of mana putting things into perspective for him seemed oddly applicable to his situation as well. Time loop or not, he would never beat Zach and people like him at their own game. Clearly Zorian couldn’t bulldoze his way through with combat magic, like Zach intended to do. No, if he was going to get out of this in a favorable manner, he had to forge his own path.

If only he knew what that path was, though. At the moment, getting to the bottom of what caused this time loop and how the damn thing worked seemed to be just about the only thing he could do to help himself. Which was unfortunate, because he just didn’t have the skills to unravel the mystery. Apparently he had to spend some time improving his magical abilities. Time, at least, he had in spades. Probably. He could never be sure the time loop would continue happening, but Zach certainly didn’t behave like it would end any time soon, and Zorian decided to follow Zach’s lead in that regard.

He really wished he had someone other than Zach to ask for advice on how to proceed in his quest to improve himself. Typically, this was what a student’s mentor was for, but he already knew what Xvim would tell him: more shaping exercises. Then he’d throw marbles at him.

Although... Ilsa did offer to take over his mentorship in a couple of restarts, didn't she? Hmm.

- break -

Despite his desire for some additional help, Zorian delayed approaching Ilsa until he actually had a few sessions with Xvim. That would require a lengthy wait, but it would make it easier to complain about Xvim's mentoring methods, since he wouldn't have to explain how he knew so much about the man already. It wasn't like he didn't have anything to amuse himself in the meantime – Zach was, if anything, even more enthusiastic about their combat magic practice sessions than Zorian was, insisting they meet up every day after classes. After two weeks of such practice, Zorian was not only able to weave a proper homing function into the magic missile spell, but also learned how to cast shield and flamethrower spells as well. He was keenly aware that his ability to cast such spells would amount to exactly zero against a human battlemage, but he also knew they weren't the only threats he faced. Those spells might buy him a second or two against a winter wolf or a troll, which could be the difference between life and death.

Zach returned to classes the day after their first practice session, apparently completely recovered. For a guy that lost a good chunk of his memory, he was surprisingly exuberant. Zorian admired his fellow time traveler for his ability to maintain good cheer in poor circumstances, but Zach's attention grabbing behavior only made his inexplicable improvement in skill that much more noticeable. It was almost a repeat of the very first time he lived through this month, only instead of hanging out with Neolu and that other mystery girl, Zach was hanging out with *him*. Which, of course, made Zorian a target for every curious classmate that wanted to know how Zach suddenly got so good all of a sudden.

"What am I supposed to tell them?" he asked Zach. They were both in the cafeteria, and he had noticed a couple of students glancing at him a bit too often, doubtlessly waiting for the chance to talk to him when Zach left. "I can't exactly tell them you're a time traveler."

"Why not?" Zach asked. "Time travel. It's what I say every time they ask me how I got this good."

"You actually tell them you're a time traveler?" asked Zorian incredulously. He didn't know whether to laugh or bang his head against the table.

"Yeah," confirmed Zach. "What's the worst that could happen?"

Zorian felt a pang of phantom pain in his chest where, in another timeline, a masked assassin stabbed him through and killed him. Did Zach honestly never experience consequences like that when trying to convince people of his story? Then again, he said he tried to convince them he was a time traveler, not that he told them about the invasion. In fact, he didn't actually tell Zorian about that either – he danced around the topic whenever Zorian tried to lead the conversation in that particular direction.

"This could have all been avoided if you just held back a little in classes," Zorian sighed.

"I kind of like the attention," Zach admitted.

"Really?" asked Zorian. "I'm only going through this once and I'm already sick of it. You're saying the novelty of all that attention still hasn't worn off after, what, more than a decade?"

"Oh come on, do you really think I spend these reverts attending classes, of all things?" scoffed Zach. "That got seriously old after the third revert or so. I spend most of the time doing my own thing. Hell, usually I'm not even near Cyoria! I only attend the classes when I want to relax or when I am feeling nostalgic. The only reason why I'm here right now is because I got kind of roughed up in my last revert and I'm still trying to sort out the holes in my memory. Oh, and because you've kind of caught my interest."

"Why did I catch your interest, though?" asked Zorian. "Not that I'm complaining or anything, but how come you're willing to invest so much time in me? Isn't it all going to be useless in the next revert?"

"That's a pretty cold way of thinking about things," Zach said. "I don't really think like that. I've tried to get to know all of our classmates in these reverts, even though some of them were pretty uncooperative with the idea, and I've never thought of it as a waste of time. This is the first time I've gotten you this friendly, and I have no idea what exactly I did to cause that. It's best to make use of it while I can."

Now he was starting to feel pretty bad. Not only had he never tried to get to know any of his classmates during the reverts, the idea had never even occurred to him. And this wasn't the first time Zach had insinuated that Zorian was kind of a jerk to him in the past. Just what had happened between Zach and past-Zorian to leave that much of an impression?

"I see," said Zorian uncertainly, not knowing how to respond to that.

"I really do wonder about you, though," Zach continued. "You're so different from the Zorian I knew, I'm starting to wonder if you're really the same person."

"Who else would I be?" asked Zorian, honestly at a loss as to where Zach was going with this. He didn't appear to have figured out that Zorian was 'reverting', as he would say, so what was he getting at?

"I think I may have shifted timelines, or something," Zach said.

Zorian gave him an incredulous look. Shifted timelines? That's his explanation? Really? *Really really*? He almost revealed himself right then and there, just so he could tell him how silly that was. Almost.

“Or something,” deadpanned Zorian.

“Whaaat?” protested Zach. “It could happen. Do *you* know how temporal mechanics work? No? Didn’t think so.”

“I did look up a couple of books about time travel after our first meeting,” said Zorian. It was a lie, of course, but only a small one – he had sifted through time travel related texts, just not in this particular restart.

“And learned nothing,” concluded Zach. “It’s a total wasteland. All they write about is about various ethical dilemmas and time paradoxes and whatnot. That was the first and last time I set foot in the academy library, let me tell you.”

Zorian gave him a strange look. “That was a joke, right?”

“Which part?” Zach asked.

“The part where you only visited the academy library once,” clarified Zorian.

“Err, well...” tried Zach, chuckling nervously. “What can I say? I don’t really like to read...”

Zorian stared at Zach, wondering if the boy was pulling his leg. He would totally understand if the old Zach, the one he knew before the time loop, told him he never set foot in the library. He wouldn’t be terribly unique in that regard – lots of students never visited the library before their third year, since they couldn’t access the spell repository before their certification, anyway. But *this* Zach had lived through this month over 200 times, and had access to the spells buried within its depths. And he never tried to search through it. Because he didn’t like to read.

The mind boggled. Well, Zorian’s mind boggled.

“You’ve clearly read our textbooks,” Zorian noted. “There’s no way you’d excel as well as you do otherwise.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t say I don’t read at all,” Zach countered. “Just that I’d rather avoid it if I can. I learn much better by example anyway.”

Funny, it was just the opposite with Zorian – he tended to learn much better when he had the chance to study the topic on his own before trying. He still thought it was a pretty serious flaw for a mage to avoid books, but Zorian had to remind himself that Zach was clearly achieving results somehow. Come to think of it, there was a serious shortage of anything dangerous in the academy spell collection, so a mage that was chiefly interested in the more restricted areas of magic would find the library of very limited usefulness.

“So you learn primarily by mentorship?” guessed Zorian. “I’m surprised you can convince mages to teach you in less than a month. Don’t they all require apprenticeships lasting for several years before they’ll agree to teach you anything useful?”

“Well, usually,” said Zach. “But I’m the last Noveda, don’t you know? I had highly respectable mages tripping over themselves to teach me my whole life. Usually I just have to show up and tell them who I am and they’re all too happy to help me out.”

Zorian suppressed a wave of jealousy that washed over him. Zach was just making the most of his unique situation, just like Zorian would have in his place. It still bothered him, though, reminding him of how Daimen and Fortov could ask and get all sorts of help and concessions from their teachers, only for Zorian to fail in securing the same for himself. His parents had lectured him endlessly that the difference was in their attitudes – that if only Zorian was more sociable, more polite, more *everything*... he too could enjoy the same benefits. To Zorian, it always seemed like his brothers had some sort of invisible tattoo on their foreheads that only mages could see, and which marked them as somehow more special than him.

Zach wasn’t his brothers, though, and didn’t deserve to be the target for Zorian’s personal frustrations.

“Convenient,” said Zorian out loud, giving his fellow time traveler a smile that was somewhat forced. Zach didn’t appear to notice.

His jealousy aside, he was really starting to wonder if his assumption about Zach being an accidental stowaway like him had any merit at all. Zach had ridiculously huge mana reserves, probably the largest of any student currently attending the academy. He was the last member of a famous Noble House, enjoying all the prestige that comes from that without having to deal with nosy parents who might be freaked out by Zach’s sudden transformation. In addition to the power inherent in his name, the boy was also fairly charming and outgoing, further improving his chances of getting help from otherwise unapproachable high-circle mages. He was not your average spoiled prince, by any means – there was a lot of potential in the boy, if only he would get enough time to bring it out. Time that Zach now had. It was... convenient. A bit too convenient, in Zorian’s opinion.

That is why, despite Zach’s seeming friendliness, Zorian just didn’t feel at ease with the boy. Not enough to reveal himself as a stowaway, in any case. Right now, his main advantage was that he was an outside element in this game Zach was playing. An unaccounted variable. He intended to use and abuse that advantage for all it was worth.

Whatever force was behind Zach, Zorian had no intention of revealing himself to it any time soon.

- break -

“Take a seat, mister Kazinski,” Ilsa said. “I sort of suspected I’d be seeing you soon.”

“You did?” asked Zorian.

"Oh yes," Ilsa said. "Usually students come knocking at my door immediately after a single session with Xvim. You actually waited until the second one, so points for patience."

"Right," said Zorian sourly.

"I can't transfer you to another mentor at this time, though, so I'm afraid you'll just have to bear with him for now," she said.

"I sort of expected that," Zorian said. Why should her answer be any different than it was the last time he asked her? "It's not what I'm here for."

"No?" asked Ilsa, raising an eyebrow.

"No," confirmed Zorian. "Since everything I've heard and experienced about Xvim suggests we'll never progress beyond the basic three, I've decided to be proactive about self study. I've been hoping for some pointers from you – where I should start, what I should watch out for, that sort of thing."

Ilsa sighed heavily. "It's hard to give that sort of advice, mister Kazinski. That's why the academy gives students mentors – because there is no one-size-fits-all solution. I suppose I could give you advice about my own subject, though. How good are you at the basic three?"

"Depends who you ask," said Zorian. "Most of the teachers from my second year told me I had them mastered. Xvim says I'm a shame to mages everywhere."

She snorted and handed him a pen. Actually handed it to him, not threw it at him like Xvim would have. Ah, the joy of interacting with sane teachers...

"Levitate that," Ilsa said.

She wasn't even finished talking and the pen was already spinning above his outstretched palm.

"Oh, so you can already spin the levitated object?" Ilsa said, sounding pleased. "I bet Xvim was very happy with that." No, not really. "Do you know any other variation?"

"No," said Zorian. "Don't tell me learning those is standard procedure?"

"Not like Xvim is teaching them," Ilsa said. "But yes, most mentors will give students variations of the basic three to improve their shaping skills."

"And how many of those variations are there?" asked Zorian.

"Oh, *thousands*," said Ilsa, confirming Zorian's suspicions. "But most students only learn 6 or so by the end of their third year. Here."

She pushed a rather heavy book into his hands, patiently waiting for him to leaf through it. It was apparently a book describing 15 'particularly interesting' variations of the basic three, 5 for each exercise.

"Let me guess: you want me to learn everything inside this book," Zorian sighed.

"That would be a pretty neat trick," Ilsa snorted. "Didn't you hear what I said? Most people learn 6 or less... *in a year*. You'll probably be finished with the academy by the time you've learned everything inside that book. Assuming you want to, of course – I'm not making you do anything."

"6 in a year, huh?" asked Zorian carefully, an idea forming in his mind.

"That's right," Ilsa confirmed.

"So what if I could master all 15 before this month is done?" asked Zorian.

Ilsa stared at him for a second before bursting into laughter. It took her a few seconds to calm down.

"My, aren't you the confident one?" Ilsa said, chuckling softly. "If you were really that good, I'd fill out the transfer forms right now, regulations be damned, and take you as my apprentice. I'd never pass up an opportunity to teach such a legend in the making. Not that I think you could do it, mind you."

Zorian just gave her a wicked smile.

- break -

Of course, there was absolutely no chance for Zorian to master all 15 exercises in this particular restart, but that was beside the point. Thanks to the wonder of the time loop, he had far more than a few measly weeks to learn the contents of the book. It was even available in the academy library, so he didn't have to go to Ilsa in the next restart to acquire it. And who knew, maybe if he learned those he could get Xvim to cut him some slack too. A man could dream.

Besides, the book was actually fairly interesting. Not only did it explain how to perform each variation in great detail, it also explained the reasons

for including each particular exercise, as well as providing a background for understanding why the basic three were being taught to students in the first place. Zorian briefly familiarized himself with each of the variations before starting to read earnestly from the start.

Making an object glow, levitating it, or setting it aflame... these were very simple effects, requiring only rudimentary shaping skills. The levitation exercise, for instance, was just repelling force emanating from the mage's palm. It doesn't get much simpler than that. There were actually a lot of these simple effects, certainly more than the three they were taught, but these three were deemed a priority. Production of light, heat, or kinetic force were common components of many spells, giving the basic three the sort of general usefulness that most other simple exercises lacked.

The variations listed in the book were not in the same category as these simple, or starter exercises. Although Xvim, Ilsa, and the book itself referred to them as 'variations', Zorian realized they were more like 'upgrades', or perhaps 'advanced versions'. He hadn't realized it at the time, but the pen spinning exercise – which was the very first variation outlined in the book, albeit under a fancier name – was a whole other category of difficulty from simply levitating the pen above his palm. Not only did he have to maintain the levitation effect on the pen, he also had to shape an additional effect to make the pen spin. The variation was supposed to teach mages how to multitask, by making them maintain two effects at once.

Though Xvim would have disagreed, Zorian considered his pen spinning exercise mastered, and the guidelines in the book seemed to agree with him. As such, he started poring over the other 4 variations of the levitation exercise, trying to figure out which one was the easiest. He quickly realized they were not only arranged in an ascending order of difficulty, but that mastering the later variations probably *requires* mastering the preceding ones first.

Vertical levitation required him to make an object stick to his palm with attractive force, position his palm vertically and then make the object separate from his palm without falling down. The sticking part was easy, and something Zorian could already do, but making the object float off the palm without falling required that he balances the attractive force binding the object to his palm and the repelling force that made it separate from it. Without the ability to multitask he acquired from the pen spinning exercise, it probably would have taken forever to master this one.

Next was fixed position levitation, which required an ability to maintain the levitated object's position in space despite disruptions and changes in initial conditions. In other words, he had to be able to move his hand up and down, left and right, while keeping the levitated object static in space. It required the ability to balance attractive and repelling force he presumably acquired from the vertical levitation exercise, but this time he had to continually adjust the balance in response to changes.

And so on. Seeing how there was only one correct order in which these exercises could be learned, Zorian started practicing vertical levitation. Unfortunately, he wouldn't accomplish much in this particular restart.

The summer festival was approaching.

9. Cheaters

Chapter 009

Cheaters

“Majara,” intoned Zorian, finishing the spell with the word he wanted the spell to search for. He felt the spell reach out around him, scanning the books in the surrounding shelves for any mention of the word in question, and poured some more mana into the spell to expand its radius. His efforts to overcharge the spell almost unraveled it, forcing him to spend several seconds stabilizing the spell boundary, but in the end the mana flow snapped into its proper place and the spell finished its task as planned. Seven golden threads flickered into existence, seemingly growing out of his chest and connecting him to various books in this particular section of the library.

Zorian smiled. The spell was one of the book divinations Ibery had taught him, one that sought out books containing a specified word or string of words. It was a somewhat fragile spell, failing if the number of positive matches exceeded a certain number – the exact number depending on the caster’s skill. It was mostly used to search for quotes or really exotic terms.

Exotic terms like, say, the dead language of Majara. Zenomir hadn’t been kidding when he had told Zorian that he wouldn’t be able to find any books about it – there were no books specifically about the Majara language, and very few books even mentioned it. Up until now, he had only found 13 other books that contained the word, and most of them only in the form of a throwaway comment or two. It was possible that the knowledge he sought existed somewhere in the library, only in a format that was invisible to the divinations he was using – Ibery had only taught him the very basics of ‘library magic’, as she called it, so his searches were painfully crude in the grand scheme of things – but if that was the case, there was little he could do about it.

He glanced down at the threads growing out of his chest and waved his hand through them, watching it pass through them without effect. He never got tired of doing that. Well, he probably would, in time, but the novelty hadn’t worn off yet. The threads were an illusion, existing only in the privacy of his own mind. Every divination spell needed a medium through which it could present information to the caster, since it was impossible for human minds to process the raw output of a divination spell. A self-imposed illusion like the threads he was currently looking at was actually fairly advanced as divination mediums go, or so Ibery had claimed when he had tried to tell her he got the spell working within 30 minutes of being shown how to do it. He had a distinct impression she thought he was lying. He didn’t really understand what was supposed to be so difficult about it, to be honest – the threads were a purely mental construct that didn’t even require much in the way of shaping skills... just visualization. It seemed pretty simple to him. Natural even.

He shook his head and followed after one of the golden threads till he reached a book it was attached to. It was a huge, intimidating, 400-page book about the history of Miasina, and Zorian had absolutely no intention of poring over it until he reached the tiny part that actually interested him, so he cast another divination Ibery had taught him. This one highlighted every mention of the chosen word (in this case ‘Majara’) in shining green, so he simply flipped through the book till he caught a flash of green.

“Zorian? What are you doing here?”

Zorian immediately snapped the book shut and stuffed it back on the shelf. While he wasn’t doing anything forbidden, he really didn’t want to explain to Ibery what Majara was, and why he was searching the library for any mention of it.

The retort he planned to use died on his lips when he finally turned to get a good look on his visitor. Ibery was a mess. Her eyes and nose were red, as if she had been crying recently, and there was an ugly purple splotch covering her right cheek and neck. It didn’t look like a bruise, not exactly, more like...

Oh hell no.

“Ibery...” he started hesitantly. “You wouldn’t happen to go in the same class as my brother, would you?”

She flinched back and looked away. He sighed heavily. Just great.

“How did you know?” she asked after a second of silence.

“Brother dearest came to me earlier today,” said Zorian. “Said he pushed a girl into a purple creeper patch and wanted me to make ‘an anti-rash potion’. I wasn’t in the mood so I kind of blew him off.”

That was a lie, actually. He had discovered, during the last three revert, that Fortov was either unable or unwilling to track him down if he failed to return to his room after class. That was actually the main reason why he spent the entire day in the library instead of inside his room. Still, due to his rather unique situation he knew what would have happened had he been present.

“Oh,” she said quietly. “That... That’s alright.”

“No,” disagreed Zorian. “No, it’s not. If I had known he was talking about you, I would have helped him out. Well... helped *you* out. *He* can go die in a fire as far as I’m concerned.” He paused for a moment, considering things. “You know, there is no reason why I can’t do it now. I’ll just have to stop by my room to pick up the ingredients and-”

“You don’t have to do that,” Ibery quickly interrupted. “It’s... not that important.”

Zorian took in her appearance one more time. Yup, she had *definitely* been crying before coming here. Besides, her choice of words was conspicuous – she said that he didn’t *have* to do it, not that he shouldn’t, and that it wasn’t *that* important, not that it wasn’t.

“It’s not really a problem,” he assured her. “The main reason I refused in the first place is because it was Fortov who asked, not because it was so difficult to do. Just tell me where to find you when I’m done.”

“Um, I’d like to come with you, if it’s not a problem,” she said hesitantly. “I’d like to see how the cure is made. Just in case.”

Zorian paused. That was... potentially problematic. After all, the alchemical workshop would be closed down this late in the evening, and he would have to employ some, uh, *unorthodox* methods of gaining access. But what the hell, it wasn’t like she would remember this in the next restart.

Thus they set off towards Zorian’s apartment. Of course, having Ibery looking over his shoulder wasn’t enough, so when he had finally reached his room he found another familiar person waiting for him. Specifically, Zach.

He wasn’t terribly surprised to see Zach waiting for him, to be honest. The boy had been getting steadily more nervous during their practice sessions as the summer festival approached, no doubt unnerved by the impending invasion. Not that he ever told Zorian about the invasion – Zach was stubbornly tight-lipped about that, regardless of how much Zorian tried to goad him into blurting out something. Over the last few days, his fellow time traveler had questioned him about his plans for the summer festival several times, not-so-subtly implying that staying inside his room would be a bad idea. As Zorian still remembered quite vividly how one of the ‘flares’ flattened his entire apartment building when the invasion started, he was inclined to agree with Zach on that one. Unfortunately, Zach seemed to have trouble believing that Zorian was in agreement with him on that point. No doubt he came specifically to make sure (again) that Zorian was going to attend the dance. Zorian wondered, for god knows what time, just what happened between Zach and his previous incarnations to produce this kind of impression. Had he really been that stubborn before the time loop?

He walked up to Zach, who was sitting on the floor next to his door, completely oblivious to his surroundings while he concentrated on something on his palm. No, now that he got closer he could see it was actually something *above* his palm. A pencil, lazily spinning in the air above Zach’s palm. Apparently Zach knew the pen spinning exercise too, and was currently practicing it while he waited. Zorian had a strong urge to throw a marble at Zach’s forehead and demand that he starts over, but decided against it.

Mostly because he didn’t have any marbles on his person at the moment.

“Hello Zach,” Zorian said, startling Zach out of his reverie. “Are you waiting for me?”

“Yeah,” confirmed Zach. He opened his mouth to say something else but then noticed Ibery trailing behind Zorian and snapped his mouth shut. “Err, am I interrupting something?”

“No, not really,” Zorian sighed. “I just came to grab some alchemical supplies and then I’ll go make something for miss Ambercomb here. What did you want with me?”

“Eh, it can wait a while,” Zach said dismissively. “What are you making? Maybe I can help – I’m pretty good at alchemy.”

“Is there anything you’re *not* good at?” asked Zorian with a snort.

“You’d be surprised,” mumbled Zach.

Ibery watched their interaction in silence, but Zach was a fairly sociable person, so by the time Zorian returned from his room with a box of supplies the two of them were engaged in lively conversation. Mostly about Ibery’s current condition.

“Man, I didn’t know your brother is such a jerk, Zorian,” Zach remarked. “No wonder you turned out to be such a... uh...”

He trailed off when Zorian raised his eyebrow at him, daring him to finish that sentence. Ibery’s reaction was more vocal.

“He’s not a jerk!” she protested. “He didn’t mean for this to happen.”

“He should have fixed it, though,” Zach insisted. “Intentionally or not, it was his fault. He shouldn’t have dumped his responsibility on his little brother like this.”

“Nobody forced Zorian to do anything,” Ibery said. “He’s doing this out of his own free will. Right, Zorian?”

“Right,” agreed Zorian. “I’m doing this because I want to.”

He actually agreed with Zach, but chose not to say so. If he had learned anything about Ibery from spending an entire revert around her it was that she had a massive crush on Fortov. No good could come from bad mouthing him in front of her. Besides, if he was to be honest with himself, Zorian had to admit he was incapable of being objective about Fortov. There was too much bad blood between the two of them.

Thankfully, the two of them quickly agreed to disagree on the topic and a comfortable silence descended on the group. Well, it was comfortable for Zorian – apparently Zach didn’t agree.

“Hey, Zorian,” Zach said. “Why are we going towards the academy proper?”

"So I can access the alchemical workshop, of course," said Zorian. He knew what Zach was getting at, of course, but he was still hoping to get away without revealing one of his most closely guarded tricks.

No such luck.

"But all the workshops are closed this late in the evening," remarked Zach.

"Ah!" Ibery exclaimed. "He's right! They closed down two hours ago!"

"It won't be a problem," Zorian assured them. "So long as we clean up after ourselves, no one will know we were there."

"But the door is locked," pointed out Zach.

Zorian sighed. "Not to magic, it isn't."

"You know unlocking spells?" asked Zach in a surprised tone.

Zorian understood his surprise – unlocking spells were restricted magic, due to their obvious abuse potential. Unless you possessed a special license, even knowing how to cast them was a crime. Not a particularly serious crime, but a crime nonetheless.

Perhaps it was good, then, that Zorian didn't know a single unlocking spell.

"No, I don't," said Zorian. "But it's just a simple mechanical lock. I'll just manipulate the tumblers telekinetically. Piece of cake."

They gave him a blank look. Like most people, they had no idea how locks actually worked, and how easy it was to bypass most of them. Zorian, due to his somewhat colorful childhood, did. In fact, he could pick your average lock without using magic at all – it was just a lot slower than his little magic trick and required him to carry around a set of lockpicks.

He stopped in front of the door leading into the alchemical workshop and tried the handle. Like Zach said, it was locked. Shrugging, Zorian placed his palm over the keyhole and closed his eyes. He could feel Zach and Ibery cluster around him to get a better look at what he was doing, and did his best to block them out. He needed total concentration for this.

He had developed this particular trick back in his second year, after he got bored of refining the standard shaping exercises they were given. It involved flooding the locking mechanism with his mana, using the resulting mana field as a sort of 'touch sight' to get a feel for the lock, and then carefully moving the tumblers into proper position so he could neutralize the lock. It took him months of stubborn practice, but by now he was good enough at it to unlock most doors in 30 seconds or less.

Even warded ones. He didn't say this to Zach and Ibery, but the door he was trying to open was actually warded. Anything even remotely important in the academy was, including most of the doors. However, as Zorian quickly discovered when he experimented with the newly-developed skill, low-level wards were very specific – they countered a handful of common unlocking spells, and nothing else. Zorian's little trick was not a structured spell, and thus didn't trip these rudimentary wards at all.

The door clicked and Zorian tried the door handle again. This time the door opened without resistance.

"Wow," said Zach as they all filed into the workshop. "You can open a lock just by pressing your hand against it for a few seconds!"

Zorian gave him a sour look. "It's a lot more complicated than that – that's just the visible part."

"Oh, I don't doubt that for a second," Zach said.

Still, while Zach seemed very impressed with Zorian's achievement, Ibery remained strangely quiet and kept giving him funny looks. This was why he hated telling people about his lock-picking prowess – most immediately assumed he was some kind of a thief. Well, that and he didn't want the academy authorities to find out about his achievement. They would no doubt change their warding scheme and then he wouldn't be able to do what he just did.

Fortunately, Ibery wasn't as condemning as some people Zorian met in his life, and got over her suspicions quickly once he started to prepare the salve. Strangely enough, Zach didn't know how to make one, even though it was a fairly simple thing to make and Zach had demonstrated some mightily impressive alchemical work in class. He didn't appear all that interested in learning, either – apparently the anti-rash salve was too mundane for his tastes, and he was only interested in things like strength potions and wound closing elixirs. That sounded like trying to build a house without bothering to set up proper foundations, but it wasn't Zorian who was a decade old time traveler. Yet.

"Aren't those purple creeper leaves?" Ibery asked, pointing at the small pile Zorian had placed on a wet piece of cloth.

"Yes," confirmed Zorian, wrapping the leaves into the cloth. "They're the main ingredient, though they have to be crushed first. Alchemical manuals usually claim you have to reduce the leaves into powder but it's not really necessary to go that far. You just have to use more leaves otherwise, but it's not like purple creepers are in short supply..."

An hour later, the salve was done and Zach was kind enough to conjure some kind of illusionary mirror so Ibery could apply the salve on herself right then and there. Kind and sneaky, because while Ibery was busy with applying the salve on herself, Zach dragged Zorian away in the corner so he could talk to him in private.

“So?” Zorian prompted. “What is it?”

Zach reached into his pocket and pulled out a ring, which he promptly handed to Zorian. It was a featureless band of gold that reacted strangely when Zorian channeled some mana into it.

“It’s a spell formula,” Zach said.

“Magic missile?” guessed Zorian.

“That, plus shield and flamethrower,” Zach said. “Now you can use all three in actual combat.”

Zorian looked at the ring with newfound respect. There was only so much one could cram into a spell formula, and it was mostly dependant on the size of the item used as a base. Turning something as small as a ring into a spell formula for three different spells was a pretty impressive feat, even if they were relatively low-level ones.

“Must have been pretty expensive,” Zorian remarked.

“Made it myself, actually,” Zach said with a grin.

“Still, that’s a pretty valuable thing to give away to someone you’ve met less than a month ago,” said Zorian. “Why do I get the feeling I’ll be needing this in the near future?”

Zach’s smile disappeared and he suddenly became more subdued. “Maybe. I’m just making sure, you know. You never know when an angry troll might get a jump on you or something.”

“How… oddly specific,” noted Zorian. “You know, you’ve been getting steadily more nervous as the summer festival approaches. And you seem oddly interested in making sure I attend the dance.”

“You will, right?” Zach prompted.

“Yes, yes, I told you I will half a dozen times already,” huffed Zorian. “What’s so important about the dance, anyway? What’s going to happen there, oh great traveler from the future?”

“You have to see it to believe it,” Zach sighed. “It’s possibly even more implausible than time travel being real.”

“That bad?” asked Zorian, privately agreeing that an invasion of that scale was something he would have had trouble believing in if he had not lived through it.

“Just… try to survive, okay?” Zach sighed. Before Zorian could say anything else, Zach suddenly donned a mask of fake cheerfulness and spoke in a voice loud enough to be heard by Ibery. “Wow, Zorian, I’m sure glad we’ve had this talk but I should really get going now! Have to be well rested for tomorrow! Bye, Zorian! Bye, Ibery! I’ll see you both at the dance!”

And then he left. Zorian shook his head at the other boy’s exit and walked up to Ibery, who was now free of purple rash that once covered her face and neck.

“Well, I guess we should go too,” Zorian said. “The academy normally doesn’t have anyone patrolling after dark, but that idiot’s shouting may have alerted someone to our presence.”

“Oh. Um, right.”

Zorian watched Ibery as they filed out of the workshop and he used his magic trick to re-lock the door again. She seemed strangely subdued for someone who got what they wanted.

“What’s wrong?” he finally asked after a while.

“Err, nothing’s wrong,” she said. “Why do you ask?”

“You don’t seem very happy to be cured,” he noted.

“I am!” she protested. “It’s just….”

“Yes?” he prompted.

“I don’t have anyone to go to the dance with,” she said. “The boy I was hoping to go with already has someone by now.”

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If her unnamed boy was Fortov (probably, considering her obvious crush on him), then yes, he most certainly did. In fact, he probably had one weeks in advance, so there was never much chance of her going with him in the first place, but he didn’t feel the need to crush her dreams like that.

"Then you'll just have to do the same thing I will and go to the dance all by yourself, won't you?" concluded Zorian.

She suddenly stopped and gave him an appraising glance.

"You don't have anyone to go with, either?" she asked.

Zorian closed his eyes and swore in his head. He really walked into this one, didn't he?

- break -

Zorian was nervous. Ever since his very first restart, he had been studiously avoiding the city on the day of the festival, not willing to get caught up in the invasion again. Being present within city limits could easily result in his grisly death, after all, and back then he wasn't sure whether his current restart would be his last. That wasn't an option anymore, unless he wanted to clue in Zach that there was something wrong with him (he didn't).

Bottom line was, he was stuck attending the dance, with the unexpected addition of Ibery as his date for the evening. He wasn't exactly happy with that, actually. He didn't really have much of a plan for the evening, except to wait and see what would happen, but Ibery's presence at his side would no doubt limit him. Not to mention that he still remembered his disastrous evening with Akoja, and had very little desire to live through a repeat performance, consequences-erasing time loop or not.

Speaking of his evening with Akoja, Zorian had to admit one thing about Ibery: she was a lot more reasonable and considerate than Akoja was. She didn't drag him out of his room 2 hours before the event, or make him wait smack in the middle of the huge throng of people gathered at the entrance, or drag him off to chat with a bunch of people who only cared about him being Daimen's and Fortov's brother... She was also more interested in scanning the crowd for any trace of Fortov than paying attention to him, but that was okay – he was under no illusion that she had asked him out because she was actually interested in him. After a while he decided to have mercy on her and informed her that Fortov was already inside, preparing for tonight's performance along with the other members of the academy music club.

Naturally, Zach's entrance was in the boy's usual flamboyant style. He had caught everyone's attention when he had shown up with not one, but *two* dates for the evening (Zorian didn't recognize either girl), and then further wooed people by demonstrating some very impressive – and attention-grabbing – dancing. Apparently Zach had learned more than magic during these restarts. Zorian clapped with the others when Zach finally finished showing off, and considered the merits of sinking some time into a non-magical skill. Not dancing, though. Or any other 'high society' skill, for that matter – honing those beyond the elementary level he had already grasped would require him to construct a mask so thorough he wasn't sure he'd be able to take it off afterwards. The benefits weren't worth selling his soul over, even metaphorically.

"This is a lot fancier than I thought it would be," Ibery noted, fingering the lacy tablecloth in front of her.

"It's obviously more than just a school dance," agreed Zorian. "I'm guessing the Academy was organizing some kind of event for foreign dignitaries this year and then decided to simply merge it with the school dance for whatever reason."

"I guess," Ibery said. "They *did* invest a lot into making everything look good this year, and I doubt they did it for our sake." Ibery looked at the far end of the table, where Zach was entertaining a small crowd around him, his two escorts nowhere to be seen. After a few seconds of this observation she turned to Zorian and stared at him strangely.

"What?" Zorian said, a little unnerved by her stare.

"I've been meaning to ask you..." she began hesitantly. "What is it between you and Zach? I mean, I know you're friends with him, but how did that come about? You seem very different from one another."

"It's a recent thing," said Zorian. "And it was mostly Zach's doing, to be honest. All I did was escort him home after he got sick in class one day, and he decided we were best friends after that. I sort of went along with the flow."

"So you don't know about... um..."

"His sudden growth in skill?" guessed Zorian. He was actually surprised she hadn't questioned him about that sooner. Almost everyone else did. Of course, she would get the same shameless lie that he fed to everyone who questioned him about it. "I have no idea how that happened, but I can tell you it's real and not some kind of a trick like many people have been suggesting. He has been tutoring me in combat magic for a while now, and he really knows his stuff."

"Yeah, I heard you were doing that," Ibery said, causing Zorian to frown. Being associated with Zach had made people disturbingly interested in his activities, no matter how mundane or irrelevant they may be. Having people scrutinize his every action like they had been doing for this past month was a novel experience. Novel and unwelcome. "Kyron has been kind of impressed with your growth, you know?"

Yeah... at least until he found out that Zach was involved, at which point it simply became one more thing that made Zach such a mystery, rather than a product of Zorian's own talent. Obviously Zach had some kind of secret teaching technique on top of everything else. Obviously.

But it's not like he was still bitter or anything!

"Impressed, right," said Zorian sourly. "So what do *you* think is behind Zach's amazingness?"

"Err, well... it's kind of silly," Ibery said.

Zorian gestured for her to go on. He always loved to hear the explanation people thought up to explain the mystery that was Zach. Much of the speculation wasn't serious, so much as attempts to think up the most imaginative (or the funniest) solution to the problem, so he doubted Ibery's explanation was any sillier than some of the stuff he had been hearing all month long. His personal favorite was that Zach performed an ancient ritual where you eat another person's brain in order to get their knowledge.

"Time dilation," Ibery said after a brief moment of hesitation.

Zorian blinked. Oh Ibery... So close, and yet so far away...

"I don't think any hastening spell is *that* effective, to be honest," said Zorian. "Zach isn't just a little better than he was – I'd personally put him around 3rd circle *at least*. I actually don't think he has any reason to attend the classes anymore, except that he finds it amusing to do so and flaunt his knowledge to everybody."

"I kind of noticed that," Ibery said, glancing momentarily to the small group of people surrounding Zach. "But I wasn't thinking of hastening magic. Do you know what the Black Rooms are?" Zorian shook his head in negative. "There are rumors that powerful nations like ours have special training facilities that use extreme levels of time dilation. You go inside the facility, spend a couple of months, or even *years* inside, and when you get out only a day or two have passed outside."

Zorian's eyebrows rose at the description. If one of the major powers had something like that, why weren't the effects more keenly felt? None of the Successor States were shy about using their power, and would have surely used such a tool to churn out trained images on a mass scale by now.

"It's just a rumor," Ibery quickly added. "Something between a conspiracy theory and an urban legend. I only know about it because one of my friends loves those kinds of things and she keeps insisting there is one such facility in the tunnels beneath the city. Supposedly they consume massive amounts of mana, so they must be located at mana wells."

"And the Hole is the biggest mana well there is," Zorian noted. "What's the explanation for such secrecy surrounding them? You'd think they'd be using it pretty intensively."

"They can't," Ibery said. "Or at least that's how the story goes. They have some kind of severe limitations on their use. Exactly how countries pick who gets to use the Black Rooms is where the 'conspiracy theory' part comes in. The more conventional theories suggest they're simply fancy facilities for training Black Ops super-agents. The wilder ones are... well, wild."

"It's a neat theory," Zorian hummed speculatively. Far closer to reality than anything else he'd heard, though he'd never say that aloud, even as a joke. If she could take such a farfetched rumor seriously, there was a good chance she might actually believe him upon hearing the truth, and that would be very awkward at the moment. Maybe he should try to convince her in one of the next restarts? Something to think about, at least. "But if Zach had spent years in one of those Black Rooms, why hasn't he visibly aged? And why exactly would they let Zach use one of those?"

"Well, he didn't have to *literally* spend years," Ibery said. "It's not that anything he's done is *that* advanced. A couple of months of intense tutoring could probably produce the effects we're looking at. And even if he spent years, there are potions that can halt your aging for a year or two. They actually work better on young people."

Zorian resisted the urge to frown as he realized something. As much as Zach liked to show off, he never really went wild with his abilities for all to see. If Zach had showed the sort of magic he did during the invasion, neither Ibery nor anyone else would be dismissing Zach's prowess as 'not advanced' so easily. Then again, perhaps that was the whole point. Extremely skilled Zach was surprising, maybe even shocking to those who knew him before the change. Instant archmage Zach would be probably alarming in the extreme and inspire a matching attitude in people around him.

Perhaps Zach's behavior was a lot more calculated than he thought it was?

"As for why him?" Ibery continued. "Well, he's a Noveda. They were quite influential before their eventual fall, and I don't just mean in the sense of being rich. They had their fingers everywhere. I could easily see some of that old influence surviving to this very day. Zach is the last of his line, and the fate of his House rests upon his shoulders. Perhaps this was simply a desperate maneuver by Zach's guardians, trying to turn Zach into a worthy successor capable of returning Noveda to their former glory."

The ground shook, followed by a deafening explosion less than a second later. Windows rattled, but didn't break. An uneasy silence descended upon the dance hall, only broken by the periodic rumble of more distant explosions.

"What... what was that?" Ibery asked fearfully.

She wasn't the only one asking that kind of questions. Agitated murmurs started traveling through the gathered crowd, steadily growing in volume and alarm. The ever-present pressure Zorian always felt from being inside crowds intensified and... changed. What was usually just an annoyance pushing on the edges of his consciousness suddenly became a suffocating blanket of fear. He struggled not to faint as foreign feelings invaded his mind. What the hell was happening to him? He didn't remember anything about an attack like this from his previous experience of the invasion.

A minute ticked away. Then ten. Zorian could practically feel the anxiety and agitation of the crowd steadily rising. The last (and first) time he had lived through the invasion he was standing on the roof when that first barrage descended to earth, and was momentarily incapacitated as a result. At least, that's what he had thought. Apparently he had been knocked out for quite a bit longer than he realized, because by his reckoning Ilsa and

Kyron should have been rushing to the roof to see what was happening by now. He could see them arguing about something in a nearby corner, and neither made the slightest move towards the roof.

"Zorian?" Ibery tried for either the fifth or sixth time, Zorian wasn't sure. "Are you sure you're alright? Maybe I should go find someone--"

"I'm fine," Zorian said, somehow managing to shove the oppressive feelings aside for the moment. The explosions had finally stopped but that hadn't led to people calming down. If anything, now that the situation had calmed down somewhat, they wanted answers, and they wanted them now. They were getting restless. Thankfully, the academy staff seemed to realize this as well. "Look, Ilsa is trying to say something."

"Please remain calm!" Ilsa said from the music stage, using the same magic that carried music evenly across the dance hall to make herself heard by everyone present. "Me and my colleague will go to the roof now and open communications with the city authorities to find out what is going on. Please don't go anywhere until we return."

Well... that didn't do much to calm people down. If anything, they got even more unruly than they were before Ilsa's speech, and some outright ignored her warnings and left the dance hall the moment she went up the stairs and out of sight. He couldn't judge them too harshly, since in another timeline he had done the exact same thing. On the positive side, the oppressive feeling lifted and reverted back to the familiar headache-inducing pressure. He breathed a giant sigh of relief.

"Hello, Zorian," greeted Zach, approaching Zorian. Of course he'd come to talk to him *now...* "Quite a commotion, huh? And I see you talked miss Ambercomb into being your date for the evening! Congratulations! I never knew you liked older girls."

"I'm only a year older than him," Ibery protested. She glanced briefly at Zorian to see if he would point out that it was *her* who asked *him* out, and relaxed when she realized he wouldn't. Zorian had to restrain himself from rolling his eyes. "And how come you're here all by yourself? Why don't you introduce us to your dates?"

If Ibery thought to fluster Zach by pointing out the plural nature of his partners for the evening, she was going to be sorely disappointed. And indeed, Zach only smiled at her, completely unaffected by the jab.

"They decided to leave for home early," Zach shrugged. "Probably for the best, considering what happened."

"What *did* happen, though?" asked Zorian. He didn't expect to get a straight answer out of Zach, of course, but it was worth a try.

"I guess we'll find out soon," said Zach, pointing to the bottom of the stairs leading to the roof, where Ilsa was talking to a bunch of students. After a couple of seconds Zorian realized that Akoja was among them, and recognized several other faces as well.

"Who is she talking to?" asked Ibery.

"Class representatives, I think," Zorian said. "At least, the ones I recognize are all class representatives for their groups."

It was so frustratingly slow. Maybe Zorian was expecting a little too much from a mere educational institution, but their response to the invasion was pretty underwhelming. At the very least he had expected them to start evacuating people to the shelters by now, or organize some kind of a defense force, or... well, anything, really. He was getting an impression that Ilsa and Kyron didn't even realize the severity of the situation yet.

Finally, Ilsa seemed to finish with her instructions and the crowd of class representatives dispersed into the crowd. It only took Zorian a minute to realize what they were doing – each one was gathering their own classmates into a single group. He bid Ibery goodbye and left towards his own group together with Zach.

Once everyone was present, Akoja told them what the plan was. The academy was going to use their limited teleportation capabilities to get foreign dignitaries and other important people out of the city, and the students were going to descend into the tunnels beneath the city to reach the shelters on foot - with no teachers present to guide and defend them, because they had other duties currently and class representatives had to know the evacuation routes to get the job anyway.

Zorian looked at Zach to gauge his reaction and saw that the boy's expression was grim and focused.

"All right," Zach mumbled. "Show time."

Zorian had a bad feeling about this.

- break -

Surprisingly, it wasn't Zach who raised the alarm – it was Raynie, of all people. How exactly she detected the winter wolves 5 minutes before they showed up he had no idea, but notice them she did and she immediately raised the alarm. A lot of students didn't believe her, but most weren't willing to risk it. The entire procession of students started to move faster towards the small cylindrical building that marked the staircase leading down into the shelters.

They never made it there before the winter wolves reached them.

Zorian wasn't a soldier, and would never call himself an expert on tactics, but what the throng of students did upon sighting the horde of winter wolves coming after them still struck him as monumentally stupid. They scattered. The ones closest to the dungeon entrance rushed towards it, but

the others immediately sought the closest shelter. He could hear Zach's frantic shouting, telling people not to separate from the main group but it was in vain.

Cursing, Zorian snatched Akoja by the wrist before she could bolt towards the nearby apartment building and wordlessly pointed towards the dungeon entrance. For a moment he thought about explaining his reasoning in more detail, but he knew he didn't have enough time for that. He let go of her and started running, hoping she would have the presence of mind to follow.

Thankfully, she did follow him, as did several other students that witnessed the silent exchange and realized the importance of it. As they ran, more people joined them, seeking safety in numbers.

Around him, chaos reigned. The winter wolves were pouring in by the hundreds, and unlike the fleeing students they were frighteningly well coordinated. Small groups of 3 to 4 wolves detached themselves periodically from the main body to intercept lone targets before rejoining the horde, using their superior numbers to flank and outmaneuver their opponents. Their white fur and the surprising silence with which they moved made them seem like an army of ghosts risen from the underworld to punish the living. Screams. Shouting. Flashes of light and canine howls of pain too – not every student was helpless. Up ahead Zach was defending the entrance to the tunnels viciously, sending swarm after swarm of force projectiles that hit far harder than your run of the mill magic missile, felling scores of winter wolves with each volley. A number of people reached the safety of a nearby building and promptly barricaded themselves inside, ignoring the pleas of those outside to let them in.

Just as Zorian thought they would make it to the entrance without incident, his luck ran out. A large group of 30 or so winter wolves noticed them and moved to intercept. The group halted immediately, unsure what to do as the pack continued to get closer. They had to go through it to reach the shelters, but fighting the wolves was suicide. Zach was busy incinerating a group of war trolls that finally made their appearance and wouldn't be able to help for a while.

"I told you I should have brought my sword," one of the boys groused. "But noooo, it's not suitable for a school dance you said. You're too paranoid for your own good, you said."

"Oh shut up," a female voice snapped back.

Zorian resisted the urge to fire off a couple of missiles at the approaching winter wolves. Even shaped as piercers, they weren't guaranteed to kill in one shot something as resilient as a winter wolf, and he still tended to fail quite often when he tried to weave a homing function in them, so there was no guarantee he would even hit anything. He had to use his mana intelligently.

Not everyone thought so, however. A number of people had a spell formula hidden on them in the form of a ring or a necklace, much like he did, and they threw missile after magic missile into the advancing wolves. Only one girl was capable of casting a proper homing bolt, so most of them missed, and when they did hit they were just smashers so they didn't kill any of them. They did, however, slow the pack down and force it to cluster together, since the girl that could fire homing bolts targeted any wolf that tried to detach from the pack to flank them. And that gave him an idea.

The moment the pack got close enough, Zorian fired an overpowered flamethrower straight into their front lines. Clustered together as they were, most of them were caught in the blast. The winter wolves, notoriously weak to fire, howled in fear and agony. That's when someone else fired another flamethrower into their ranks, this one much bigger and hotter than Zorian's, and the winter wolves promptly turned and fled. The ones that still lived, that is.

Zorian turned to see who cast the other flamethrower and was surprised to see Briam there, staring smugly at the charred corpses in front of him. He was holding his fire drake in his arms like a living weapon, and the little lizard was licking its chops like it wanted to eat its kills.

So much for his theory that the drake was too young to breathe fire.

After a moment of shock at the sudden reversal, they all scrambled into the building housing the dungeon entrance and immediately descended into the tunnels below. Zorian was immediately intercepted by a worried Ibery, who seemed extremely relieved that he was alive. Even though he knew her death wouldn't be permanent, he had to admit he was glad she survived as well.

Though, now that he could sit down and think about it a little, it wasn't that unusual she had survived. She was a fourth year student, and they were at the front of the procession for some reason. That was very unfortunate, because fourth year students were, presumably, much more capable of defending themselves than third year ones... and they were the ones who reached the safety of the shelters first, leaving their younger compatriots to fend for themselves.

"I didn't know you had any fire spells," Briam noted from his left, stroking his familiar affectionately. "I guess that's one of the things Zach has been teaching you this past month, huh?"

"Yeah," Zorian admitted. He gave the fire lizard a dubious look, and the reptile stared back at him challengingly. "Did you really bring your familiar to the school dance?"

"Oh, no way," Briam laughed. "I'm not *that* attached to him. No, I used a recall spell to summon him to my side when the winter wolves started pouring in."

"Isn't summoning pretty mana intensive, though?" Zorian asked.

"Not if you're summoning your familiar," Briam said. "We're bound together, he and I. Connected through the soul. It's a lot easier and a lot less

taxing to cast certain spells where they concern him”

“Huh,” Zorian hummed.

An hour went by, with little to show for it. Zorian listened to stories of people around him, trying to put some sense into what had transpired and thinking what he could change in the next restart to make this evacuation thing less of a fiasco. His thoughts were interrupted when a group of teachers finally stumbled into the shelters.

There were six of them and they looked tired and frightened, much like the students who had gathered around them for explanations and assurances. The only one among them that inspired confidence in Zorian was Kyron, who remained as stoic as always. He was no longer bare-chested, opting to wear full body armor that sort of resembled the chitinous shell of a saint bug, and had a plethora of spell rods hanging off his belt in addition to the combat staff he was firmly gripping in one hand.

Kyron had bad news – the attack on the academy was just one piece in an all-out invasion targeting the entire city. Zorian already knew this, of course, but everyone else was suitably shocked. The invasion was well prepared, and most of the defenders had been overpowered right at the start. The city was about to fall. Once that happened, the shelters would become just a giant death trap. They would have to go outside and fight their way out of the city before the invaders could secure everything of critical importance and turn their attention to them.

People were taking it pretty badly.

“Why don’t you just teleport us out!?” someone called. “You’re supposed to be able to do that!”

“Academy ward control has been subverted,” Kyron said calmly. “The invaders have turned our own teleportation wards against us. We can’t teleport in or out.”

Zorian groaned. The enemy had control of the wards? How on earth did they do *that*? The academy wasn’t just some random house with a generic warding scheme – it’s supposed to be too secure and sophisticated for that!

The questions continued for a minute or so before Kyron got enough of it and started to bark out orders. They needed to get moving.

Zorian was paying attention to something else though. The student next to him had been acting strangely ever since Kyron and his cohort entered the shelters. Zorian could practically feel the boy’s eagerness and anticipation. For what, he couldn’t say, but he had a feeling it was nothing good.

That is why, when the boy threw a vial full of sickly green liquid on the floor and smashed it with his foot, Zorian held his breath and fired a smasher straight into the boy’s chest. Foul smelling green smoke erupted from the broken vial, and the shelters erupted into chaos.

Zorian couldn’t see anything through the no doubt poisonous smoke, but the sounds of fighting were unmistakable. He stumbled through the smoke, trying to find an end to it and failing. He could tell from the hacking students around him that breathing in would be a bad idea. Thank god it didn’t also irritate the eyes or he’d never be able to cast a shield in time to stop a magic missile from smashing into his face. A circular plane of force flickered into existence in front of him, soaking the hit. The shield wavered for a second but held.

And then Zorian heard Kyron shout a series of words, and all the smoke around him rushed towards the source of Kyron’s voice, as if caught in some sort of vacuum. Zorian had just enough time to see Kyron holding his left hand in the air, a smoky green ball compacting itself above it, before he was forced to erect a shield again.

At least he could breathe now. Thank the gods for small favors.

Before the attackers – who had probably teleported in under the cover of smoke, because Zorian would remember a bunch of middle-aged men in brown robes if they had been present when he got into the shelters – could regain initiative, Kyron snapped one of his hands and a shining whip flashed through the air. The invaders promptly fell apart, the upper half of their bodies sliding off the lower half like they were never attached to one another at all.

Zorian stared at Kyron in shock. He knew the retired battle-mage was capable, but seeing it was something else. The man had assessed the situation within moments and solved it with a total of two spells. He wondered what would have happened during the initial evacuation if Kyron had been leading the students. He couldn’t help but think that Kyron would have found a way to repel the initial winter wolf rush without losing anyone. Certainly the students would be more inclined to listen to Kyron than their class representatives – the man had a certain aura of command around him.

“How... the hell... are you... still standing?” wheezed Zach not far from him. Apparently he had breathed in some of the smoke, and was affected just like everyone else. Even decades old time travelers could be brought down by some tricks, it seemed.

Zorian was about to answer when the ground exploded next to him, showering him with stone fragments and knocking him on his back. He heard Kyron chanting something, but it was too late for him – the giant brown worm that emerged from the ground was far faster than it should have been and Zorian was in too much pain to move. He saw a huge toothy maw closing around him, and then he knew only blackness.

His last thoughts were that it wasn’t fair. Just how many contingencies did these people have? These invaders were freaking cheaters!

10. Overlooked Details

Chapter 010 Overlooked Details

Zorian's eyes abruptly shot open as sharp pain erupted from his stomach. His whole body convulsed, buckling against the object that fell on him, and suddenly he was wide awake, not a trace of drowsiness in his mind.

"Good m—"

"No, it's not," Zorian interrupted. "How could it possibly be a good morning? I got killed again! Eaten by a giant worm this time. And waking up like this is really starting to get on my nerves! Couldn't the time loop have started a day later or something?"

He stared at his little sister expectantly. She stared back at him, confused out of her mind and probably a little frightened.

"Um, what?" she asked hesitantly.

Zorian wordlessly flipped her over the edge of the bed. She fell to the floor with a thud and an indignant yelp, and Zorian quickly jumped to his feet to better respond to any violence she might decide to retaliate with. Having learned his lesson during previous restarts, he immediately set out towards the bathroom before she could get her bearings.

She realized what he was doing quickly, but by then he had already locked the door behind him. Her screams of outrage were music for his ears, especially since they eventually caused mother to come after her and give her a scolding.

Maybe it *was* a good morning, after all.

- break -

Trains... Zorian hadn't really liked them to start with, but he was starting to develop an intense dislike of them ever since he was caught in this time loop thing. Travelling via train on a regular basis was almost as annoying as Kirielle jumping on him at the start of every restart. He had toyed with the idea of killing time by striking a conversation with Ibery, so she'd be familiar with him when he got a job at the library, but scrapped the notion after a while. Mostly because he decided not to apply for the job in this restart. Working at the library like he had been doing was fairly time consuming, and he had a much more promising project to work on – mastering all the shaping exercises in Ilsa's book so he could woo her into taking him as her apprentice. Library magic was useful, but getting rid of Xvim would be absolutely priceless.

He wouldn't be present in Cyoria when the invasion came either. Not in this restart, nor in any near future one. Even if he had to reveal his secret to Zach because of it, he'd take the first train out of town on the eve of the summer festival. He knew that the smart, responsible thing to do would be to stay in the city and note what was happening – how the invasion was progressing and what could be done to stop it. He knew it, but... it was too much for him. And not just because getting himself involved in that mess seemed to invariably lead to his death, either. The emotional rollercoaster of the 'evacuation' was very hard on his nerves, but that was just a symptom of the real problem. He struggled with his thoughts for a moment, trying to identify the root of the problem. Every reason he could think of felt... not right.

And then it clicked. It was the helplessness. Every time his thoughts strayed towards the topic of the invasion, he couldn't shake the notion that the forces arrayed against him were vastly beyond his ability to handle, and that the only reason he survived as long as he had was through sheer dumb luck. It occurred to him that the manner of his most recent death could easily be an allegory for this entire invasion. So you repelled a murderous pack of winter wolves and reached safety, helped foil a traitorous ambush, and now you think the worst is over? No, stupid, a giant worm suddenly jumps out of the ground and bites your head off! How were you supposed to fight something like that? How was *he* supposed to fight something like that?

Maybe he shouldn't. A lot of things about the invasion seemed... implausible. About as implausible as Zach becoming a super-prodigy over the span of a single summer, Zorian learning all 15 shaping exercises in Ilsa's book within the span of a month, or time travel being real. What if his theory of there being a third time traveler was correct, and that someone was the mastermind behind the invasion? It would explain a lot. Then again, it would also pose a lot of questions on its own... like why hadn't this hostile time traveler dealt with Zach already? The lich had already proved it was very much possible to hurt people like Zach and Zorian, and was working for the invading forces already.

Regardless, he intended to involve himself again with the invasion only after he acquired some *serious* magic, or after he calmed down somewhat and felt emotionally capable of facing the situation. Whichever came first. It's not like he could study the invasion in any great detail if he kept dying at the very start of it, anyway.

Eventually the train arrived in Cyoria, and Zorian began his long trek towards the academy. He wasn't in a hurry this time, because he had finally found a spell to protect himself from rain in the last restart and was eager to try it. Well, he had actually found *several* protective spells meant to deal with rain and other adverse weather, but only one was within his ability to actually cast. That was okay, though, since the 'rain barrier' spell was the one best suited for his purposes anyway – it offered the most complete protection, at the cost of being horribly draining to maintain. He could see why the mana drain would be a serious problem for people who wanted to use the spell extensively, but Zorian only needed it to last for an hour or two in an exceptionally mana-rich area of Cyoria.

Also, being encased in an invisible sphere that repelled water was just plain more impressive than the more subtle, sophisticated wards. The barrier

actually worked on water in general, not just rain drops, so he didn't even have to worry about stepping into puddles and soaking his footwear. Seeing water on the road part before him like in front of some kind of celestial emissary was mightily amusing. Also a bit of an ego boost, which is something he sorely needed after being so thoroughly outmatched during the invasion of the previous restart.

He'd probably never use the spell after getting out of the time loop, since an umbrella was good enough for most occasions and didn't consume any mana, but finding a store that sold them along his usual route from the train station had proved surprisingly difficult. Which, now that he thought about it, suggested that he probably *would* use the spell from time to time, since he doubted this would be the only time in his life he'd find himself without an easily acquired umbrella.

He shook his head. He really shouldn't be fantasizing about what he'd do after getting out of the time loop, since it didn't appear that would happen any time soon. He had to concentrate on the present... and boy did that sound weird, considering his situation. Like what was he going to do with Zach? He was sorely tempted to just admit everything to the boy and have them try to figure out this mess together – surely two heads are better than one? Impulsive he may be, but Zach couldn't have gotten as far as he did without having a good head on his shoulders. He didn't feel entirely comfortable with that idea, though – he strongly suspected there was more to Zach than it appeared, and he hated to charge in without knowing what he was getting himself into.

He decided to see how Zach interacted with him in this restart before deciding.

- break -

“Zorian! Over here!”

Zorian glanced towards the happy-looking Benisek waving at him like a lunatic and wondered what he should do. He didn't really want to talk to him. Benisek might be his closest friend among the student body, but he was also rather irritating at times, and it's not like he could tell Zorian something he didn't already know at this point. In the end he sighed in defeat and trudged over to the grinning boy. Time loop or no, it felt wrong to blatantly snub someone so visibly happy to see him, especially since he shared so much history with Benisek.

He did find it interesting that Benisek was present in the cafeteria at this time, since that wasn't his usual behavior in the restarts Zorian experienced so far. These kind of unexplained divergences happened all the time, which was to be expected – there were at least two time travelers wandering around the time loop, changing things both inconsequential and crucial – but it was surprising to see a change this soon into the time loop. It had only been a day since he arrived in Cyoria. Usually it took at least a week until everything went off the rails, and even then a lot of things repeated themselves. Most teachers followed some kind of a fixed teaching plan, for example, and rarely deviated from it. As far as he knew, Fortov always came looking for him for help with the purple creeper salve, even though his accident with Ibery only happened near the very end of the time loop. Which, now that he thought about it, suggested the accident wasn't so accidental after all. Kind of suspicious for an accident to be so insensitive to changes...

“You just got to Cyoria, didn't you?” Benisek prompted excitedly the moment Zorian sat down beside him.

Zorian nodded hesitantly. Benisek was only ever this excited when talking about a particularly hot girl or when he got a hold of particularly juicy gossip material. Hopefully it was the latter, because there was no way Zorian would be staying otherwise.

“You're so not going to believe this!” Benisek said excitedly. “You know Zach? You know, Zach Noveda, last scion of the Noble House Noveda? He went to class with us these last two years.”

Of course it's Zach. He really should have known.

“Of course I know him,” Zorian said. “He is... very memorable.”

“He is?” blinked Benisek. He shook his head. “I mean, of course he is. I kind of didn't expect you to know, though, since he's kind of a failure as a mage and you never interacted with him much.”

Zorian shrugged. Truth be told, it was very rare for him to forget someone's name, regardless of how often he had interacted with them or how long it had been since he last saw them. Even before the time loop, Zorian would have instantly known who Benisek was referring to.

“Anyway,” Benisek continued, “Zach escaped from his family mansion yesterday.”

“Err, what?” asked Zorian incredulously. “What do you mean ‘escaped’? Why would he need to escape from his own mansion?”

“Well that's the question, isn't it?” Benisek said. “Apparently he had an argument with his guardian that eventually descended into a full-blown magical duel. A duel which, get this, Zach *won!* Half of the mansion was trashed, and Zach fled into the city and has yet to be found. They're searching for him everywhere!”

“Um, wow,” Zorian said, honestly at a loss for words. What the hell was *that* about?

“You said it,” Benisek agreed. “I'm not sure I believe the official story, though. I mean, there's no way Zach could have taken on his guardian in a magical duel! Tesen Zveri is a 7th circle mage or something, and Zach barely passed his own certification! Then again, *something* sure demolished Noveda mansion...”

“How do you know this?” asked Zorian.

"It's all over the newspapers," said Benisek. "Besides, everyone is talking about it. I can't believe one of our classmates would be involved in something like that. What do you think, Zorian?"

"Ben... I honestly don't know what to think about that," said Zorian.

And he really meant it. He didn't doubt for a second that Zach could beat the stuffing out of his guardian, 7th circle or not – the man was a politician, as far as Zorian knew, not a battlemage – but why would he want to do that?

"I suppose he won't be coming to class this time, then," mused Zorian out loud. Then again, he would not have put it past Zach to just walk into class one of these days as if nothing was wrong.

"I doubt it," Benisek laughed.

"Did he kill anyone?" asked Zorian. Benisek shook his head in the negative. "So basically he didn't do anything *that* serious. What's the worst that can happen to him if he simply turns himself in?"

"Well, Tesen must not be too happy with him now, and he's too influential to brush off, even for someone like Zach," said Benisek. "Attacking one of the Elders of Eldemar is actually a fairly serious crime, and Tesen could really ruin Zach's day if he was inclined to pursue satisfaction. Not that I think he would, since that would just draw even more attention to what happened. This whole thing is a giant political scandal for him. I'm guessing Zach will come back after a month or so, after he cools off a bit, and Tesen will 'magnanimously' forgive him everything."

Stolen novel; please report.

Zorian was silent. Zach had told him that it was rare for him to spend a restart in Cyoria, and even rarer for him to attend classes. In light of that, it had been foolish of him to expect Zach to be around in this restart. Zach may have found Zorian interesting in the previous restart, but probably not *that* interesting. Still, this was more than a little strange. If he had wanted to leave and do his own thing, couldn't he have just walked out of his mansion one day and kept going? Who would have stopped him? His guardian? Why would Tesen do that? The man was clearly very hands-off in his dealings with his charge, as evidenced by Zach's frequent absences from school during the last two years, as well as Zach's abysmal performance prior to the time loop.

There was no obvious answer, and Zorian didn't feel like trying to track down Zach. He probably couldn't find him, even if he tried, and he had more attainable goals to pursue.

Like getting out of Xvim's merciless clutches. What could be more important than that?

- break -

The rest of the restart was pleasantly uneventful. There was no Zach, since the boy never showed up in school and couldn't be found by anyone. After a week or so, the newspapers stopped covering the story because there were no new developments to justify the articles, and the rumors making rounds across the student body died down soon after. For his part, Zorian threw himself completely into mastering the exercises in Ilsa's book. He neglected virtually everything else, often skipping classes when he thought he could get away with it. Akoja was furious, since he was apparently ruining the attendance record of the class, and got Ilsa to corner him one day about it. Fortunately, Zorian's ability to get top grades on every exam, despite his spotty attendance, blunted the impact of Akoja's criticism, and Zorian managed to convince Ilsa he was working on a personal project that was taking most of his time... *not* skipping classes for the heck of it as Akoja claimed. He assured her the project would be finished within a month, and that he would resume attending classes regularly after the summer festival. She made him promise that he would show her what he was working on when he was done, and he enthusiastically agreed with her.

His single minded focus gave results quickly – he mastered both vertical and fixed position levitation by the end of the restart. He didn't bother showing these advanced skills to Xvim, who was still having him work on the pen-spinning exercise, since he doubted he'd get a worthwhile reaction. Nothing seemed to please that guy.

He hadn't been present in the city when the invasion came, of course. Without Zach's ring, he was even more useless in combat than he was in the last restart, so it was doubtful he could have lasted for very long in the midst of it all. He did make sure to practice with combat invocations he learned from Zach each day, hoping to hone them into the same reflexive state that Zach displayed. That would take years of practice, of course, but that just meant he'd better start as soon as possible. He also didn't just leave via train like he usually did – he traveled by foot to one of the hills overlooking the city and observed the city from there.

Watching the invasion unfold from such a high vantage point was not only a lot easier on Zorian's nerves than being in the thick of it – it was also rather informative. It was interesting to see how the invasion played out in broad terms. It seemed to have several stages, the first of which was, of course, the disguised artillery magic barrage. The explosive flares mostly targeted three crucial areas – the city hall, the local military base, and one cluster of buildings that Zorian didn't recognize. The academy didn't appear to be a primary target, possibly because the invaders wanted it reasonably intact. Aside from the initial blast, the impact zones seemed to spawn scores of fire elementals that had to be dealt with. Fortunately, a lot of buildings in Cyoria were at least moderately warded against fire, because Zorian didn't doubt for a second that the entire city would've been aflame within minutes otherwise. Once the fire elementals had a few minutes to make a nuisance of themselves, monsters poured out of the sewers, and after they rampaged across the city a bit, the spellcasters finally arrived.

The battle was still raging when the clock finally hit two past midnight and everything went suddenly black.

All things considered, the army of monsters was the least destructive part of the invasion – if he could somehow prevent the initial barrage from crippling the city defense right from the start, or take out a lot of the attacking mages that followed in the monster’s wake... well, it was worth a shot when he finally got some skills under his belt.

The next three restarts were essentially the same, right down to Zach dueling his guardian and escaping into the night. Apparently that *wasn’t* just a one-time thing, but a rather routine occurrence. The exact details varied, but every time he roughed Tesen up before setting off god knows where. Unfortunately, Zorian couldn’t find out anything substantial about Tesen – the man was a high ranking politician, and thus not exactly approachable, and nothing in publicly available sources explained Zach’s apparent hostility towards the man.

His work with Ilsa’s book progressed steadily, but he was frankly getting a bit sick of it. There was only so much of incessant shaping practice he could stand before he lost all enthusiasm. Besides, Ilsa said most students go through them at a rate of 6 per year, and he was already more effective than that – something that he attributed to his unusual focus in the matter. How many people could afford to focus all their energies on shaping exercises? There were so many things vying for the typical student’s attention that shaping exercises no doubt ended up near the bottom of their priorities.

That was why he was currently in Ilsa’s office, trying to see if he could get something out of her without mastering quite the entire book.

“What can I do for you, mister Kazinski?” Ilsa asked.

“Well, I’m a bit concerned about the program you outlined in your first class,” said Zorian. “I’m not sure I’ll get anything out of it, since I already have a solid grasp on all the topics you mentioned.”

Ilsa raised an eyebrow at him. Hey, it worked on Kyron, why wouldn’t it work on Ilsa too?

“I see,” she said after a second of silence. “Would you mind if I gave you a couple of quick tests to confirm that?”

Confident he could deal with anything she tested him with, he agreed. Ilsa proceeded to rummage through her drawers and took out 2 different tests. One was an exact copy of the same test Ilsa gave to the whole class just before the summer festival, and Zorian proceeded to fill it out in 10 minutes flat by sheer memory. The other was unfairly hard, because it covered advanced topics that didn’t turn up in class at all. Zorian only managed to fill out a quarter of the questions before time was up, and he was fairly sure not all of his answers were correct.

Ilsa skimmed through them quickly and then nodded to herself.

“Your theoretical knowledge is pretty spotty,” Ilsa said with a theatrical sigh, and Zorian had to stop himself from scowling. That was such bullshit! She gave him that second test just to make sure he failed! “Here... I’ll give you a list of additional reading to study in your free time.”

Two minutes later Zorian found himself practically pushed out of the door, a piece of paper with hastily scribbled writing in his hand. He glared at the list of book titles, very much tempted to incinerate it on the spot. He was supposed to start on the variations of the flame producing exercise, anyway. But he didn’t. He would not be defeated that easily! If he could survive Xvim’s mentoring methods this long, he could definitely read a couple of theoretical manuals. He would be back. She could be sure of that.

- break -

“Good morning, brother! Morning, morning, *MORNING!!!*”

“Good morning, Kiri,” said Zorian pleasantly. “Thank you for waking me up.”

Kirielle stared at him for a couple of seconds and then huffed in disappointment at his lack of reaction and got off of him all on her own. Well damn – he should have tried that ages ago.

“You’re no fun,” she accused.

Zorian simply nodded in agreement.

“Mom wants to talk to you,” Kirielle said. “Could you show me some magic before you go, though? Pleeeeease?”

Well... why not? He quickly cast the ‘floating lantern’ spell, causing an orb of light to spring into existence above his palm. He had the orb fly around the room while he repeated the spell two more times, producing a different colored orb each time.

The books Ilsa had told him to read were mostly boring crap, but they did tell him something rather interesting. All those variations he had been practicing had more uses than just improving his shaping skills, apparently – they also allowed him to adjust certain spells more to his liking. The same variation of the light emitting exercise that allowed him to produce colored light also enabled him to change the color of the glowing orb produced by the floating lantern spell. Mastering a whole bunch of light-related exercises would apparently also make light-based invocations more powerful and less mana intensive, and the same principle applied to other groups of spells as well... such as fire-related exercises improving invocations based around fire and heat, and levitation-based ones improving spells relying on telekinetic forces. He was a lot less annoyed at having to go through all those shaping exercises when he found *that* out. Hell, if they were that useful, he’d probably see if he could find more of them when he ran out of the ones in Ilsa’s book.

“More! More!” Kiri demanded.

Distracting Kiri with a few more orbs, Zorian quietly slipped out of the room and went to the bathroom before Kiri could realize what was happening. Why was she always so intent on getting there first anyway? That was horribly petty, even for Kirielle. He'd have to ask her in one of the restarts.

Unfortunately, he sort of forgot he filled his entire room with multi-colored orbs of light by the time Ilsa came around to visit, so he thought nothing about inviting her into his room. He hastily swept his hand in front of him, casing them all to wink out of existence, but it was too late – Ilsa had already seen them and was looking at him curiously.

“That’s not really a second year spell,” Ilsa remarked, her eyes boring into his own.

“Daimen can be a pretty good teacher when he wants to be,” said Zorian with a cheeky smile, shamelessly relying on Daimen’s fame to deflect any concerns. Teaching first circle spells like that one to uncertified mages was illegal, but if Zorian ever learned something in his life, it was that Daimen can get away with anything.

“And you know how to produce something other than white light,” Ilsa noted. “Impressive. I guess this should be easy for you, then.”

She handed him a very familiar scroll, and Zorian was just about to flood it with mana to break the seal when he realized something was wrong. Ilsa was studying him like a hawk, expectant and alert. She had never shown this much interest in his scroll-opening before, so what made this one special? He stared at the scroll for a couple of seconds, unable to see any difference from the scroll he was used to. Even the symbols on the seal were the same. Wait...

A few moments later he remembered where he saw the symbols inscribed on the seal and promptly felt like banging his head against the wall or something. How... why... those sneaky little...

He had been doing it wrong! All this time he had been simply pouring mana into the seal to break it, when instead he had to channel mana into it in very specific ways so he could peel it off intact! It said so, right at the god damn seal! It required more mana control than simply flooding the seal with mana, but it was nothing he hadn’t already been capable of, even before the time loop. All this time he had thought the symbols on the seal were purely ornamental in nature, but no, they were *instructions*. Instructions written in a somewhat obscure form, but still. How could he have missed that?

He directed his mana to flow along the sides of the seal, causing it to pop off without resistance.

“Well done,” Ilsa said with a smile. “Not many students have such a firm grasp on their magic at this stage. I see someone is continuing in Daimen’s footsteps.”

Zorian smiled back politely. He mustn’t scowl, he mustn’t scowl...

“Unfortunately, I’m in a bit of a hurry so we’ll have to continue this conversation later,” Ilsa said. “Visit me in my office when you get to Cyoria. Now about your electives...”

- break -

Ilsa stared at him. He stared back. She glanced towards the two completely filled out tests on her desk and then returned her gaze towards him, this time with a speculative look. Zorian remained silent.

It actually felt good to baffle someone like this, Zorian decided. Apparently Ilsa wasn’t as cold-blooded about improbable skills as Xvim was.

“I must admit, I didn’t quite expect this level of knowledge and shaping skill when I told you to come and see me,” Ilsa said thoughtfully. “That second exam I gave you is the one I give to students at the end of their third year, and you only got 2 of the questions wrong. On top of that, you know 10 different variations of the basic three, which is astronomical for a 3rd year student.”

She tapped her pen against the table, lost in thought.

“You may be a bit too advanced for what I intend to teach your group this year,” Ilsa finally admitted. “My class is mostly there to make sure the students don’t have any obvious holes in their shaping skills and theoretical knowledge, and to teach them a few miscellaneous spells that are of general utility to most mages. You’re way beyond that. What am I going to do with you?”

“Transfer me away from Xvim so you could teach such a promising student?” Zorian tried.

She laughed at him.

“Sorry,” she said. “You’re good, but not *that* good. Besides... you should have it easier than most of Xvim’s vi- err, *charges*. What with your amazing shaping skills and all.”

“You’d be surprised how little difference that makes to him,” Zorian sighed.

“Oh come on, mister Kazinski, you didn’t even have a single session with him,” Ilsa chided. “I’m sure that whatever rumors you heard were greatly exaggerated.”

"Right," said Zorian, unable to keep himself from rolling his eyes. "Can you at least give me a written permit to skip your lectures? You said yourself I have nothing to learn there, anyway."

That wasn't quite what Zorian was after, but he supposed it was better than nothing. It would give him a bunch of free periods throughout the week, which wasn't terribly useful while he was inside the time loop (where he could just skip classes if he needed more free time) but would come in handy when and if he got out of it. And besides, a written permit would cut down on Akoja's whining, if nothing else.

"No," Ilsa said. "I need you in class, if only to motivate the rest of your classmates to try harder. Don't worry, I'll make sure you're not bored during class."

Crap. Maybe he shouldn't have asked her that...

"In the meantime, I'm going to do you a favor," Ilsa continued. "While I am personally too busy to teach you, I will see if I can find a teacher willing to give you some private instruction. Do you have an area of magic you're particularly interested in? Personally, I would recommend you look into either divination or alteration, but it's your choice."

"Spell formulas," Zorian said firmly.

"Oh? Ambitious," noted Ilsa. "It's a hard subject. Not something your shaping skills can help you with, either."

"I'm certain," Zorian confirmed. Spell formulas had fascinated him ever since he started to learn magic, so there was no way he was wasting this kind of opportunity.

"Very well," Ilsa shrugged. "I don't foresee any problems, in that case. I'm sure miss Boole will be ecstatic to have such a talented and determined student."

'Miss Boole'? As in, Nora Boole, the orange-haired maniac that expected them to read 12 books within a week and gave them 60-question 'progress tests' every other lecture? Zorian resisted the urge to sigh. Why couldn't he have a normal mentor for once?

11. Limiters

Chapter 011 Limiters

“Why is your test longer than mine?” Benisek whispered to him hurriedly. “Did I lose a page or something?”

“You didn’t,” Zorian whispered back. “Nora is just testing me because... well, it doesn’t matter. I’ll tell you later.”

Zorian sighed and continued pondering the advanced spell formula questions in front of him. As if the original 60 question test hadn’t been enough! Worse, Nora took a page out of Ilsa’s book and decided to test him on knowledge that he technically shouldn’t even have, because the additional questions had nothing to do with second year curriculum. Thankfully, he had actually read all 12 of her ‘recommended’ books over the course of several previous restarts, so he wasn’t *completely* stumped while looking at the piece of paper in front of him.

Still, the additional questions were encouraging, since they suggested Nora was taking him a lot more seriously than she usually did when he asked for some advanced instructions out of her. In the handful of restarts he had tried, the results were underwhelming – while enthusiastic about her subject, Nora Boole never seemed to believe he was as advanced as he claimed. All of his teachers were like that, as far as he could tell from his initial attempts, with Kyron being the biggest exception. Though now that he thought about it, that probably had more to do with the ease with which his proficiency with the magic missile spell could be demonstrated, rather than Kyron’s inclination to believe his claims. In any case, the sheer speed with which things were happening gave him hope – it was only yesterday that he and Ilsa had talked in her office, and already Nora was testing him. That was absurdly fast, since teachers liked to take their time about things like this. Zorian had expected the entire process to take a week, *at least*. Apparently he had left an even bigger impression on Ilsa than he thought he had.

Good. It was nice to have a confirmation that he was actually going somewhere, rather than just wasting his time.

A few minutes later his peace was once again broken by Benisek. He gritted his teeth as the boy started to pester him for answers. Zorian had always found Benisek to be somewhat annoying, despite him being Zorian’s best friend (or at least the closest thing to it), but Zorian found himself steadily losing his patience with the boy as restart after restart went by. It wasn’t really fair to Benisek – the chubby boy was behaving no worse than his usual fare – but the time loop made Benisek’s antics annoyingly repetitive. He quickly scribbled answers to a handful of questions on a piece of paper and thrust it at Benisek. Benisek looked like he would say something to him in his not-whisper (Benisek whispered far too loudly for it to be called a real whisper), but Zorian silenced him with a quick glare.

As annoying as Benisek might be, Zorian wasn’t ready to give up on him just yet. Whether that resolve would hold throughout the entire time loop remained to be seen, however.

“All right, time’s up. Pencils down, everyone,” Nora said, earning her a wave of protests from the student body. “Except for mister Kazinski, that is. He can keep working on that special second test I gave him.”

Zorian cursed internally as all eyes momentarily shifted towards him. She just had to tell that in front of the whole class, didn’t she? He made a note to himself to watch what he said in front of Nora, since discretion obviously wasn’t her strong suit.

Akoja hurriedly collected all the tests, lingering slightly longer near his desk so she could see what his ‘special’ test was all about. After that, the class continued as normal. It was the exact same thing he had already listened to countless times before in the previous restarts, so he did his best to block it out and continue solving the test. Even with his massively unfair advantage, the test was rather hard. Spell formula in general involved a lot of mathematics and geometry, as the very name of the discipline hinted at, and that automatically made it hard for a lot of people... him included.

Eventually the class came to an end, and Nora asked him to stay behind while everyone else filed out of the classroom. She immediately started to look over his tests when the last of his classmates left, and Zorian watched her intently for a reaction.

Unlike Xvim, or even Ilsa, Nora Boole was a very expressive woman. By the time she had reached the end of the first test, he could see she was pleasantly surprised. She damn well should be, considering it was 100% correct. When she started inspecting the second test, though, her face quickly morphed first into shock, and then barely restrained glee. Evidently she liked what she saw. Finally, she set the test aside and met his eyes, giving him a penetrating gaze that actually caused Zorian to flinch a little. She reminded him of Zach and Kirithishli, because she seemed to radiate a similar sort of... vibrancy, for the lack of a better word. It was always a bit uncomfortable being around people like that, especially when they were focused solely on him like Nora currently was.

“Well...” she began. “I didn’t expect that. Do you know why I gave you the second test?”

“Uh, no,” said Zorian. “To scare me off?”

“Exactly!” Nora exclaimed. “Exactly!”

Zorian blinked, unable to believe she actually admitted that to his face.

“Spell formulas require bravery! They require passion!” continued Nora animatedly. Funny. Everyone else said they required patience and meticulousness. “They require determination! Anyone who is scared off by this little thing here,” she waved the second test in front of his face, “will

surely give up when we delve into the truly difficult parts of the discipline. I had to make sure you wouldn't bail out on me somewhere along the line."

Zorian was starting to feel a little unnerved by Nora's outburst. Was he signing up for spell formula tutoring or cult membership?

"Of course, I didn't actually expect you to solve any of the questions correctly," Nora said. "I just wanted to see if you'd leave it completely blank. Not that I'm complaining, far from it! Let's see..."

She went back to her desk and pulled out a stack of papers out of a drawer. She frowned as she leafed through them, apparently unhappy about their contents, before finally setting them aside with a sigh. After an entire minute of silence, she glanced towards him and shook her head, as if suddenly remembering he was still there.

"Tell me, what are spell formulas?" she asked him. "And I don't want to hear a textbook definition. I want to hear it in your words."

Zorian opened his mouth for a moment and then quickly snapped it shut as he considered what to say.

"Come on," Nora encouraged. "Bravery, remember? Besides, I just want to know your opinion. There is no right answer."

Hah. There might be no right answer, but Zorian knew from experience that there was always a *wrong* answer. Always. But he supposed that, in this particular instance, silence was the wrongest answer of them all.

"It's the practice of using geometric shapes and various sigils to modify spells, usually in order to strengthen wards or amplify spellcasting," said Zorian.

"Really? How do they do that?" asked Nora in mock curiosity.

"Err... they limit mana flow along pre-determined pathways?" tried Zorian.

"Yes!" agreed Nora. "They limit, that's exactly what they do! I can't tell you how many mages think they're some kind of inherent amplifier or something. Drives me crazy, I tell you. Of course, most modern crafters use special materials that *are* inherent amplifiers, but that's something else entirely. Anyway, you know the point behind structured spellcasting, right?"

"The narrower the effect of the spell is, the more mana efficient it becomes. Structured magic creates a spell boundary to forcibly narrow down effect space into something manageable for a human spellcaster."

"And spell formulas are the exact same thing, only with more pronounced benefits and drawbacks," said Nora. "Since mages can take their time when crafting the spell formula, they limit the mana flow much more tightly than your typical invocation. This means bigger potential benefits, but also makes the spell even more inflexible. And, of course, the tighter spell boundary means there is less margin for errors, so designing a working spell formula is a lot harder than designing a working invocation."

Zorian waited patiently until she was finished, not really sure why she was telling him these things – this was all basic theory that he had heard and read a thousand times – but unwilling to interrupt. Unfortunately, it appeared he would have to wait to hear what the point of her little questioning was, because Nora suddenly looked at the clock hanging by the door and blanched when she realized how much time had passed.

"Sorry, Mister Kazinski, I guess I got carried away. You better go to the next class before I get you in trouble," Nora said apologetically. Zorian shrugged – he had intended to skip the next class one way or another, but it probably wouldn't impress her much if he told her that. "I'll need a few days to set up a schedule, so I'll tell you the details via Ilsa. We'll have a blast working together, I can already tell."

He was just about to leave when she suddenly started talking again.

"Oh! I almost forgot. Go see Ilsa sometime today – she has something she wants to talk to you about. Something about you returning a favor you owe her for setting this up..."

Now why did that sound kind of ominous?

- break -

Cyoria's main train station was always busy. There was a sort of hurried feeling suffusing the entire area that Zorian found either annoying or invigorating, depending on his current mood. When he was disembarking from the train, it served as a metaphorical bucket of cold water to wake him up from the long sleepy journey, and he welcomed it. When he was simply standing on platform number 6, waiting for the train to arrive, it was oppressive and unwelcome, and he desperately wished he knew how to suppress it. Especially since the damned train was 2 hours late!

In order to amuse himself and pass the time, he had taken to harassing the numerous pigeons and sparrows milling around the place. Not physically, of course – that would be not only childish, but would also cause people to stare at him – he was instead pushing his mana at them, trying to control them mentally. Of course, simply pushing mana at something and wishing for it to happen wasn't enough to do real magic, but it did seem to agitate them a lot. Typically, whatever bird he was concentrating on became increasingly erratic as seconds went by before fleeing away from the area after a minute or so.

Finally, finally, the shrill whistle of the incoming train broke him out of his concentration, and the local wildlife was spared further indignation.

Zorian scanned the crowd of people disembarking from the train, searching for his target. He was technically supposed to hold a sign and wait, but he was confident he could spot the guy without problem. It's not like there'd be many white-haired teenagers on the train platform, after all.

It actually wasn't as bad as he'd thought it would be, this favor Ilsa had asked of him. Admittedly, helping a transfer student carry his luggage and showing him around the city would waste an entire day... but on the bright side, he was excused from attending today's classes! Besides, it would give him a legitimate excuse to approach Kael, the transfer student in question – the morlock boy was a bit unapproachable even at the best of days, and Zorian had been thinking of trying to befriend him. He really ought to find some friends beside Benisek, and Kael seemed like someone he could get along well with. If he turned out to be wrong... well, it's not like the morlock would remember any awkwardness between them once the time loop reset itself again, would he?

Finally, he spotted Kael disembarking and moved towards him to help him with his luggage. It wasn't just an empty gesture of good will on Zorian's part, either – Kael was clearly having problems with his burden, probably because he could only use one arm to manipulate the heavy bags. The other hand was currently supporting a little girl that clung to Kael's side like a barnacle, observing everything around her with childlike intensity.

Kael was momentarily surprised when Zorian wordlessly started helping him, but quickly went along with it. The little girl clutching his side was now staring at Zorian with undisguised curiosity, and Zorian wondered who she was. Was this his little sister? Her vivid blue eyes certainly reminded him of Kael, since the morlock had eyes of the exact same shade, but her hair was jet black, and she didn't look very much like a morlock to Zorian. And in any case, surely the boy wouldn't bring a child this young with him? Zorian kept expecting her mother to step out of the train and take the little girl out of Kael's hands, but somehow that never happened.

Finally, the last of the bags was standing on the floor and Kael finally turned towards him.

"Thank you," the boy said politely. For all his aloofness, Kael was never actually rude. "I'm Kael Tverinov. I'm not normally this inept, but it's hard to handle the luggage with one hand. Kana has been rather clingy today, and I didn't have the heart to pry her off. The move was too stressful for her, I'm afraid."

"It's no problem," Zorian said. "I'm here to help, after all – that's what Ilsa sent me here for. I'm Zorian Kazinski, one of your classmates. Ilsa Zileti sent me here to help you with your luggage and show you around the city."

Kael gave him a startled look, clutching the little girl attached to his hip like Zorian was about to snatch her away.

"What?" Zorian asked, surprised at the alarm in the boy's posture. "Was it something I said? I didn't mean to offend."

Kael gave him a long, suspicious look, before finally reaching a decision of some sort.

"You didn't do anything, mister Kazinski, and it is I who should apologize," Kael said finally. "Allow me to introduce myself again: I am Kael Tverinov, and this is my daughter, Kana."

Zorian stared at the morlock for a moment, before glancing at his... daughter. Kana gave him a shy wave, but otherwise remained silent. She was very young, probably around 3 years of age, but Kael wasn't much older than Zorian. That would mean Kael was 13 or so at the time she was born. Huh. Talk about being a young parent.

"I see," he said finally. And he really did, too. Kael probably got enough grief from people around him over being a morlock without adding this sort of fuel to the fire. If Zorian was in his place, he would have done everything he could to keep this sort of thing from his classmates as well. "If you're afraid I'll go around telling all our classmates about you having a daughter, you don't have to worry – I understand the need for discretion in matters like this."

Kael breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it," Zorian said, waving him off. Considering the child's mother wasn't here with them, there was probably a very stressful story in there somewhere. He would have to be a total jackass to set the academy rumor mill on the poor guy by telling them about this. He was a little curious as to how the boy intended to watch over his daughter while attending the academy, but supposed he had already arranged for a nanny of some sort for the child. "I'll just cast a quick spell to carry your luggage and then we'll be off."

Zorian quickly cast the 'floating disc' spell, and a ghostly horizontal circle flickered into existence in front of them. It was a very useful spell that they were supposed to learn in Ilsa's class somewhere in the middle of the third year, but Zorian had been proactive enough to track it down in one of the restarts. It was similar to the 'shield' spell in mechanics, but this particular force construct was mobile and optimized for supporting weight as opposed to absorbing blows. It dutifully floated after them as they started walking out of the train station.

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"Interesting," Kael said. "I must admit that, when Ilsa told me my education is severely lacking in many areas, I thought she was exaggerating. Is this what an average third-year student is like?"

"Well, no," said Zorian. "I'm actually way beyond what a third-year student should be. Though I'm hardly unique in my skill..."

Kael hummed thoughtfully.

"Why would your education be lacking, anyway?" asked Zorian.

Kael remained silent for a few seconds, and Zorian was just about to conclude the morlock wasn't interested in talking when the boy finally decided to answer.

"My education was... unconventional," said Kael. "I was a sort of unofficial apprentice to a village mage. One that wasn't a member of the guild. Her skills were somewhat specialized, so much of my proficiency with magic is a product of my own personal efforts. In other words, I'm largely self-taught."

Zorian's respect for the other boy rose a few notches after hearing this. Magic was hard enough to learn with proper instruction. For a young boy to go at it all by himself and get far enough to join a third-year class... though if he's such a genius...

"I hope I'm not being too nosy, but..."

"But why am I going into Cyoria, now?" guessed Kael. "I got a pretty good offer from the academy, and it wasn't like I had anyone stopping me from leaving. My parents died when I was young, and my teacher... she got sick during the Weeping. As did my wife. Kana is the only family I have left."

Zorian flinched. "Oh gods, I didn't mean..."

Kael shook his head. "Don't worry about it, mister Kazinski. If I was to fall apart every time someone broached that topic, I would have to become a hermit and avoid people completely. It is natural to be curious about these things."

Zorian still felt pretty terrible. He had pretty much assumed Kael had gotten some girl pregnant and later had to take responsibility for the child. But no, the guy had been married and everything. A bit shocking to marry and have children so young in this day and age, but hardly unheard of. He studied Kael out of the corner of his eyes in the resulting silence. The boy looked very delicate, with pale, willowy physique and gentle facial lines. Coupled with his shoulder-length white hair, it gave him a rather... feminine appearance. Nonetheless, the boy clearly had no shortage of inner strength if he could move on after losing so many people to the horrible sickness. Back in Cirin, there was a woman who had lost a husband and both sons to the bloody tears fever, and never managed to move past that. She had actually blamed the entire Kazinski family for her tragedy, claiming they had used their 'magic powers' to curse her loved ones because of some petty disagreement. Zorian would be the first person to admit he and his family were no angels, but that was just absurd. And kind of sad.

"There is no need to pity me, mister Kazinski," said Kael, breaking him out of his thoughts.

"Oh, I don't pity you," Zorian said. "I think you're very inspiring, actually. You're a single parent who somehow managed to find the time to teach himself magic to such a degree that a world-renowned institution like the academy in Cyoria acknowledged your potential. They gave you a scholarship, didn't they?"

Kael nodded. "I wouldn't be able to attend otherwise."

"They rarely give out scholarships, you know?" Zorian said. "About 5 to 6 of them each year. You must be pretty amazing to have caught their attention like that."

"It's mostly my medical expertise," Kael sighed. "I made a vow to myself after... well, you know. I swore to myself I would become the best healer of the age and make sure a tragedy such as the Weeping can never happen again."

Uh... wow. Zorian didn't know what to say to something like that.

"I made quite a lot of progress on that front, if you permit me to be a little immodest here." Kael said. "But... well, it's complicated. We can talk later, if you're still interested. Me and Kana are rather tired from the journey and I'd like to retire for the day. Kana especially."

Zorian suddenly noticed Kana was starting to doze off on Kael's shoulder. She had been so quiet throughout his entire interaction with Kael that he had almost forgotten she's there. If only Kirielle could be that docile.

"Yes, sorry about that," Zorian apologized. "I got carried away, I guess. I'll have to give you a tour of the city some other time, then."

They spent the rest of the walk in comfortable silence.

- break -

"You were absent yesterday."

Zorian gave Akoja an annoyed look. She wasn't going to give him grief over that, was she?

"I was excused," he noted.

"I know," Akoja said. "I was just wondering where you were."

Zorian was about to tell her it wasn't her damn business where he went in his free time, but then he reconsidered. He was getting strange vibes off Akoja, almost as if she was... *concerned* about him. Very strange. Normally he would write it off as just another weird thing Akoja did from time

to time – the girl seemed to have logic all of her own sometimes, one that not even her obsession with rules could explain – but his recent conversation with Kael stopped him. Was he too dismissive of other people? Up until yesterday, Kael was simply ‘that morlock transfer student’ to Zorian... It brought back memories of his conversations with Zach, and the other boy’s remarks about Zorian’s behavior in previous restarts, before he became aware of the time loop.

“I was doing a favor for Ilsa,” Zorian said. “Showing our newest transfer student around the city and such.”

“Oh,” Akoja said, glancing at Kael for a moment. The white-haired boy was sitting several rows behind Zorian, silent and aloof as always. He gave virtually no indication that he knew Zorian was in the classroom, but Zorian could feel the morlock’s eyes on him from time to time. ‘Who is he anyway?’

“Kael Tverinov,” Zorian answered.

“I didn’t mean his name,” Akoja huffed, realizing, after a few seconds of silence, that he wasn’t going to say anything else.

“Not sure what else to tell you,” Zorian shrugged. “He sounded like a good person to me.”

“He looks kind of arrogant,” Akoja remarked. “And girly.”

“Well how judgmental of you,” Zorian remarked with a frown. “You come off as a bit arrogant yourself, you know?”

Well, so much for being nice to Akoja! She stomped off soon after that, shooting him a nasty glare.

Resolving to be more understanding towards people was hard.

- break -

It took Nora Boole only 2 days to organize their first lesson, and the moment Zorian stepped into the classroom Nora had reserved for them he realized Nora was taking this very seriously. It was a professional-looking workshop, the sort that students normally couldn’t access without special permission from the teachers. Nora beckoned him forward, positively radiating excitement and enthusiasm. Suddenly he remembered why he had been pensive about getting instruction from her. Considering the amount of homework and additional reading Nora assigned as a matter of course during her classes, Zorian dreaded finding out what she considered an appropriate workload for an actually talented student.

“Ah, you’re too quiet!” she complained. “Courage, Zorian, courage!”

“Right,” agreed Zorian half-heartedly.

“We’ll make a proper crafter out of you yet, just you see!” huffed Nora. “But first, let me just wrap up our discussion from last time. I was a little long-winded, but what I had been trying to build up to was that spell formula are... support magic. Magic affecting other magic. By itself, even the most elegant spell formula is merely a theoretical exercise. You need to actually cast the spells and anchor them to the spell formula before it’s of any use. I note this because Ilsa seemed to think your skill in invocations would do you no good in my subject, which annoyed me because it revealed a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of the discipline. Which is very disappointing, coming from her, since she is... well, you know...”

“A teacher,” finished Zorian.

“Yeah,” Nora agreed, a little awkwardly. Teachers rarely spoke ill of one another, in Zorian’s experience, so it was no wonder why she was uncomfortable criticizing Ilsa in front of a student. They did have to work with one another on a regular basis, after all, and undermining other teacher’s authority like that could get ugly very quickly. Fortunately, only Zorian was present in this case, and he didn’t intend to make trouble for her. She seemed to realize it too, after a moment, because she smiled and continued as if nothing had happened. “Anyway, I guess we should get you started on the beginner’s cube.”

As it turned out, the beginner’s cube was a perfectly cubical block of grey stone, each side roughly 10 centimeters long. The one Zorian was given was completely blank and smooth, but Nora showed him a couple of finished ones as a demonstration. They did things like heat up, shed light, or float in the air when activated, or when certain conditions were met. Basically, each finished cube was a crude magic item that used a couple of simple spells and a whole lot of spell formula to produce a neat little toy. They were a standard training tool, according to Nora.

Zorian wanted one the moment he had laid his eyes on them. Giving such a blatantly magical toy to Kirielle would probably keep her out of his hair for *hours*. It would be his secret weapon against her! Besides, a small floating cube would make a much more challenging target for his magic missile practice than the boulders and tree trunks he usually practiced on. Especially if he could somehow get it to dodge...

He wouldn’t have to wait long to acquire one, as it turned out – crafting one was the idea behind today’s lesson. And not just any beginner’s cube, either. Zorian had expected Nora to give him something easy for a start, but apparently she had something a little more... ambitious... in mind.

“But those ones are too easy for you,” Nora concluded. “No, I have something much more fun for you to work on. Here.”

She handed him another cube, though this one was positively covered with spell formula. Zorian noted with rising dread that he couldn’t make heads or tails of it. Hell, many of the sections looked like mere placeholders instead of working spell formula, being little more than stylized pictograms. Wait...

“As you may have noticed, I compressed the spell formula somewhat,” Nora said. “Partially it’s because there wasn’t enough space on the cube to represent it fully in its raw form, and partially to stop you from simply copying the entire thing line by line on the blank one I gave you earlier.”

“Isn’t that the whole point?” Zorian asked. “For me to study a working example to see how it’s done, that is?”

“Absolutely. But I’m afraid blindly copying the spell formula from one cube to another won’t teach you what I want you to learn. If I thought you needed to practice memorization and precision, I’d have you copy a dozen or so easy ones to start with, but I’m sure you’re already beyond that. No one spends as much time on spell formula theory as you have without trying out some practical examples.”

“Err, I never encountered anything like those cubes in the texts I read,” said Zorian. “But yes, I have been using spell formulas from time to time. Mostly to establish an alarm perimeter around my bed during my second year – I had a really nosy roommate – and also to make some free lamps and heating plates.”

Invocations didn’t last long. Even if a mage poured more mana into them than absolutely necessary – and there was only so much you could overpower a spell before it shattered from the strain – they inevitably degraded after a couple of hours at most. The spell boundary degraded with time and eventually fell apart, regardless of whether the spell had enough mana left or not. As a consequence, if Zorian wanted his alarm spell to last throughout the entire night, or his makeshift lamp not to wink out every hour or so, he had to stabilize the spell boundary somehow. Spell formulas were the easiest and most reliable way to do that, so long as someone already crafted a stabilization formula for that particular spell and made it available to the public.

“It’s not very surprising you never encountered beginner’s cubes in your reading,” Nora said. “They’re mostly used for theoretical exercises. Not very useful. Most mages don’t really care how spell formulas work – only that they do. They memorize the well-documented formulas and some quick-and-dirty methods of modifying existing ones, and then they only have to know when to apply which one. Then they say spell formulas are dry and boring. Hah! If only they knew the true mysteries of the Art, the hidden beauty of numbers and geometry...”

Zorian listened stoically as Nora mumbled to herself about ‘unimaginative rabble’ and ‘sleeping in the bed they made for themselves’ for a while. After a while she took a deep breath and plastered a pleasant smile on her face before turning her attention to him again.

There was no sane teacher in this school, it seemed. Zorian wondered whether it was the stress of teaching itself that was producing these kind of effects, or if you simply had to be crazy to accept a teaching position here.

“But I digress,” Nora said cheerfully. “I guess I should stop wasting our time and tell you what I want you to do. Here, let me demonstrate...”

- break -

The cube Nora wanted Zorian to recreate was quite complicated. At its core, it was a glorified lamp using a simple ‘torch’ spell as its base. It could be activated and deactivated verbally, by saying one of the several command words, and it had to be able to tell when someone was referring to it specifically, as opposed to using the command word in some other context. It had three different brightness settings. It conserved mana by not shedding light from any side that was covered by something – the side resting on the floor didn’t shine, for example, and wrapping it in a blanket would cause it to turn itself off. Each individual side could be turned on and off by tapping on it twice in quick succession. It could be keyed in to a specific person, taking orders from him or her alone.

Nora had told him not to worry if he couldn’t duplicate it exactly – she only wanted to see how far he’d get on his own by the next time they met. That was good, because this assignment was far more complex than anything spell formula related he had done up until now. Their next session was on Monday, so he had an entire weekend to work with, but he doubted he could fully rise to the challenge.

He had mixed feelings about Nora’s teaching methods. On one hand, she was taking him seriously, and that was good. On the other hand, she seemed to think that throwing a person overboard was a perfectly valid way of teaching people how to swim, metaphorically speaking.

“Come in.”

Zorian sighed before stepping into Xvim’s office. What a wonderful way to end a week. For all her faults, he infinitely preferred Nora’s way of teaching compared to that of Xvim.

“Zorian Kazinski? Sit down, please,” Xvim ordered, not even bothering to wait for an answer. Zorian caught the pen the man had thrown at him with practiced ease, and then promptly caused it to float off the palm of his hand, gently spinning in the air. Woops. He hadn’t meant to do that. Oh well, let’s see what the man will say about that.

“Make it glow,” Xvim barked out without skipping a beat, completely unfazed by Zorian’s skill.

Zorian wasn’t even surprised anymore. The pen promptly snapped back to his hand and erupted in soft ghostly glow. He cycled through various colors without prompting from Xvim, occasionally changing the intensity of the light just to prove he could.

Xvim arched his eyebrow at him. “I didn’t say you could stop levitating the pen.”

Zorian’s lips twitched in an aborted smile. If Xvim thought he would stump him with that, he was very much mistaken – combining two different shaping exercises was an obvious thing to do, and Zorian had already tried it. Moments later, the pen was spinning in the air in front of him, glowing.

Xvim tapped his finger on the desk thoughtfully. Was it possible? Had he really managed to give the man pause? The world was coming to an end! Zorian watched in anticipation, wondering what the crazy man would think up next.

"I suppose there is no point in testing your ability to burn things. That was always the easiest exercise of the three," Xvim mused. As a point of fact, Zorian was a bit deficient in the burning exercise... at least compared to the other two. Not that he was going to tell that to Xvim, of course. "Your essentials are... adequate. Almost decent, though not quite. Your attitude could use some work, but I suppose you at least have more tact than most of the unfortunates that haunt these halls. Plus, miss Zileti has appealed to me on your behalf, asking me to be 'not such a hardass' towards you. As such, as much as I'd like to shake up your woefully shaky foundations, I'm going to reluctantly move on to something *slightly* more advanced."

To Zorian's great confusion, Xvim handed him a strip of cloth. What was he supposed to do with *that*?

"Err..."

"It's a blindfold," Xvim explained. "You put it over your eyes so you can't see."

"And... why do I need a blindfold again?" Zorian asked.

"We're going to train your ability to sense mana," said Xvim. "You're going to put the blindfold on, and then I'm going to throw these mana-charged marbles at you."

Zorian stared at the man incredulously. Had he really heard him right?

"I'm either going to throw them over your left shoulder, over your right shoulder, or straight at your head. If you get hit by a marble, you lose a point. If you move when you don't have to, you lose a point. Otherwise you receive a point. We'll stop when you accrue 10 points or our time runs out."

Yes, he really *had* heard him right. Thank you so much for your help Ilsa, thank you so much!

- break -

The next two weeks were busy, but routine. He directed most of his efforts towards mastering spell formulas, largely because Nora was very willing to indulge him – the harder he tried in their lessons, the more enthusiastic she became about teaching him. She even suggested they meet on Sundays for additional instruction, apparently not having any private obligations to distract her. He had learned much, but Nora set a grueling pace, and he was glad the restart was fast approaching. He doubted he could last much more than a month of Nora's teaching.

Interestingly, he seemed to be attracting attention from the teachers and students alike in this particular restart. Maybe it was him impressing Ilsa as much as he did, maybe it was the way he quietly went with the insane workload Nora gave him, or maybe Xvim said something nice about him to the other teachers. Well, probably not that last part, since he had made little progress in mastering Xvim's current 'exercise'. In any case, he was getting a lot of attention for his efforts, which was rather curious. Most of the time, no matter how hard he tried in class, everyone was pretty flat about it. He thought about trying to leverage all that attention into something useful, but he was too exhausted by his studies to plot properly. Some other restart perhaps.

The attention had the unfortunate side-effect of wrecking any chance he had of befriending Kael. Associating with Zorian would surely bring great scrutiny on the morlock, something the boy was understandably concerned about, so Zorian wasn't surprised the other boy never sought him out. Frankly, he wasn't sure he could befriend the boy even in normal circumstances – the morlock had a daughter waiting for him at home, and thus probably wouldn't want to spend his time after class socializing with friends.

Akoja was extremely pleased with him, though. Zorian couldn't really understand why, but she was.

And then it happened. Suddenly, without any warning, there was a wrenching sensation and everything went black. He woke up, as usual, with Kirielle lying on top of him, looking smug.

There were two possibilities that Zorian could think of to explain this occurrence. The first one was that something or someone had killed him so fast he was dead before he realized it. He was skeptical of this, as he had done nothing to warrant an assassination, and he couldn't think of any natural force that could kill so suddenly and thoroughly. He hadn't even felt any pain before he died.

The second possibility was much more likely, and also much more worrying. While he was minding his business, learning spell formulas in Cyoria, Zach was off somewhere in the world, doing insanely dangerous things. Zach died. When he did, his soul was dragged into the past to start over... and it dragged *Zorian's* soul back with it.

Which would make Zorian soul-bonded to Zach.

Damn it.

12. Soul Web

Chapter 012

Soul Web

Zorian stomped into his room, closing the door behind him with way more force than necessary. He should have known he wouldn't find out anything about soul bonds that he hadn't already known, but it was still annoying to come back empty-handed after spending an entire day in the library.

The books all repeated the same warnings he received back in his first year: soul bonds were a dangerous and poorly understood branch of magic, capable of causing some pretty horrifying side-effects if used recklessly. Every once in a while, some ill-informed couple decide that soul-bonding themselves together would be the most romantic thing ever, only for everything to end up in tears and lawsuits a few months later when complications surface. The main issue was that one of the participants usually started to mentally and spiritually dominate the other, making them more like themselves in mind and soul, not to mention disturbingly obedient and deferential. This was a good thing when binding animals as familiars, since it was almost always the animal that got dominated by the human, and animals actually tended to benefit from such domination by developing higher intelligence and better control over their magical abilities (if they had any). Sentient beings usually had issues with someone magically subverting their entire personality and worldview, however. At least until the soul bond finished, turning them into a servile clone, that is.

Zorian ran a trembling hand through his hair and started to clean his glasses with the hem of his shirt to calm himself down. He really, *really* hoped he was wrong and that there was no soul bond between him and Zach. Zach had 6 times larger mana reserves than Zorian's theoretical maximum, was naturally more outgoing and confident, and – thanks to being in the time loop far longer than Zorian – was probably decades older than him too. No points for guessing who'd be the dominant one between the two of them!

The worst thing about it was that he couldn't even go to someone for help. He was pretty sure the soul bond, or whatever it was, was responsible for him looping around along with Zach. If he asked someone for help, they'd insist on severing the bond (an understandable sentiment and something he'd eagerly agree to in normal circumstances), which would cause him to lose everything he had gained inside the time loop, memories included, once Zach started over at the end of the month.

Yeah, he was totally screwed.

He took a couple of deep breaths and put his glasses back on. Maybe he was looking at things too fatalistically. Considering the sheer size of disparity between him and Zach, he should have experienced some pretty massive personality shifts by now, and he didn't notice anything of the sort. He certainly wasn't feeling submissive towards anyone, least of all Zach. Obviously things weren't as bad as they seemed. He could very well be overreacting and overlooking some other, perfectly reasonable explanation for the unscheduled restart...

Someone was knocking. Who could possibly-

Oh. Right. Taiven.

He sighed heavily. Just what he needed right now. The knocking turned into banging, prompting him to finally open the door.

"Hi, Roach!"

"Hi, Taiven," Zorian said in a slightly suffering tone. "How nice of you to visit me. Do you want to come in?"

Taiven promptly did what she always did once he let her inside – she jumped on his bed and made herself comfortable. Zorian shrugged and went after her. Best to get it over with quickly.

"Didn't you graduate?" he asked. "You said you were going to go into exploration after you graduate, what happened to that?"

She gave him a sour look. "It's not that simple. No expedition is going to take a complete beginner like me with them. I need an established explorer to take me as an apprentice. I'm working on it."

"Funny, I heard you're working as a class assistant to Nirthak," Zorian remarked. "Isn't that going to interfere with searching for another master?"

"Well, sort of," she admitted. "But I'm not literally searching for another job at this point. I'm actually trying to build up my reputation and get people to notice me by doing missions and such. In fact, that's what I came to talk to you about – I'd like you to join me and a couple of others on a job tomorrow."

"Sounds suspicious," Zorian said. "What could a measly third year help you with?"

"Um, fill out our numbers?" Taiven answered. "We can't take the job until there are 4 or more of us, and we're one short of that."

"Well, why *does* the job require four people?" asked Zorian, knowing from previous restarts that this was the fastest avenue to shut down Taiven's excuses. "Surely the employer didn't put that there just to be mean to groups like yours."

"It's supposedly dangerous," Taiven huffed, folding her arms across her chest. "The old man is overreacting. The spiders aren't even that big from what he told us."

“Spiders?” prodded Zorian.

“Yeah,” Taiven said hesitantly, apparently realizing she probably shouldn’t have mentioned that. “Spiders. You know, hairy eight-legged-“

“Taiven,” Zorian warned.

“Oh come on, Roach, I’m begging you!” Taiven whined. “I swear it’s not as dangerous as it sounds! We’ve been in the tunnels hundreds of times and it wasn’t that dangerous at all! We can protect you easily!”

“Hundreds of times?” asked Zorian dubiously.

“Well, a dozen times at least,” she relented.

Zorian was just about to tell her no, like he usually did at this point, but then he stopped himself. He probably wouldn’t be able to do anything remotely productive for at least a week, what with the possibility of a soul bond between him and Zach weighting heavily on his mind and all. A nice distracting stroll through the sewers might be just what the doctor ordered, so to speak.

“Sure,” he said.

“Really!?” she squealed.

“Yes, really,” confirmed Zorian. “Just tell me where to meet you tomorrow before I change my mind.”

A few minutes later Taiven left, thanking him profusely and kissing him on the cheek ‘for being a friend’ before running off to... wherever she had been going, he supposed. He didn’t ask, being too shocked by her kiss, innocuous as it may have been. He was a bit angry at himself for being so affected by a silly kiss on the cheek, but he supposed he shouldn’t be too hard on his subconscious. She was his former crush, after all.

He decided he had had enough of everything for the day and drank one of the sleeping potions he kept in his stash. Hopefully things would seem clearer after a good night’s rest.

- break -

The next morning he woke up a bit more level-headed than he had been after his visit to the library, and things didn’t seem as hopeless as they had the day before. He had been jumping to conclusions, and needed more information. He was tempted to skip classes for the day to have another go at the library, but he suspected that he lacked both the research skills and the access level to properly tackle a restricted topic like soul bonds. And besides, there was someone in his class he absolutely had to talk to – Briam, the guy with a fire drake familiar. Surely someone who is already soul-bonded to another, even if it was to a magical animal instead of another human, could tell him more about those blasted things.

“I see your family has given you a fire drake of your own,” he said conversationally, sitting down beside Briam and ignoring the threatening hissing of the fire drake. For some reason, the ill-tempered beast never saw fit to attack him in previous restarts, so he didn’t think it would start now. “Is he your familiar already?”

“Yes,” Briam confirmed, clearly pleased with that. “I bonded with him just this summer actually. A bit strange, at first, but I think I’m getting the hang of it.”

“Strange?” asked Zorian. “How so?”

“Well, it’s mostly the bond being there, you know?” Briam said.

“So the bond can be felt?” Zorian said speculatively, trying not to let his excitement show. He didn’t feel anything. “Is that normal? Can everyone who is soul-bonded feel their bond?”

“No, not everyone,” Briam chuckled. “Only a tiny minority can, and nobody is sure why. I can, though. I guess I’m lucky that way.”

Zorian suppressed a scowl. He had been hoping that him not being able to sense any bonds meant there was none, but apparently that was no proof. Damn.

“You know,” Zorian tried, “I’ve always had an... *academic interest* in familiars and soul bonds...”

Thankfully, Briam didn’t find Zorian’s interest in any way suspicious and was happy to indulge Zorian’s curiosity. What Briam told him was interesting, to say the least. According to Briam, the soul bond spell was actually a ritual of some sort, one that took at least 10 minutes to properly cast, and usually more. Not something you cast as a regular invocation. Also, even the most oblivious of participants tended to feel something after a few weeks, after the bond had properly anchored itself to the participants.

There were a lot of things Zorian had experienced so far in the time loop that could qualify as signs of a developing soul bond, but it was hard to say how much of that was simply a consequence of the crazy situation he had found himself in. The effects were just too weak compared to what Briam told him should happen. His mana reserves were slightly larger than they had been at the start of the time loop, for instance, but the increase was nothing special. It could just as easily be a consequence of his regular combat magic practice instead of being caused by the soul bond trying to twist his soul to be more in line with Zach’s. The spell that the lich cast on them definitely wasn’t a ritual either... but then again, it *was* a lich. Who knew what kind of magic a creature like that had at its disposal?

All in all, it would appear he was lucky – the link between him and Zach was either very weak or of a different type. Or perhaps it was only half-formed? According to Briam, the bond required physical proximity and a lot of personal interaction between participants to fully mature. It was why he carried his fire drake everywhere he went at this point in time. Considering he only interacted with Zach in one of the restarts so far, and that the boy spent virtually all of the restarts away from Cyoria, the bond may have never gotten the chance to solidify. If so, he must never allow it to fully form – he would avoid contact with the other time traveler from now on until he could figure out more about what was happening.

Which, admittedly, could take a while. Hopefully his idea of avoiding Zach as much as possible would keep him from being overwhelmed by the bond in the meantime. He really ought to make a learning plan for himself. So far, he had been learning things rather haphazardly. There was no hurry, as far as he knew, and he didn't know where to begin anyway. Also, he had wanted to grow a little as a mage before breaking out of the time loop, since he would never get an opportunity like this again. That kind of disorganized approach was no longer appropriate, however – he wanted the soul bond broken as soon as possible, and that meant finding a way out of the time loop as quickly as possible.

But that would have to wait for another time, because he had a meeting with Taiven and her friends scheduled for the evening. Why did he agree to this again? Oh yes, Taiven picked a really inconvenient moment and he had a momentary bout of insanity. He should have at least gotten some favor out of her for doing this. Oh well, live and learn.

Taiven had chosen an annoyingly distant meeting place, so Zorian had a long trek across in front of him. Apparently there was a meeting spot for chess players in one of Cyoria's parks, and one of Taiven's friends was a regular visitor. He never actually visited that particular park, but the path towards it was somewhat familiar and he couldn't figure out why.

He realized why it was familiar a few minutes later when he stumbled on a small bridge just inside the park. This was where he had met that crying little girl whose bicycle fell into the stream, back before he was aware of the time loop. Come to think of it, he never visited this place after that, did he? There just wasn't any reason to, since he knew in advance there were obstacles blocking his path if he went this way. He peered curiously at the section of the creek beneath the bridge, trying to see if the bike was still there. Unsurprisingly, it wasn't. Yesterday's heavy rain had swelled the creek into a raging torrent, and the bicycle was, no doubt, picked up by the currents and swept along.

The little girl wasn't there this time, of course, but that didn't mean he was alone on the bridge. There was a small-ish cat, probably a very young one, looking forlornly at the raging waters of the stream. Zorian didn't generally stress himself about the plight of animals, but when the cat turned to look at him and their eyes met, he was assaulted by an intense feeling of sadness and loss. Unnerved by the experience, he picked up his pace, hurriedly leaving the strange cat behind him.

Finally, after nearly 30 minutes of wandering the park, he found the meeting place. Taiven should really learn how to give proper directions one of these days. It was a rather peaceful place, though populated almost entirely by old people. As in, *really* old people. Taiven's group of teenagers stuck out like a sore thumb, but none of the old geezers surrounding them seemed to mind so Zorian decided not to let it bother him and cautiously approached.

Taiven's other friends were a pair of gruff, muscular boys that looked more at home in the boxing ring than in a mage school. One of them was currently frowning at the chess board in front of him, contemplating his next move, while Taiven and the other boy sat on each side of him. Taiven was clearly impatient and bored out of her skull, at one point actually trying to snatch a figurine from the board to pass the time with, only to get foiled by the players. The other boy was more relaxed, lazily observing everything around him like a guard dog. It was this other boy who noticed him and pointed him out to the other two.

"Roach!" Taiven waved. "Thank the gods, I was starting to fear you'd never show up!"

"I wasn't late," Zorian protested.

"Well you sure developed a habit of cutting it close since the last time we saw each other," she accused. "But anyway. Roach, I'd like you to meet my two minions, Grunt and Mumble. Grunt, Mumble, this is my good friend Roach."

Zorian rolled his eyes. At least it's not just him who gets a stupid nickname.

"Damn it, I told you not to introduce us like that!" One of the boys protested. It was more out of force of habit than because he honestly expected Taiven to change, if Zorian was reading things correctly. He sighed and turned towards Zorian. "Hi, kid. I'm Urik, and the guy playing chess is Oran. Thanks for helping us out like this. We'll make sure nothing happens to you, so don't worry about anything."

The chess player grunted, possibly in agreement. That must be Grunt, then.

"I'm Zorian," he spoke back. The guy never told him their last names, so why should he tell them his?

"Right!" said Taiven enthusiastically. "Introductions are over, so let's get going, shall we?"

"Not until I finish this round," the chess player said flatly.

Taiven's shoulders slumped in defeat. "I hate that game," Taiven whined. "Find yourself a seat, Roach. This could take a while."

Zorian clacked his tongue in annoyance. For once Zorian empathized with Taiven's impatience. He wasn't a big fan of chess either.

The Dungeon was an extremely dangerous place. Also known as the Underworld, the Labyrinth, and a million other names, it was a staggeringly extensive network of caves and tunnels that ran beneath the surface of the world. At first glance, the place seemed like every mage's dream come true – ambient mana levels increased the deeper one descended into the endless depths of the Dungeon cave system, and the lower levels were practically swimming with useful minerals with fantastic magical properties. Unfortunately, mages were just one of the many creatures that thrived in such an environment. Monsters of all sorts lived in the tunnels, and the deeper one went the stronger and more alien they became. Even the greatest of archmages had to take care not to go too deep when exploring the Dungeon, lest they come face to face with something they had no hope of defeating.

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Cyoria, like many other cities, took advantage of the Dungeon beneath it when the city was being built. The topmost portion of the Dungeon was cleared of anything aggressive or particularly dangerous and then systematically walled off from the deeper levels. These tunnels were then modified into shelters, storage spaces, flood-control systems... and the city sewer system. Human settlements had used the Dungeon as a sewer for so long that several species of oozes and other monsters adapted specifically to take advantage of this unique ecological niche, and humans often transplanted them from one city to the next when they built new settlements. Of course, the separation of this topmost layer from the deeper parts of the Dungeon was never 100% effective – especially since many Dungeon denizens were very capable diggers. Regular maintenance was required to keep the whole thing functioning properly.

Cyoria's Dungeon boundary was widely known to have more holes than a sponge. It was a fairly young city, and the local Dungeon was particularly extensive. It grew too big, too fast, and a proper separation between layers was never finalized. That was probably why the invaders managed to smuggle an entire army of monsters into the city by having them pour straight out of the tunnels – though how exactly the invaders mapped out the Deep Dungeon well enough to find a route big enough for an army to pass through is anyone's guess. Just one more example of how ridiculously well prepared the enemy was, Zorian supposed.

Despite the obvious danger, Zorian wasn't too worried about following Taiven into the tunnels. Cyoria's underground wasn't the safest place in the world, but it was by no means a certain death sentence either. And he doubted the invaders were currently in there, since a giant army of monsters living just beneath the city was absolutely impossible to hide, regardless of how good the invasion organizers were – they would have to navigate their route on the day of the invasion to avoid detection. He would feel better if he had a focusing item for his combat magic, of course, but that was beyond his reach at this point. Nora's tutoring aside, he still wasn't good enough with spell formulas to make one from scratch, and he couldn't buy one without a permit.

Unfortunately, their employer didn't seem to share Zorian's confidence.

"This is the fourth member you found?" the old man demanded incredulously. "Did he even graduate yet?"

Zorian looked at the scowling man waving towards him in a dismissive manner and promptly decided he could understand Taiven's irritation with the guy. If the guy was so worried about their ability to deliver results, why didn't he hire an actual professional to recover his damn watch? Oh, that's right – he didn't want to pay a professional's wage! Frankly, Taiven and her group were probably the best he could hope to get, considering where he looked for help.

The job itself was simple enough – the old man lost a pocket watch in the tunnels while fleeing from a duo of giant spiders, and now they had to get it back. The old man tried to retrieve it, but when he came back to the spot where he had dropped it, it was no longer there. Personally, Zorian was sure it was eaten by an ooze or some other metal-eating scavenger living in the tunnels, but the old man insisted it was still intact and in the spiders' possession. How he knew that was anyone's guess. What would a bunch of spiders, giant or otherwise, do with a watch? Were they like magpies, collecting shiny items just because?

"Nope," Zorian said, completely unrepentant. "I'm a third year."

"A third year!" the man squawked. "And you think you can survive down there? Do you even know any combat magic?"

"Sure do," confirmed Zorian immediately. "Magic missile, shield and flamethrower."

"That's all?"

"You get what you pay for," Zorian shrugged.

"Look, what's your problem?" Taiven interrupted. "It's four of us versus two large-ish spiders. I alone would be enough for that!"

"Just because I only encountered two doesn't mean there isn't more of them," the man grunted. "I don't want you to stumble on a whole hive of those things and get slaughtered. Those things are *fast*. And stealthy – I didn't even notice them until they were right on top of me. I'm lucky to be alive, talking to you four."

"Well there's four pair of eyes among us," Taiven reasoned. "We'll watch each other's backs, so good luck on them sneaking up on us. I don't suppose you'll finally tell us what's so important about that watch you lost?"

"It's none of your business," the man shot back. "It's not valuable or anything. I just have sentimental reasons for wanting it back." He shook his head. "I suppose the kid is right. I got what I could, considering the reward I'm offering. Just... don't get careless. I don't want the lives of a

bunch of children weighing on my soul when I finally die.”

A few minutes and a whole lot of pointless bickering later, Taiven finally led them all towards the nearby Dungeon entrance. There were guards stationed there but Taiven had a permit to go in and could bring people with her, so they were free to pass. That was reassuring at least – it meant someone in the permit office considered Taiven capable enough to keep relative non-combatants like himself safe down there. Apparently she hadn’t been talking completely out of her ass when she had said she could protect him.

The tunnels themselves were a lot less sinister than Zorian imagined, or at least this particular section was – smooth stone walls and nothing more threatening than rats wandering around. The stone covering the corridors reflected light pretty well, so the four floating lanterns they had hovering above them (Taiven insisted they all cast one and space them away from each other, so they wouldn’t be immediately plunged into darkness on the off chance they encountered something that could dispel them) illuminated the tunnels quite nicely. Unfortunately, there was no sign of either the missing watch or the giant spiders. Taiven seemed to think it would be easy to track down the spiders with a simple ‘locate creature’ spell, and was stumped when the spell – and all other divinations she tried, for that matter – came out empty.

As it turned out, Taiven and her two friends were more than a little specialized in combat magic, and didn’t have the faintest idea how to go about tracking down either the watch or the spiders once their rudimentary divination attempts failed. Eventually they settled on just wandering around, hoping they’d stumble on the spider’s lair, occasionally repeating the divinations with no effect. After about 2 hours of that, Zorian was ready to call it quits. He was just about to suggest they give up and come back tomorrow, when he suddenly felt very, *very* sleepy.

Being a mage required a great deal of mental discipline – shaping mana correctly required focus and ability to visualize the desired result with crystal clarity. As such, all mages were, to an extent, resistant to mind magic and other effects targeting the mind. It was the only reason why Zorian was still awake and desperately fighting the sleep spell, instead of collapsing on the ground in deep slumber. In front of him he saw Taiven and one of her friends sway on the spot as they tried to resist the spell as well, while the other boy already laid sprawled on the floor.

He struggled with the spell for a second or two, and then the sleep effect just... withdrew. Before he could do anything, he was forced on his knees by a stream of memories and images that bored themselves directly into his mind.

Confusion. A memory of him staring at a particularly baffling spell formula problem, tapping his pen against the table in frustration. An image of two floating balls of water connected by a collection of ever-shifting streams of water flowing from one orb to another. An alien memory of a war troll tearing through delicate white walls that seemed to be made solely out of cobwebs. A question.

[*Are you-*] the voice boomed in his mind, before collapsing into another psychedelic collection of images and alien memories. The deluge lessened for a moment, as if waiting for a response. Then it started again. Frustration. [*I thought-*] Brotherhood. Webs stretching across lightless chasms, orbs of light trapped within them. [-*don’t understand me, do you?*] Sadness. Pity. More frustration. Resignation.

The flow of images abruptly stopped assaulting his mind. Zorian clutched his head to lessen the raging headache pulsing inside his head and looked around. Taiven and her two friends were unconscious, but appeared to be unharmed. There was no trace of their attacker anywhere. He tried to wake them up, but they wouldn’t budge.

Deciding the best idea would be to get back to the surface before something decided to finish them off, Zorian promptly cast the floating disc spell and piled his three unconscious teammates on top of it before making a beeline towards the dungeon entrance.

He just hoped his head would stop killing him by tomorrow.

- break -

Zorian woke up very confused. A part of him was wondering what he was doing in a hospital, of all things, while another part was surprised he hadn’t woken up back in Cirin with Kirielle wishing him a good morning, just like every time he started over. A few seconds later his mind cleared up and he remembered what had happened yesterday. He didn’t start over because he hadn’t died in the tunnels – he just had his mind scrambled. This was actually far more worrying than merely dying, since any damage to his mind carried over across restarts, but it would seem he didn’t suffer any permanent damage.

He vaguely remembered the doctor concluding the same when he was brought in yesterday, before shoving him into this room and telling him to sleep it off. Some doctor. He didn’t need a hospital for that. He wondered how Taiven and her two friends were faring – they had been still completely comatose when he had stumbled out of the Dungeon entrance and the guards had rushed them all to the nearest hospital.

“Finally awake I see,” Ilsa’s said from the doorway. “Do you feel up to talking or should I come back later?”

“Miss Zileti?” Zorian asked. “What are you doing here?”

“As our student, the Academy is obliged to represent you in legal matters,” Ilsa said, approaching his bed. “This qualifies. How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine,” Zorian shrugged. He didn’t even have a headache anymore. “I might as well go home once you finish questioning me.”

“Questioning you?” Ilsa asked. “It sounds almost sinister, the way you say it. Why would I be questioning you?”

“Err, well...” Zorian fumbled. “The police tend to be hard-asses towards witnesses in my experience. Just in case they’re hiding something and all that.”

For a moment Zorian thought she would ask him where he got that kind of experience with the police, but she instead just shook her head and chuckled.

"Well, I'm not the police," Ilsa said. "Though I did come to ask you what happened. Your friends don't remember anything substantial, having been hit with that sleep spell right at the start of the attack."

"Are they alright?" Zorian asked.

"Yes," Ilsa confirmed. "They woke up yesterday with no ill effects. Your injuries were far more serious, medically speaking." She gave him a wry smile. "I think it was their pride that was hurt the most. A third year resisted a spell they could not and saved their lives. Cyoria's Dungeon boundary is infamously... porous. If it weren't for you, they probably would have been dead by morning."

Zorian looked away uncomfortably. Is that why Taiven had never contacted him after that initial invitation to go with her at the start of each restart? He thought she was being callous.

How *did* he resist that sleep spell, though, if Taiven and her two friends didn't? And what happened afterwards... it hurt, and it was unpleasant, but he had a feeling it wasn't an attack. His attacker could have finished him off at any particular time but chose not to. The words, the images... it was as if something was trying to talk to him but didn't know how to communicate with humans properly.

Considering the number of webs in the alien memories he had been bombarded with, it was probably the spiders. He never heard of any sentient spiders with access to mind magic, though.

"I'm not really sure what happened," Zorian finally said. "After the sleep spell failed, I was immediately bombarded by a barrage of images that almost made me black out. It was very painful and disorienting. After it stopped I tried to get my bearings to respond to further attacks, but after a minute or so I realized none were coming and decided to hightail out of there. I have no idea why the attackers stopped."

"Hmm," Ilsa hummed. "There are lots of possibilities. Maybe, instead of walking into a deliberate ambush, you simply stumbled upon someone who didn't want to be seen and they moved to incapacitate you so they could slip away unnoticed. Maybe someone left a spell trap in that section of the tunnels for whatever reason and you set off the trigger. Maybe you resisting two spells in a row intimidated them into leaving. We may never know, I guess."

Yes, all valid possibilities. It certainly wasn't giant sentient telepathic spiders, no sir!

"Oh and Zorian?" Ilsa continued. "You're forbidden from going down in the tunnels until further notice. I get that you wanted to help a friend, but it was still a foolish thing to do."

"Err, yes professor," Zorian agreed. "Understood."

10 minutes after Ilsa left the nurse came to tell him he could go home.

- break -

"This is boring!" Taiven complained.

Zorian cracked one of his eyes open so he could glare at her.

"You said you wanted to make it up to me," he reminded.

"But I meant teaching you some kickass spells, not..." she scowled at the bowl full of marbles in front of her. "...throwing marbles over your shoulders. Shouldn't I at least aim a couple at your forehead? I bet you'd be a lot more motivated to get it right that way."

"If you do that, I'm going to track you down to your room and suffocate you in your sleep," Zorian threatened heatedly. The whole reason he was having her do this was so that he could practice this stupid trick without suffering through Xvim's methods.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. After a few seconds he felt the mana-charged marble pass in the vicinity of his face but couldn't pinpoint over which shoulder it flew.

"Left," he tried.

"No, right," Taiven. "Now you're just guessing, aren't you? Just give it a rest for today, you're not going to get anywhere once you get frustrated."

"No, I just need a couple of minutes to calm down," Zorian sighed. Taiven groaned in response and he opened both eyes so he could properly glare at her. "Why are you being so difficult about this, anyway? You know I can't ask anyone else to do this for me, right? I don't know anyone else who can aim their throws precisely enough, and none of them could keep charging marbles for more than half an hour without depleting their reserves."

"I know, I know," Taiven sighed. "And I'm glad you asked me for help. It's the least I could do after... well, you know. But you're not taking advantage of me properly!"

Zorian raised an eyebrow.

"Err, that came out wrong," Taiven chuckled nervously. "What I meant was: I can do much more than this. My accurate marble throwing skills aren't my only gift. I know I must seem pretty pathetic for getting knocked out by a single spell but come on!"

"I never thought of you as pathetic because of that, Taiven," Zorian sighed. "But alright. What can the great Taiven do for me?"

"Teach you how to fight, of course!" she grinned.

"The magical way, I hope," Zorian remarked warily.

"You should never underestimate the usefulness of a fist to the face, even in a magical duel," Taiven grunted. "But yes, I meant the magical way. Were you telling the truth when you told the old guy who hired us you can cast magic missile, shield and flamethrower?"

"Of course," Zorian said.

"Well, let's see them," Taiven said, waving towards a duo of dummies on the other side of the room.

"Err, won't your parents mind if I wreck their training dummies?" Zorian asked.

She rolled her eyes. "The whole reason I told you to come to my place was so we could train here. The whole room is warded, and those dummies especially. You won't even scratch them, trust me."

Shrugging, Zorian quickly cast a magic missile, shaping it into a piercer and weaving a homing function into it so it would hit the head of the dummy. The bolt of force sped across the room and struck the dummy square in the forehead. The faceless wooden head of the dummy bent backwards with the force of the blow in a manner that would snap a real human's neck in several places, but then promptly snapped back to its default position as if nothing was wrong.

"A decent magic missile," Taiven praised. "I like that you can cast one without a spell focus – I thought that would be the first thing I would have to teach you."

Her hands blurred in a dizzying display of skill, the chant spoken so softly he barely even heard it. A veritable swarm of magic missiles erupted from her hands, speeding towards the dummy with a lot more speed than Zorian's piercer had and impacting it with enough force to lift it off its feet and smash it into the wall behind it. Though they were simply smashers, Zorian knew they were a lot more dangerous than the piercer he had produced, even individually.

She didn't appear the slightest bit strained by the effort to produce the display.

"So was there any purpose for doing that, other than rubbing in how far beyond me you are?" Zorian inquired. "Firing that many magic missiles, even sequentially, would drain my reserves dry on the spot. I don't think I'll be repeating your feat any time soon."

"Err, really?" Taiven asked. "I guess I kind of assumed your mana reserves are huge, like your brothers'. How many magic missiles can you cast in one sitting?"

"11," Zorian said, pointedly ignoring her first remark. "It started out as 8, but I increased it somewhat."

"Eight!?" Taiven gaped. "But that's... practically below average!"

Zorian knew nothing good would come out of blowing up at her. It was Taiven. She didn't really think before speaking, and if you were bothered by that you had no business interacting with her.

"Does that mean you admit defeat and we should get back to the marbles?" he asked with deceptive cheer.

"No!" she shrieked. "No, I was... I was just surprised, that's all. I sort of wanted to teach you how to cast multiple magic missiles with one casting, but I suppose it wouldn't do you much good with such tiny mana reserves. You should make your every spell count instead of going for quantity. Show me your shield and flamethrower while I think of something."

After trying to burn a dummy to a crisp and failing, Zorian cast a quick shield, thinking just its existence would be enough of a proof for Taiven. Apparently not, as she immediately whipped out a spell rod out of her belt and fired a smallish purple projectile at the shield. Zorian's eyes widened at the unexpected attack, but the attack splashed harmlessly against the semi-transparent plane of force and dissipated into a puff of purple smoke that soon disappeared without a trace entirely.

"What the hell was that!?" Zorian demanded.

"I was just checking if the shield can hold," Taiven told him. "The spell is harmless, just a simple coloring bolt that carries some force to it."

Zorian wanted to tell her his shield held against a hostile mage that was actually trying to kill him, but he couldn't really do that. He settled on giving her an annoyed look.

Eventually, Taiven admitted she couldn't think of anything at the moment and reluctantly started throwing marbles over his shoulders again. She made it clear to him, however, that she would enlist help from her parents in the coming days, and that this way of training was a one-time thing. Zorian managed to negotiate at least an hour of marble throwing each session, in addition to whatever crazy scheme she would come up with.

eventually.

Truthfully, combat magic was only a side interest at the moment. He was starting to realize he couldn't keep blundering blindly through this. As much as he had wanted to advance his magical studies before finding the exit, he couldn't simply ignore the danger posed by the possibility of a soul bond – the longer he stayed inside, the bigger the chance of the bond activating in full force and devouring his will and personality. The mental assault he recently went through simply highlighted that the time loop had its own dangers, and that it was irresponsible to take them lightly.

A rough plan was forming in his head. He needed to find out everything he could about the time loop – how it came to be, how it functioned exactly, and how he could get out of it. Also, what was the nature of his connection to Zach? And what was the deal with the invasion – it seemed too conveniently timed to be a coincidence, so what was its connection with the time loop? Finding answers to those questions would require skills in divination, information gathering, and infiltration, so that's where the bulk of his efforts should focus on. He still intended to learn other things too, of course, but these three things were a must and a priority.

He would have to finish his semi-apprenticeship in the library and learn all the tricks of that trade he could within the constraints of the time loop. The Academy library was an incredible resource to have, and he was sure he would have to use it extensively if he was to find answers to the questions that were plaguing him. So far his attempts to use it had not yielded much in the way of results, but that was probably a consequence of insufficient authorization and lack of research skill on his part than an actual void of information on the topics in question. He needed to know how to bypass the protections on the secure sections of the library, and how to search them efficiently once he got through, and Kirithishli and Ibery were his best shot in getting there. He would apply for the job in the library first thing tomorrow morning.

And, though it was too late for that in this particular restart, he should impress Ilsa again and choose divination as his interest this time. If Ilsa's choice was even half-way as motivated as Nora Boole was, he would have a particularly easy avenue on learning that otherwise tricky subject.

And then, as he was climbing the stairs inside his apartment building, everything went black and he woke up via Kiri jumping on him and wishing him good morning. Apparently Zach died again. Only a few days into the restart this time, too. Hopefully Zach would get the hang of whatever he was attempting very soon, because being wrenched without warning into another restart could get old really fast.

He would soon learn he should really stop tempting fate with such thoughts.

13. Any Second Now

Chapter 013 Any Second Now

Zorian's eyes abruptly shot open as a sharp pain erupted from his stomach. His whole body convulsed, buckling against the object that fell on him, and suddenly he was wide awake, not a trace of drowsiness in his mind.

"Good morning, brother!" an annoyingly cheerful voice sounded right on top of him. "Morning, morning, *MORNING!!!*"

Zorian growled as he roughly pushed Kirielle away from him. Fifth time! This was the fifth time the restart terminated after only a handful of days! How many times would Zach need to die before realizing he should back off for a while and try again later? Honestly, Zorian would have reconsidered his approach after the second attempt...

He snatched his glasses from his bed post and stomped off towards the bathroom before Kirielle could gather her wits. The short, irregular restarts were ruining every plan he cared to make, not to mention disrupting his concentration. He really couldn't do anything substantial while this was going on, other than browsing the library for helpful texts and hoping Zach would quit killing himself on a regular basis. What the hell was the boy trying to do anyway?

He shouldn't get so worked up over it, though – after all, how much longer could this possibly go on for? 10, 15 restarts?

Yeah. Yeah, that sounded about right...

- break -

"Hi, Roach!"

Zorian wordlessly gestured for Taiven to come inside before slowly closing the door and shuffling after her. He could feel her impatience at his sluggish pace, but he paid it no heed. He was deliberately stalling, trying to decide what to do.

He fully intended to have a chat with the weird telepathic spiders that inhabited the sewers, but it would be lunacy to go there at this point. There was no guarantee they would be as friendly as they were the last time, and their mind magic made them dangerous even within a time loop. He needed a way to protect his mind before venturing into Cyoria's underworld, and so far he had only found one ward that protected the caster's mind in the academy archives. Unfortunately, that particular ward blocked *everything* related to the mind, mind-based communication spells included. He needed something more selective than that.

But just because he was unwilling to descend into the Dungeon didn't mean he was content to let Taiven get herself killed by going there either. He wasn't sure why he cared, exactly – pragmatically speaking, he shouldn't be bothered, since everything would be reset in a couple of days and she'd be fine again. Still, he *was* bothered, and since he was forced to have this conversation repeatedly every few days, he could as well find a way to talk her out of going.

He didn't think for a moment it was going to be easy. Taiven was possibly even more stubborn than Zach.

"So, Taiven, how is life treating you?" he began.

"Eh, so so," she sighed. "I am trying to secure an apprenticeship but it's not going all that well. You know how it goes. I got Nirthak to take me as his class assistant this year, so there is that. You wouldn't happen to have taken non-magical combat as one of your electives?"

"Nope," Zorian answered cheerfully.

"Figures," Taiven rolled her eyes. "You really should have, you know? Girls-"

"...love boys who exercise, yes, yes," Nodded Zorian sagely. "Why are you here, Taiven? You tracked me down here even though I only moved in yesterday and never told anyone which room here is mine. I suppose you used a divination to find me?"

"Uh, yeah," Taiven confirmed. "Pretty easy thing to do, really."

"Aren't these rooms supposed to have some sort of basic warding scheme placed on them?" Zorian inquired.

"I'm pretty sure it's just rudimentary stuff like fire prevention and basic detection fields to warn the staff about fighting in the hallway and attempted demon summonings and what not," Taiven shrugged. "Anyway, I'm here to ask you to join me and a couple of others on a job tomorrow."

Zorian said nothing, patiently listening as she said her sales pitch. It was actually on Monday, not tomorrow – Taiven's definition of 'tomorrow' differed greatly from the standard definition – but other than that, she was actually fairly honest in her explanation of the situation. She even mentioned that there was a small chance they might encounter something very nasty in there, but emphasized that she and her friends were totally capable of confronting anything they may find there. Right.

"Anything?" Asked Zorian suspiciously. "You know, I happen to have read up on magical spider breeds, and they can be pretty powerful. A single

grey hunter has been known to wipe out entire hunting parties of mages, and they're no larger than a human at their biggest. Phase spiders can literally jump on you out of nowhere and drag you off into their own private pocket dimension. Some of the breeds are even sentient and have mind magic at their disposal."

The last one was a joke in more ways than one. Dungeon ecology was a giant mystery, even to mages that specialized in it, and information about monsters that made their home there was very scarce. As such, it was probably not surprising that he could find nothing on sentient telepathic spiders in the academy library, even after conscripting Ibery and Kirithishli on the effort.

Was it just him, or was the academy library a lot less useful than he had imagined it to be? Every time he tried to find something there he got disappointed. Then again, the things he was trying to find information on lately tended to be obscure, borderline illegal or both.

"Oh please," Taiven snorted dismissively. "Don't be so paranoid. As if something like that could be right below Cyoria. We won't be delving into the Dungeon's depths, for Gods' sake."

"I don't think you should go at all," Zorian insisted. "I'm getting a really bad feeling about this."

Taiven rolled her eyes, an undercurrent of annoyance in her voice. "Funny. I never took you for a superstitious guy."

"Time changes people," Zorian said solemnly, smiling at his private joke before straightening his features into a serious expression. "But seriously: I'm getting a *really* bad feeling about this. Is this really worth getting yourself killed over?"

Apparently this was a wrong approach to take, as Taiven's temper flared immediately. He supposed she perceived his comment as an insult towards her skills as a mage. Before he could apologize and rephrase his argument she was already shouting at him.

"I'm not going to die!" Taiven shouted irritably. "Gods, you sound just like my father! I'm not a little girl and I don't need to be protected! If you didn't want to come you should have just said so instead of lecturing me!" She stomped off angrily, muttering to herself about conceited brats and wasted time.

Zorian winced as Taiven slammed the door behind her. He wasn't sure why she had reacted so strongly to his words, but apparently pointing out the potential danger of the job was ineffective and only pissed her off.

Oh well, he didn't expect to succeed on the first try anyway.

- break -

"Hi Roach!"

"It is a good thing you came, Taiven," Zorian said with a grave expression. "Come in, we have much to talk about."

Taiven raised an eyebrow at his behavior before shrugging and sauntering inside. Zorian tried to project a serious, ominous presence about himself, but it seemed to amuse her more than anything.

"So... I gather you wanted to see me then?" she asked. "I guess you're lucky I decided to drop by, then?"

"Not quite," Zorian said. "I knew you would come today, just as I know you're here to conscript me into joining you for a sewer run."

"It's not a—" Taiven began, only to get interrupted by Zorian before she could gather steam.

"A sewer run," Zorian repeated. "Retrieving a pocket watch guarded by some very dangerous spiders from the top layer of the Dungeon under the city."

"Who told you that?" asked Taiven after several seconds of bewildered pause. "How could they possibly know? I told nobody where I'm going or why I'm visiting you."

"Nobody told me," Zorian said. "I had a vision about this meeting... and about what will happen should you descend into the tunnels."

Well, it *was* true in a way...

"A vision?" Taiven said incredulously, disbelievingly.

Zorian nodded gravely. "I have never told you this before, but I have prophetic powers. I receive visions of the future from time to time, seeing glimpses of important events that will affect me personally in the days ahead."

It wasn't completely implausible – people like that did exist in the world, though their powers were quite a bit more limited than what he had at his disposal thanks to the time loop. From what he understood, their visions were less of a detailed recording of the future and more of a general outline of some upcoming event. The future was always changing, always uncertain, and trying to get a clear image of it was like trying to grasp a fistful of sand – the more you squeeze, the more things slip past your fingers.

Unfortunately, while being prophetic was not impossible, Taiven clearly wasn't buying his claim.

“Oh really?” Taiven said challengingly, crossing her arms in front of her chest. “And what did this ‘vision’ of yours tell you about the job?”

“That it will be the death of you,” said Zorian bluntly. “And me as well, should I choose to follow you down there. Please, Taiven, I know it sounds ridiculous, but I’m serious about this. The visions are rarely as clear as they were this time around. I won’t go down into the sewers and you shouldn’t either.”

As seconds ticked past in silence, Zorian began to think she would actually listen to him. This impression was destroyed when she suddenly started laughing.

“Oh, Roach, you almost had me there!” she wheezed, breaking into uncontrollable chuckles after every couple of words. “Visions from the future… Roach, you have the funniest jokes. You know, I missed that quirky sense of humor of yours. Remember… remember that one time you pretended you were asking me out?”

How Zorian stopped himself from physically recoiling at that he would never know. She just had to mention that, didn’t she? He forcefully pushed away the memories of that particular evening, determined not to dwell on it.

“Yeah,” said Zorian emotionlessly. “What a funny guy I am”

Why was he trying to save her again?

“So….” she said, finally getting her giggles under control. “How *did* you know I was coming?”

- break -

“Hi R-” Taiven began, only to stop when she saw his vacant, hollow expression. “Whoa, Roach, what the hell happened to you?”

Zorian kept staring off into space for a few more moments before shaking his head, as if to clear his thoughts a little.

“Sorry,” he said in a subdued voice, motioning her to get inside. “I just had an extremely vivid nightmare tonight and I didn’t get much sleep.”

“Oh?” Taiven said, collapsing on his bed like usual. “What about?”

Zorian gave her a long look. “Actually, you were in it.”

Taiven stopped fooling around and gave him a shocked look. “Me!? Why the hell would I be in your nightmare? You’d think a beautiful girl like me would automatically make for a pleasant dream! Now I *got to* know what it was about.”

“I was walking through the sewers with you and some other two guys I never met,” began Zorian in a haunted tone, “when we were suddenly set upon by a swarm of giant spiders. There… there were so many of them… They just swarmed over us and started biting and….”

He took a couple of deep breaths, pretending to be on the verge of hyperventilating, before finally calming down.

“I’m sorry, it’s just… it was so real, you know?” he said, giving Taiven the most vacant stare he had. After a few moments he looked down on his trembling hands and balled them up into fists in a very visible motion. “The feeling of their fangs sinking into my skin, the poison coursing through my veins like liquid fire… they didn’t even kill us in the end, they just wrapped us in spider silk and dragged our paralyzed bodies off to their lairs to feed upon later. Such a horrid, vivid vision – I don’t think I’ll ever look at a spider in the same light again.”

Taiven shifted nervously where she sat, looking extremely uncomfortable and vaguely ill.

“But it was just a nightmare,” Zorian said in forced cheer. “To what do I owe this visit, anyway? Is there something you wanted to talk to me about?”

“N-No!” Taiven blurted out, a nervous laugh escaping her lips. “I just… I just stopped by to have a chat with one of my friends, that’s all! How has life been treating you anyway? Aside from the whole… nightmare… thingy….”

She found an excuse to leave in a matter of minutes. He would later find out she went into the sewers anyway and never came back.

- break -

“Spiders?” asked Zorian, doing his best to appear alarmed. “Taiven, don’t you listen to rumors from time to time?”

“Umm… I’ve been pretty busy lately,” Taiven chuckled awkwardly. “Why, what do the rumors say?”

“That there are some mind magic using spiders prowling the city sewers,” Zorian said. “Word is the city is trying to root them out, but the creatures are evading them thus far. They’ve been trying to suppress the information, since it would make them look incompetent and all that.”

“Wow, good thing I talked to you then,” Taiven said. “I never would have thought to put a mind ward on myself before going down otherwise.”

“You’re still going down there!?” Zorian asked incredulously. “What makes you think this mind ward of yours is enough?”

“Mind magic is a subtle thing,” Taiven said. “It uses tiny amounts of mana in very sophisticated ways, which makes it easy to counter with brute

force. So long as you know in advance you're going to face a mind mage, it's easy to make yourself effectively immune. Trust me, now that I know what to expect from those crawlies, I won't fall for their tricks."

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Zorian opened his mouth to protest, but then reconsidered. Was Taiven right? Maybe he was looking at things from the wrong perspective. He was trying to get Taiven to *survive*, which didn't necessarily mean stopping her from going into the sewers.

"I guess," he finally conceded. "But I won't be going with you."

"Oh, come on!" Taiven protested. "I can totally keep you safe!"

"Nope," Zorian insisted. "Not happening. Find someone else to go with you."

"How about—"

"No fighting," Zorian interrupted. "Look, there is no way to talk me into going along with this. Do tell me how the whole thing turns out afterwards, though. I don't want to have to check to see if you survived."

She actually did visit him a few days later, telling him the sewer run was a failure as far as finding the watch went, but that nothing attacked them either.

Huh. Maybe Benisek was onto something when he spoke so highly about the power of rumors and gossip.

- break -

Zorian's eyes abruptly shot open as a sharp pain erupted from his stomach. His whole body convulsed, buckling against the object that fell on him, and suddenly he was wide awake, not a trace of drowsiness in his mind.

"Good morning, brother!" an annoyingly cheerful voice sounded right on top of him.

"Good morning, Kiri!" yelled Zorian back, engulfing the shocked Kirielle into a hug. "Oh what a wonderful, wonderful day this is! Thank you for waking me up, Kiri, I really appreciate it! I don't know what I would do without my wonderful little sister."

Kiri wriggled uncomfortably in his grasp, not used to receiving such a gesture from him and unsure how to react.

"Who are you and what did you do to my brother!?" she finally demanded.

He just hugged her tighter.

- break -

"Something I can do for you, sonny?" asked Kyron. "The class has been dismissed, in case you haven't noticed."

"Yes, I've noticed," Zorian confirmed. "I just wanted your advice about something, if you can spare the time."

Kyron impatiently gestured him to get to the point.

"I was wondering if you knew any means of countering mind magic," Zorian said.

"Well, there is your basic mind shield spell," Kyron said carefully. "Most mages agree that's all you need as far as mind magic protection goes."

"Yes, but that spell is a bit... crude," Zorian said. "I'm looking for something more flexible than that."

"Crude, yes," Kyron agreed, suddenly becoming more interested in the conversation. "Often useless, too. A simple dispel is enough to strip the protection off the target, and a proper mind mage will ensnare your mind before you even realize you're being targeted."

"Then why do most mages think it suffices?" asked Zorian.

"You know why most mind magic is restricted or forbidden?" Kyron asked. It was a rhetorical question, apparently, because Kyron immediately launched into an explanation. "It's because it's most commonly used to target civilians and other mostly defenseless targets. Most mind mages are petty criminals that use their powers on the weak-willed, and cannot be called a master of anything, let alone mind magic. It's rare for mages to encounter mind mages that know how to use their powers properly. Still, even a moderately talented mind mage can easily ruin your life, to say nothing of magical creatures with mind-affecting powers on their disposal. There are methods of dealing with mind magic without resorting to warding spells, but most find it easier to practice mind shield until it's completely reflexive and they can cast it on a moment's notice. Or just carry a spell formula for the spell on their person at all times."

"And these other methods are?" Zorian prodded after he realized Kyron wouldn't say anything more.

Kyron gave him a nasty smile. "I'm glad you asked, sonny. See, not too long ago, the combat magic class had a much more demanding curriculum,

including what was called ‘resistance training’. Basically, the combat magic instructor would repeatedly cast various mind spells at students while they tried to fight off the effects. It was quite effective at making students innately resistant to common mind-affecting spells like sleep, paralyze, and dominate. Unfortunately, there were a lot of complaints from students who reacted particularly badly to it, and after a number of scandals where teachers and student assistants were discovered to have been using the training exercise as an excuse to punish students outside of proper channels, the practice was discontinued. An overreaction in my opinion, but I was overruled.”

Zorian stood in silence for a moment, trying to digest this information. Was that really the best way to deal with mind magic? He got what the idea behind it was – it worked on the same principle that shaping exercises and reflexive magic did, burning the defense procedures into his soul the same way repetitive movements burned certain reactions into muscle memory. It just sounded so... mindless. And probably very painful.

That’s when he noticed Kyron was giving him a very predatorial look.

“How about it, sonny?” Kyron asked. “You think you have what it takes to go through it? I’ve been wanting to revive the practice for some time now, to be honest. I promise I’ll go easy on you.”

He lied. The very first spell he cast on Zorian was the ‘Nightmare Vision’ spell. Whatever the spiders had to say, it better be worth it.

- break -

Zorian’s eyes abruptly shot open as a sharp pain erupted from his stomach. His whole body convulsed, buckling against the object that fell on him, and suddenly he was wide awake, not a trace of drowsiness in his mind.

“Good morning, brother!” an annoyingly cheerful voice sounded right on top of him. “Morning, morning, *MORNING!!!*”

Zorian took a deep breath and focused on the image of what he wanted to achieve until it was so real he felt he could almost touch it. Billowing streams of mana erupted from his hands, invisible to the naked eye but easily felt by his senses – a mage could always feel his own mana, especially while in the process of shaping it. In little more than a second, everything was ready and he set the effect loose on the little pest lying on top of him.

Nothing happened.

Zorian opened his eyes and let out a long frustrated hiss. This was no structured spell he had been attempting, but pure unstructured magic – specifically, he had been trying to levitate Kirielle off of him by using the basic levitation exercise. He knew such an attempt would be much harder to accomplish than levitating a simple pen over his palm, but *nothing*?

“That tickled,” Kirielle said. “Were you trying to do something?”

Zorian narrowed his eyes at her. Okay, that? That was a challenge.

- break -

“What can I do for you, mister Kazinski?” Ilsa asked. “Normally I’d assume you are here to complain about Xvim, but you haven’t even had a single session with him yet.”

Zorian smiled brightly. That was the one bright spot in this series of short restarts – they always happened before Friday, so he didn’t have to deal with Xvim while they lasted.

“Actually, I’m here to ask for advice on a personal project,” Zorian said. “Do you know a training regimen that will allow me to lift a person telekinetically without casting a structured spell?”

Ilsa blinked in surprise. “As in, using pure shaping skill? Why would you ever have a need for that?”

“I sort of ran out of shaping exercises after mastering everything in Empatin’s ‘Expanded Basics’,” said Zorian. “It seemed like an interesting project.”

“All 15 of them?” Ilsa asked incredulously.

Instead of answering, Zorian decided to demonstrate. He picked up a particularly large and heavy book from Ilsa’s table and made it spin in the air above his palm. Spinning a book like that was actually much harder than spinning a pen, because a book was a lot heavier than a pen and had a tendency to snap open unless a mage used magic to force the covers shut while it was being levitated. That particular trick was something he was taught by Ibery, of all people – she claimed that being able to keep a book shut while levitating it was a must-have for some of the spells she intended to teach him. Unfortunately, it took a couple of weeks for Ibery to warm up to him and decide to teach him seriously, and he didn’t have that in these short restarts.

He made the book glow ominous red after a while. Using pure shaping skills to spin a book in the air while keeping it shut and making it glow with colored light was a pretty impressive showing from a third year, and should be ample evidence of his skills.

Ilsa took a deep breath and leaned back in her chair, obviously impressed.

“Well...” she said. “Your shaping skills certainly aren’t lacking. Still, hovering a person without a spell is... not really something there is a manual on. Nobody does it, as far as I know. If they have a need for on-the-spot levitation, they just carry an appropriate focus on their person at all

times. Rings, usually, since they're small and unobtrusive. I really would recommend you focus on something else if you want to hone your shaping skills further. The number of shaping exercises in existence is virtually endless, and the academy library has quite a collection of them. Stone crumbling and north finding exercises are extremely useful, for instance, but they're typically not taught to most students due to time constraints."

"Stone crumbling and north finding?" asked Zorian.

"Stone crumbling consists of placing a pebble on your palm and then causing it to disintegrate into dust. That's a flawless result, however, and most people are satisfied if they can get it to fall apart into sand-like grains. It's a useful exercise for those who plan to heavily focus on alteration spells, since the first step when restructuring matter is nearly always to break apart the existing state. North finding is an exercise for diviners, involving the use of a dummy compass to locate magnetic north. Those of sufficient skill don't even need the compass – they simply *feel* where the north is at all times."

"Those do sound useful," agreed Zorian. "I'll definitely try to learn those. Still, are you sure you can't help me with my people levitating problem?"

Ilsa gave him an annoyed look. "You're still not ready to give up on that? Why are so many talented students so intent on wasting their time on useless pranks?"

Zorian was about to object but then realized she was right. He was essentially trying to prank Kirielle. Ilsa reached out and snatched the book out of the air, causing Zorian to blink in surprise. He was still levitating it? After a second of introspection he realized that yes, he kept the book in the air throughout the entire exchange. He stopped spinning it and it no longer glowed, but apparently levitating an object over his palm was so easy for him now that he barely even registered doing it. Huh.

His pondering was cut off when Ilsa threw the book on the table where it hit the wood with a deafening boom. She smirked at his surprise and gestured him to pay attention.

"Like I said, there is no manual for this," she said. "And I never tried something so foolish, either. So keep in mind that this is all pure speculation on my part, alright?"

Zorian nodded eagerly.

"The first thing I would do if I were in your place would be to stop relying on hands to levitate things," Ilsa said. "Focusing the magic through your hands makes the process way easier, yes, but only for a certain category of tasks. In a very real way, levitating an object over your palm isn't 'true' non-structured magic – the palm provides a reference point for the effect, which both guides it and limits it. If you mastered everything in Empatin's book, you are familiar with fixed position levitation?"

Zorian took a pen from a box full of them next to him and made it float above his palm. After a second, he moved his hand left and right, but the pen remained hovering in the exact same spot in the air he left it in, stubbornly refusing to follow the movements of his hand.

"A flawless demonstration," Ilsa praised. "But let me ask you this: does it not appear to you that fixed position levitation achieves its goal in a kind of convoluted, roundabout way? Why do you need an advanced shaping exercise to achieve something a simple levitate object spell can do as a matter of routine?"

Before he could answer, Ilsa reached out and twisted his palm sideways. The pen instantly fell to the table.

"Because using your hand as a reference point limits what you can do with the mana you're shaping," Ilsa said, leaning back. "Even though the pen appeared independent of your hand, it was only an illusion. A pretty baffling one too. Why would you bother? You basically put a limiter on the mana flow – making it dependent on the position of your palm – and then tried to subvert that very same limiter to decouple it from your palm."

The book Ilsa threw on the table to catch his attention suddenly rose into the air. Ilsa didn't make a single movement, but he knew she was responsible.

Not the least because she was grinning at him.

"Look," she said. "No hands. Of course, this is just about the limit of what I can do without using any sort of gesture to help me out with the shaping. It is a hard skill to learn, but you probably won't need it in its pure form simply for the sake of this 'project' of yours. You just need to reduce the degree to which your shaping depends on your hands and make it more flexible. Twisting your hand sideways shouldn't have caused the pen to plummet down like a rock."

"You just surprised me," Zorian huffed indignantly. "I don't usually lose control of my mana that easily."

"I stand by my words," Ilsa said with good-natured smile. "You are very impressive for a student, or even a regular mage, but you have a long way to go if you want to join the ranks of the truly great. But anyway, if and when you get some progress on that, you should try levitating some living being smaller than a human. *Much* smaller. Try insects for a start, then progress on mice and so on. All in all, it should only take you.. oh, about 4 years or so."

If she thought he would be discouraged by that, she was sorely mistaken. Not only did he have his doubts about the accuracy of her predicted timetable, he really didn't have anything better to do at the moment.

"I guess I better get started then," was all he said.

- break -

Zorian's eyes abruptly shot open as a sharp pain erupted from his stomach. His whole body convulsed, buckling against the object that fell on him, and suddenly he was wide awake, not a trace of drowsiness in his mind.

"Good morning, brother!" an annoyingly cheerful voice sounded right on top of him. "Morning, morning, *MORNING!!!*"

Zorian stared blankly at the ceiling above him, at a loss for words. That prediction he had made? He lost track of how many restarts had passed in the meantime, but the number was way bigger than 15. And nothing had changed since then – rare was a restart that lasted more than 3 days, and none of them went on for more than 5. Whatever Zach was doing, it was lethally hard and Zach was too much of a stubborn ass to give up any time soon.

"Zorian? Are you alright? Come on, I didn't hit you that hard. Up, up."

Zorian ignored Kirielle who was currently pinching his side with ever increasing vigor, staring at the ceiling while suppressing so much as a twitch. The pain was negligible compared to a couple of particularly nasty pain spells Kyron used on him during one of their 'resistance training' sessions. Thankfully, Kyron never used any of them more than once per restart. Kirielle slapped him a few times and then pretended she was going to punch him in the face. When he didn't react to that, her fist stopped just before it would impact with his face.

"Umm... Zorian?" Kirielle said, actually sounding somewhat concerned. "Seriously, are you okay?"

Slowly, mechanically, Zorian turned his head to meet Kirielle's eyes, keeping his expression as blank as possible. After a few seconds of silent staring he slowly opened his mouth... and screamed at her. She recoiled at the sudden outburst and let out a girlish scream of her own as her retreat caused her to tumble off the bed.

He watched for a few moments as Kirielle began to turn red from rage, and then he could no longer restrain himself. He started laughing.

He kept laughing even as Kirielle's little fists started to rain down blows on him.

- break -

Zorian's eyes abruptly shot open as a sharp pain erupted from his stomach. His whole body convulsed, buckling against the object that fell on him, and suddenly he was wide awake, not a trace of drowsiness in his mind.

"Good m—"

With an inarticulate yell, Zorian flipped Kirielle on her back and mercilessly started tickling her. Her shrieks reverberated through the entire house until mother came up to his room and made him stop.

- break -

"Good morning, brother! Morning, morning, *MORNING!!!*"

A short silence ensued, broken only by the rustling of Zorian's blankets as Kirielle shifted impatiently on top of them.

"Kiri," he finally said. "I think I'm starting to hate you."

He was exaggerating, of course, but gods was this becoming annoying as hell. Amusingly, Kirielle actually appeared concerned by his proclamation.

"I'm sorry!" she said, hurriedly wriggling herself off the bed. "I was just—"

"Woah, woah, woah," interrupted Zorian, fixing Kirielle with a mock glare. "My little sister apologizing? That doesn't happen. Who are you and what did you do to Kirielle?"

Kirielle's appeared dumbfounded for a moment, but her expression quickly grew stormy as she realized what he was implying.

"Jerk!" She huffed, childishly stomping her foot for emphasis. "I do too apologize! When I'm wrong!"

"When you're backed into a corner," corrected Zorian. "You must want some pretty big favor out of me if you're this desperate to remain in my good graces. What's the story?"

He really did want to know, too. She gave no indication she wanted something from him all those times he had been through this, yet it must be pretty important to her if she was willing to apologize to get it. That didn't make much sense – Kirielle wasn't really a shy girl, and had no problems with making her wishes known in the past. For a moment he was tempted to conclude he misinterpreted the situation but then Kirielle looked away and started mumbling something intelligibly.

"What was that?" he prodded.

"Mother wants to talk to you," Kirielle said, still avoiding his eyes.

“Yeah, well, mother can wait,” said Zorian. “I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what you want from me.”

She pouted at him for a moment before taking a big breath in preparation.

“Please take me with you to Cyoria!” She said, folding her hands in front of her in a pleading gesture. “I’ve always wanted to go there and I don’t want to go to Koth with mother and...”

Zorian tuned her out, shocked at the revelation. How could he have been so *blind*? He *knew* there was something strange about the ease with which he could convince mother not to make him take Kirielle with him, but he didn’t want to question a favorable outcome and so ignored it. Of course it was easy... she didn’t want him to take her either! It was Kirielle who wanted to go. Mother was just making a token attempt so she could tell Kirielle she tried and failed. No wonder Kirielle always seemed so sullen on the way to the train station.

“Zorian? Please?”

He shook his head to clear his thoughts and smiled at Kirielle, who was looking at him with bated breath and hope in her eyes. Now how could he say no to that? That it would ruin mother’s schemes was simply a bonus.

“Of course I’ll take you with me,” he said.

“Really!?”

“So long as you behave y-“

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” Kirielle yelled happily, jumping around in excitement. He could never understand this boundless energy she had. He was never that exuberant, even as a child. “I knew you’d say yes! Mother said you’d refuse for sure.”

Zorian looked away in embarrassment.

“Right,” he said lamely. “Shows what she knows. Shall I assume then that you already have mother’s permission for this plan?”

“Yeah,” Kirielle confirmed. “She said she was fine with it so long as you agree.”

Oh that diabolical woman... saying no but making him take the blame for it. Looking back at it, the plan was almost magnificent in execution – she even gave him a lecture on proper attire and family honor to put him into a foul mood before springing the question.

With a sigh he put on his glasses and got out of bed. “I’m going to the bathroom.”

A second later his brain caught up with what he said and he froze. Looking back at Kirielle, he was surprised to see she wasn’t trying to race him to his destination and was instead looking at him in confusion.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing.” Zorian said, before walking out of the room. He supposed the only reason she did that in your average restart was to make him confront mother as soon as possible. A poor move, since it only made him more annoyed at her, but she was only a kid and probably didn’t think things through all that well.

It was going to be an interesting restart.

14. The Sister Effect

Chapter 014 The Sister Effect

After telling Kirielle to pack her things for the trip (a task she immediately set off to accomplish), he filled his room with multicolored orbs of light and went down to the kitchen to face mother. The lightshow was something he did in every restart, since he wasn't sure Ilsa would agree to arrange additional tutoring for him unless she stumbled on it. Not that it did him much good, since these short loops he was stuck in ceased too soon for him to gain anything from it, but he kept doing it regardless. Just in case. Who knew, maybe this particular restart would be the one where Zach stopped dying so soon.

Mother studied him like a hawk as he descended down the stairs, looking for any flaw in his appearance she could criticize. He knew from experience that she would find *something* to complain about, but he didn't really care. He was dressed well enough to avoid a protracted lecture about family honor, and that was all that mattered. For a while he had tried to use his time loop given foreknowledge to appear 'perfect', but that hadn't worked on her. Talk about high standards. Maybe she really *was* deliberately trying to annoy him to make sure he'd refuse to take Kirielle with him?

Sitting at the table, he pushed the cold porridge to the side and started eating apples instead, ignoring mother's annoyance at spurning her food. After she had realized he wasn't going to say anything she released a dramatic sigh and launched into one of her long-winded monologues, dancing around the real issue she wanted to talk to him about – the possibility of him taking Kirielle with him to Cyoria.

"Now that I think about it," mother said, finally deciding to get to the point, "I never told you I'm going to Koth with your father to visit Daimen, did I?"

"You want me to take Kiri with me to Cyoria," Zorian 'guessed'.

"I... what?" she blinked, surprised for a second. Then she shook her head slightly and sighed. "She told you," she concluded.

"Yup," Zorian confirmed.

"So much for picking the right moment like we agreed upon," mother said. "I guess I should go and comfort her."

"Why would she need comforting?" Zorian asked. "I said yes. She was ecstatic. She's in her room right now, packing her things."

She looked at him like he had suddenly started reciting classical poetry. Zorian didn't know whether to feel guilty or annoyed. Was it really *that* weird for him to agree to this? Before he had enrolled into the academy he had spent more time with the little imp than anyone else in the family, mother included. He was more of a parent to Kirielle than she and father ever were! Really, if Kirielle had just told him she wanted to go herself instead of having mother speak for her, he probably would have agreed to it after some arguing, even before the time loop.

Annoyed. He was definitely feeling annoyed with her. He leveled a challenging glare at mother, daring her to say something.

"What?" he snapped after a few seconds of mutual staring.

"Nothing," she said, schooling her expression into something unreadable. "I'm just surprised, that's all. I'm glad you're finally starting to think about someone other than yourself. Have you thought about housing?"

"I have," confirmed Zorian. "It depends on whether I'll have to pay for the arrangements from my own pocket or if you'll give me extra money for rent."

"Now you're just being insulting," his mother snapped. "Of course we'll give you rent money. When did we ever make you pay for essential living expenses by yourself? How much do you need?"

As if her own remark about him finally thinking about someone other than himself wasn't just as insulting. He was just responding in kind. But yes, Zorian grudgingly admitted she was right – his parents had many flaws, but they would never let him go hungry or homeless unless they were completely bankrupt themselves. He was the disfavored son, but a son nonetheless. They spent the next several minutes discussing living expenses in Cyoria, arguing back and forth about how much money he would need to rent some place and feed Kirielle. He, of course, favored larger sums, and he knew enough about Cyoria's economy to give weight to his arguments. Mother made no secret about her surprise at his knowledge of rent prices in various districts of Cyoria – apparently she was under the impression such 'down to earth' knowledge didn't interest him. Zorian decided not to explain he was keeping track of rent prices so he could move away from home at a moment's notice, instead trying to change the subject. He was not very effective in that regard – mother was stubbornly fixated on that little factoid – but Ilsa's arrival saved him from her interrogation. Mother quickly excused herself, saying she was going to help Kirielle pack, but Zorian still led Ilsa back to his room when she asked him where they could have some privacy. He had to show her all those lights he 'accidentally' forgot to dispel, after all.

At first the talk proceeded in a fairly standard fashion, but the usual routine he was used to was quickly shattered when they reached the topic of habitation.

"According to this," began Ilsa, momentarily shaking a piece of paper she was holding, "you lived in academy housing for the past two years. I assume you intend to do the same this year, too?"

"Err, actually, no," answered Zorian. "I'm taking my younger sister with me this year, so I can't do that. Unless the academy makes allowances for such things?"

"It doesn't," Ilsa said.

"I figured," Zorian said, not really surprised by that. "We'll just stay in a hotel for a few days until I find a place to rent."

Ilsa gave him a strange look that Zorian had trouble deciphering.

"You don't have a place reserved already?" she asked.

"No," Zorian said. "The decision was a bit abrupt so I didn't have any time to make proper preparations. Why?"

"I may have a solution for you in regards to that," Ilsa said, straightening her posture into a slightly more serious stance.

"You mean you know a place I could rent?" Zorian asked. Ilsa nodded. "That's... fortunate, I guess. What do you have in mind?"

"First of all, I want to emphasize that what I'm about to offer you has nothing to do with the Cyoria Royal Academy of Magical Arts," Ilsa cautioned. "This is something strictly between the two of us, understand?"

"Okay," said Zorian cautiously. He was getting slightly concerned now, but he sensed no deception or ill intent from Ilsa. He waited to hear what she was offering.

"A friend of mine is renting rooms at very reasonable rates..." Ilsa began.

After several minutes of questioning and reading between the lines, Zorian decided he would give Ilsa's friend a chance. Her 'reasonable rates' were a tad expensive, but it was manageable. Ilsa also suggested her friend loved children and would be all too happy to take care of Kirielle while he was at class, which would be worth every piece he paid for the place if actually true.

After that, the topic shifted to his choice of mentor (or rather, the fact that he wasn't allowed to choose one), and his choice of electives. Since he had pretty much tried out every elective he was even remotely interested in by now, his choices were pretty constant at this point: botany, astronomy, and human anatomy. He chose them solely because he knew for a fact that teachers of those particular subjects didn't care in the slightest if he chose not to come to class, and because Akoja didn't choose any of them as *her* electives (and thus wasn't aware he was skipping them).

The moment Ilsa went back to the academy, Kirielle came barreling down the stairs like a herd of elephants, ignoring mother's admonishments about running inside the house. No doubt she had finished packing a while ago and had been simply waiting for Ilsa to leave so she could come out.

"I'm ready!" she grinned happily.

"So you have everything packed?" asked Zorian.

"Yup!" she nodded.

"What about my books?" asked Zorian.

"Why would I pack your books?" she scowled. "You can do that yourself, lazy ass!"

"Well, you did take them from my room and hide them under your bed," Zorian remarked.

"Oh!" Her eyes widened in understanding. "Those books! Umm... I guess I kind of forgot to give those back to you. I'll put them back in your room, okay?"

"What are you two talking about?" mother asked as she approached.

"Nothing!" Kirielle said in a slightly panicky voice, whirring quickly to face mother. "I just forgot something, that's all! I'll be right back!"

She quickly bolted up the stairs, ignoring mother's repeated admonishment about not running in the house. Zorian looked at her retreating form with narrowed eyes. Why was Kirielle so frightened about mother finding out she had been taking books out of his room? It was hardly the first time she helped herself to his things, and mother never cared before. There was something of significance hidden in that seemingly innocuous reaction, he just knew it.

He was starting to think he didn't know Kirielle half as well as he thought he did.

- break -

"I'm bored."

Zorian opened his eyes and glared at his little sister. He couldn't close his eyes for more than a minute without her saying something or

‘accidentally’ kicking him in the knees with her pointy little shoes. And he had thought the station announcer was annoying.

“I can tell,” he said, rolling his eyes. “What do you want *me* to do about it?”

“Play a game with me?” she said hopefully.

“Haven’t we done enough of that already?” he sighed. “There are only so many times I can beat you at hangman before it gets boring.”

“You were cheating!” she protested. “‘Asphyxiation’ isn’t even a real word!”

“What!? Of course it is!” he shot back. “You’re just-“

“Liar!” she interrupted.

“Whatever,” Zorian scoffed. “It’s not like that was the only game where I won.”

“So you admit you cheated in that one!” she concluded triumphantly.

Zorian opened his mouth to retort before he closed it again.

“Why am I arguing about this?” he asked out loud, though it was directed more towards himself than Kiri.

A sharp crackling sound that always heralded the voice of the station announcer stopped any further argument they may have had.

“Now stopping in Korsa,” a disembodied voice echoed. A crackling sound again. “I repeat, now stopping in Korsa. Thank you.”

“Oh thank the gods,” Zorian mumbled. Not only did arriving in Korsa mean three quarters of the journey was over, it also meant someone was going to join them in their compartment, thus giving Kirielle someone else to annoy.

Someone other than Ibery, though – he purposely avoided his usual compartment to ensure she and Kiri would never meet, since he had a suspicion a conversation between them wouldn’t end well. Kiri didn’t like Fortov any more than Zorian did, and she was a lot less tactful about it.

“So many people,” Kiri remarked, watching the throng at the train station through the window. “Are those all students like you?”

A case of theft: this story is not rightfully on Amazon; if you spot it, report the violation.

“Most of them, yeah,” Zorian said. “Though not all of them go to the same school as I do. There is more than one academy in Cyoria.”

“I thought mages were rarer than this,” she said. “Mom says you need to be really smart to be one. Do you think I could be a mage too one day?”

“Sure,” he shrugged.

“Really?” she asked, a mixture of excitement and suspicion radiating from her voice and posture. Zorian supposed she half-expected him to use his agreement as a set up for a mean-spirited joke or something along those lines.

“Yes,” he confirmed. “I don’t see why you couldn’t. You seem to be doing well enough in school from what I heard, so I don’t see why your intelligence would be a problem. And it’s not like our parents can’t afford to send you somewhere, even if it isn’t Cyoria.”

Kirielle didn’t answer, choosing instead to look through the window in silence and pointedly refusing to look him in the eye. He was just about to ask her what’s wrong when the door to the compartment slid open, distracting him.

“Byrn Ivarin,” the boy introduced himself. “Can I sit here?”

Zorian waved him in without a word. This was the guy who inspired him to seek employment in the library the last time they had spoken with each other. The boy had been quite talkative back then, so he should be perfect! Even if he was disinclined to talk to someone so young, he doubted Kirielle would let him ignore her, and he seemed too polite to just plain snub her to her face. Hopefully he would keep Kirielle busy till the rest of the journey.

“I’m Kirielle Kazinski,” his sister promptly introduced herself, “and that’s my brother Zorian. Are you a student like Zorian? Can you do magic?”

“Err, well... yes,” Byrn said, torn between desire to ask about the surname and a desire to be polite and answer Kirielle’s question. Politeness won in the end. “I’m only a first year, though, so it’s not like I have anything to brag with.”

Sadly for Byrn, he would have to wait for a while before he could ask about the surname – Kirielle was on a roll, and promptly assaulted the poor kid with every question imaginable. Zorian soon found out that Byrn was an only child of two first generation mages from Korsa, and that his family had pretty high expectations of him. Byrn was as excited to be away from his overbearing parents as he was about learning magic. That, at least, was something Zorian could empathize with.

“3 older brothers, huh?” Byrn laughed. “Poor you. Though... I kind of wish I had a few older brothers myself. My parents could have someone else to focus on every once in a while.”

"I know what you mean," Kirielle said. "Ever since Zorian started going to the academy, mother has no one but me to pay attention to. It sucks."

Zorian flinched in sympathy. He hadn't thought of that, but it shed a great deal of light on Kirielle's behavior for the past two years. Without Zorian there to act like a figurative lightning rod for mother's criticism, Kirielle's time at home probably took a sharp turn for the worse in his absence. A part of him was pleased that the little imp was forced to experience some of what he went through in his daily interactions with their family, but he mostly thought she didn't deserve something like that.

"So, I've been meaning to ask," said Byrn. "Your last name is pretty distinctive. Not that many Kazinskis walking around. Are you related to Daimen Kazinski by any chance?"

"He's our brother," Kirielle said.

"Really?" asked Byrn excitedly. "You know, I haven't heard anything about him in a while. What is he up to currently?"

"He's in Koth," Kirielle said. "I think he found something in the jungle but... I don't know. I don't really talk to him all that often. He's always traveling. You're more likely to find out about him in the newspapers than by talking to me. Zorian knows him better than I do."

Zorian shot Kirielle a quick glare for putting him on the spot like that, and on the topic of Daimen no less! The little imp just stuck her tongue at him. Hmph.

"Daimen and I don't get along," Zorian said bluntly. "There is not much I can tell you about him that Kiri hasn't already."

"Oh," Byrn said, obviously disappointed. He let out a slightly strained laugh, trying to dispel the somewhat awkward atmosphere that descended on the compartment. "And here I thought I would get some inside stories about one of my heroes. Though I suppose in a way I did, didn't I? It's a bit sad that he doesn't have time for his family."

"Hmm," hummed Zorian noncommittally.

The rest of the journey was uneventful, except that Byrn decided to tag along with them for a while after they disembarked. Both Byrn and Kirielle were awed (and more than a little intimidated) by the sheer size and activity of Cyoria's train station, and Zorian decided to be nice and give them a brief tour around the place. The tour turned out to be not as brief as he had intended, however, because Kirielle insisted on browsing the stores. He tried to tell her that every shop in and around the train station sold massively overpriced merchandise (because they could, thanks to their favorable location) and that he wouldn't be buying her anything, but that didn't deter her in the slightest. She was 'just looking'. Byrn, for some unfathomable reason, sided with Kiri. He liked browsing stores too, apparently. Madness.

Since they had wasted so much time, however, the rain had already started falling by the time they were ready to depart. Byrn had no umbrella, of course, and even if he had, the amount of luggage he carried would make a trek through the rain a problematic endeavor. Zorian reluctantly offered to help – the boy looked so miserable at this sudden turn of events that Zorian didn't have the heart to just walk away.

Besides, Kirielle wouldn't let him do that, and he didn't want to make a scene by dragging her away so they could be on their way.

"I really appreciate this, you know?" Byrn said, curiously brushing his fingers against the dome of the rain barrier spell surrounding them. "I don't know what I would have done if it weren't for you. It doesn't seem like the rain is going to stop any time soon."

"For the last time, it's alright," Zorian sighed. "Really, I live to help."

Byrn 'covertly' mouthed 'thank you' to Kirielle, who was unabashedly playing with the rain barrier by sticking her arms and legs outside the protective dome and then drawing them back in, causing her to give him a thumbs up. Apparently the boy knew whom to thank for his good fortune. Hmph. If he ran out of mana halfway to their new home after getting Byrn to the academy, it would be on her head. Rain barrier was quite draining, and he had to enlarge it so it would cover all three of them plus the floating disk that carried their combined luggage.

"This spell is awesome," Kirielle declared. "How hard is it? Do you think you could teach me how to cast this one? I won't tell anyone!"

"Oh please," Zorian snorted. "You can't even *feel* your mana, much less shape it. It's not a question of legality, it's a question of skill. It would take months if you're some kind of genius, a year or two otherwise. Just wait until you enroll into a magic school yourself, okay?"

Kirielle immediately deflated.

In the end they managed to deposit Byrn to the safety of the academy's own rain wards without issues before going their own way. In fact, they nearly made it to their destination before Zorian ran out of mana, causing the rain barrier to wink out of existence.

Emphasis on 'nearly'. He hoped Ilsa's friend wasn't sensitive about people bringing water into the house.

- break -

"You should have waited! Honestly, what possessed you to walk around in this horrid weather? Kids these days think they're invincible..."

Zorian rolled his eyes at his host's scolding, not hiding his reaction in the slightest since she was busy rummaging through a set of drawers and wasn't really facing him. The rain would have continued throughout the entire night – though he couldn't exactly tell her how he knew that – so waiting it out hadn't been an option. Besides, they would have made it just fine if Kirielle hadn't been so stubborn about getting Byrn to the

academy grounds first. And also, it's not like their brief run through the rain was all that traumatic. So really, why was she getting so worked up about it?

His thoughts were interrupted by a towel hitting him in the face.

"There. You can use that to dry your hair," she said. "I'll go see if your sister needs any help. You just hope she doesn't get sick from this or you'll be hearing from me about this, you hear?"

"She's not a sugar cube," Zorian mumbled. "She's not going to fall apart just because she got a little wet."

Either that was spoken too softly for her to hear or she decided to ignore him, but either way she just walked past him and left the room. Unconcerned, Zorian sat down on a nearby chair, studying the place they were in.

Their landlord, one Imaya Kuroshka, was a lively middle-aged woman that quickly ushered them in when she found them, soaking-wet, on her doorstep. She hadn't even asked for their identities before she had done that – it took an introduction by Zorian until she realized they actually had a reason beyond getting out of the rain when they knocked on her door. Zorian was tempted to deliver his own scolding to the woman about naiveté and letting strangers into the house, but unlike *some* people, *he* chose not to be difficult. She seemed nice enough, all things considered. At the very least she didn't appear to be one of those landlords that tried to bleed their tenants of everything they could part with, though it was hard to be sure this soon.

The part that irked him a little was that Imaya seemed to consider them living at her place a done deal already. He only agreed to check the place out, nothing more!

Once Imaya returned with Kirielle (who had changed her clothes and mostly dried her hair at this point, and seemed completely unaffected by the fact she had been running through the pouring rain less than an hour ago) they started talking. Zorian had to steer the conversation back to the topic of their stay every once in a while, since both Imaya and Kirielle were content to let the conversation wander around if he let them. He also had to kick Kirielle a few times under the table to get her to shut up – Ilsa had told him never to broach the topic of marriage and husbands in front of Imaya for... some unspecified reason. Zorian liked it when people respected his privacy, so he was content to do the same of Imaya, and had warned Kirielle to abide by the rule as well. Something she evidently had problems with, due to her tendency to babble.

Their arrangement was not exactly to his liking, in all honesty. Imaya's house clearly hadn't been designed for rent – it was a normal, if large, family home that had a bunch of empty sleeping rooms on the second floor. Zorian and Kirielle would be getting one of them, and they would be sharing the rest of the house facilities with Imaya and 2 other tenants that were scheduled to arrive in the next few days. That was a lot less privacy than he was comfortable with. Not to mention that their room only had one bed, meaning he would have to sleep together with Kirielle. Zorian had actually spent a few nights with Kirielle when she had been younger, and knew for a fact that Kirielle was a restless sleeper and a cover hog, so he had big issues with that. Thankfully, they were the only tenants at the moment, so Imaya allowed him to claim an additional room for himself at no extra charge, with the stipulation that he move back in with Kirielle when she found a proper tenant for it.

Zorian decided to quietly look into other places to rent tomorrow. Just in case.

- break -

Despite his novel living arrangements and Kirielle's presence, the next few days were fairly standard. He applied for the job at the library. He went to talk to Ilsa about advanced instruction and chose divination as a discipline he was interested in. He practiced various shaping exercises whenever he had some free time, concentrating mostly on the north finding one since that exercise was supposed to help with divinations. Taiven tracked him down, despite his change of residence, and Zorian notified her about the 'rumors' about mind magic using giant spiders running around the sewers to make sure she'd survive the encounter. Despite his misgivings, he decided not to leave Imaya's place, since Imaya did a masterful job of keeping Kirielle happy and off his back. For her part, Kirielle was remarkably well behaved. She spent a lot of her time drawing things. He didn't even know she liked to draw. She never did it at home as far as he knew. Maybe the trip had inspired her to take up a hobby?

In any case, once those first couple of days had passed, everything just... went off the rails. For one thing, the restart hadn't ended at that point and instead just kept going, which was noteworthy by itself. More importantly, however, he was once again asked by Ilsa to greet Kael and his daughter at Cyoria's main train station... only to find out that Kael had also rented a room at Imaya's place. For pretty much the same reason that he had, too – Ilsa had recommended the place.

So now he was living in the same house with his little sister, a teenage morlock and his daughter, and a landlord that didn't really act like a landlord. He was finally going to meet his divination instructor, Xvim would be throwing marbles at him again come next Friday, Ilsa apparently visited her friend's house on a regular basis, and Imaya invited Taiven to eat with them next Sunday while she was trying to talk Zorian into following her into the sewers. Clearly this was not going to be your average restart.

"I still feel like I'm taking advantage of you," Kael said, pouring a fist-full of blue powder into a transparent glass container.

"And I still can't imagine why," Zorian said, not taking his eyes off the tiny blue mushrooms he was currently grinding into more powder. "I stock your lab with ingredients, and you let me be your assistant while you do your work. You get to save a little money on reagents and I get some practical alchemical experience. What on earth is predatorial about that? Here."

He thrust the powdered mushrooms to the white-haired boy, who sighed in defeat and went back to work. Zorian took the time to look around the workshop without being too blatant about it.

Kael's workshop was pretty amazing considering it was really just a basement that Imaya donated to the boy so he could convert it to his purposes. Setting it up was the first thing Kael did after moving into the place, with Imaya being surprisingly unconcerned about a mere academy student working with dangerous magical concoctions right under her home. 'Ilsa assured me Kael knows what he's doing,' she said. Well, he probably did, but still. As for equipment, it was loaned to Kael by the academy authorities. According to Kael, it was rather outdated, but the morlock couldn't afford to be picky and was lucky to get anything at all.

"I just don't think the price of restocking my workshop is worth whatever experience you're going to get," Kael said, pouring boiling water into the powder-filled container and adding some weird little black balls that Zorian didn't recognize. "In fact, considering how good you are at this I should probably be paying *you* for the help."

"Don't worry about it," Zorian repeated, hoping this time it would stick. He couldn't exactly tell the boy that his savings account would spontaneously refill when the loop restarted, so it was hard to explain why money wasn't too important for him.

Overall, his interaction with Kael was a lot friendlier this time around. Grudgingly, he had to admit Kirielle had a lot to do with it – she hit it off with Kana pretty quickly, despite the other girl being practically a baby, which seemed to put Kael at ease with both of them. After that, the two of them discovered they got along pretty well and Zorian decided to help the morlock with his alchemy and learn something at the same time. Which led to their current situation.

"This whole situation is terribly strange," Kael said after a minute of silence. "Not in a bad way, though. Kana is the happiest I have seen her in a while. I really am grateful to your sister for everything she has done for her, by the way."

"To be honest, I'm not sure how long it's going to last," Zorian admitted. "For now she finds Kana cute, and probably finds it pleasing to have someone pay attention to her with such rapt attention. She tends to get bored really quickly, though. And in any case, she's only in Cyoria temporarily while my family is off visiting my brother in Koth."

"Well that's too bad," Kael sighed. Then he smirked at Zorian. "Though I supposed you'll be relieved when she finally leaves."

"Well, who knows," Zorian said. "We'll see how things go. She's not so bad right now, so maybe she won't be a total pest like she usually is. I'm hoping some of your daughter's attitude will rub off on her in time."

"Oh, that would be such a pity," Kael said. "It would be a shame for such a lively girl to lose her spark of life. I myself wish Kana had some of that boundless enthusiasm"

"Shall we trade, then?" offered Zorian.

"No," Kael snorted. "Fetch me the water celery and be quiet for a while. I need to concentrate on this part."

And so Zorian stood in silence and watched Kael work, and thought about what the rest of the month would bring.

15. Busy Friday

Chapter 015

Busy Friday

Zorian felt the mana-charged marble approaching him, but didn't move. He couldn't tell whether it was aimed to the left or to the right, but he knew it wasn't aimed at his forehead. He could always tell when it was. Always. He wasn't sure how he could tell that with absolute certainty when he could not actually pinpoint where the marble was going, but he was grateful for it. He just wished he could replicate that success to the exercise in general.

The marble whizzed past him and he struggled to identify on which side it passed him by.

"Left," he tried.

"Wrong," Xvim said in a disinterested tone. "Again."

Another marble was thrown towards him. This one wasn't aimed at his forehead either. Not that surprising, really – Xvim stopped doing that when he realized Zorian could identify those with perfect accuracy. It wouldn't do to give Zorian free points, after all.

"Right," he said.

"Wrong," Xvim immediately responded. "Again."

Zorian frowned behind the blindfold. Did it just seem that way or was he actually getting *worse* at this as time went by? Something was very wrong here. At the beginning of the session he was getting more than half of them correctly, but now he was constantly getting it wrong. He'd have thought he'd guess correctly every once in a while, through statistical inevitability if nothing else. There were only two possibilities!

That's why, when Xvim threw the next marble, Zorian quickly wrenched the blindfold off to see what the deal was.

The marble flew straight over his head.

That son of a bitch!

"I didn't say you could take the blindfold off," Xvim calmly said, as if Zorian didn't just catch him red-handed.

"That's cheating!" Zorian protested, completely ignoring Xvim's remark. "Of course I couldn't guess correctly if you're not even going to abide by your own rules!"

"You're not supposed to guess, mister Kazinski," Xvim said unapologetically. "You're supposed to *sense*."

"I *was* sensing," Zorian ground out.

"If you were, you would have realized what was happening far sooner, and you would not have needed to take off the blindfold to identify the problem," Xvim said. "Now stop wasting your time and put the blindfold back on so we can continue."

Zorian cursed Xvim mentally but did as he was told. As much as he hated to admit it, Zorian had to admit there was a lot of truth in Xvim's words. He had been mostly guessing over which shoulder the marbles were going, relying on gut instinct instead of a clear perception of its location. But it was hardly his fault he couldn't reliably track a fast-moving object through its faint mana emissions – according to books, that was a highly advanced skill that took years to master! Honestly, asking a student to master this sort of thing in their third year was completely unreasonable. But completely in character for Xvim, he supposed. At least he no longer had to worry about being hit in the head anymore.

The rest of the session was typical, which is to say repetitive and boring. Then again, what part of school wasn't boring at this point? He had been stuck in the time loop for little over a year now, and feigning attention during classes was starting to get hard. He was tempted to take a page out of Zach's book and go wander somewhere else for a few restarts, but he couldn't. For one thing, it would be irresponsible to waste time like that when he could be working on skills he needed to get to the bottom of this. For another, he didn't want to attract attention to himself. The memory of their interaction was probably still fresh in Zach's mind, and there was a possible third party to consider. Completely blowing off classes would be completely out of character for him, and would raise a lot of eyebrows. He was already playing it close by taking Kirielle with him and skipping almost a quarter of his classes to do his own thing, but those changes were at least easily explainable. If his current course of action didn't produce results, he'd have to drop the masquerade to preserve his sanity, but that wasn't an immediate concern. He had more pressing problems to worry about, so he put off that issue for later, when and if it became relevant.

His session with Xvim done, he went to the library to report to Kirithishli. Normally he didn't go to work on Fridays, since dealing with Xvim tended to kill his mood very fast, but he was feeling just fine today. He was getting used to the irritating man's antics, it seemed.

"Zorian!" Kirithishli greeted. "Good timing! We just got a new shipment today and Ibery had to go home early."

"Uh, okay," Zorian said slowly. He was about to ask what kind of shipment arrived, but then he decided it was a stupid question. It was a shipment of books, of course. "What do you want me to do?"

"Just unpack the books out of their boxes and separate them into rough categories," answered Kirithishli, pointing in the direction of a small mountain of boxes. "I'll inspect them in more detail later to see what to do with them."

"You don't know what to do with them?" asked Zorian, baffled. "Why did you order them, then?"

"I didn't," Kirithishli said, shaking her head. "Someone donated their personal library to the academy. It happens from time to time. Sometimes people leave their books to us in their wills, or people who inherit them don't have a use for them and can't sell them. A lot of old books are only useful as historical curiosities and sometimes not even that. Most of the books in these boxes will be disposed of, to be honest."

"Oh?" asked Zorian, opening one of the boxes and pulling out one of the books stacked inside of it. It was a manual about cultivation of plums. The cover said it was published 20 years ago. "I'm surprised by that. I distinctly remember you saying that librarians should preserve everything they can rather than pick and choose what they think is 'good' or 'useful'."

"Oh shut up," Kirithishli groused, taking a half-hearted swipe at him that he dodged. "It's an ideal to be followed, not an unbreakable law. There is only so much space in the library, no matter how big it appears. And besides, most of these books are duplicates of ones we already have. Stop being a wiseass and get to work."

Zorian threw himself to the task, unpacking box after box. Kirithishli gave him a huge book that contained list after list of the most common books they received in these sorts of deliveries and told him to use it to separate the obvious duplicates from the rest. Using the book manually to find the matches would be a total nightmare of course, especially since the letters were in a really tiny print in order to cram as many words as possible on every page, but Zorian knew it was designed with something else in mind. One of the spells he learned from Ibery in the previous restarts involved making a list of terms you wanted to search for and then connecting the list via divination spell to a target book you wanted to search. It sounded a little pointless to him back then, but now he realized it was made with precisely this sort of thing in mind. And the huge, densely-packed reference book was probably made with the spell in mind, in turn.

Nearly 2 hours and 20 hastily scribbled lists later he had separated the duplicates from the rest of the books and was in the process of leafing through one of the spellbooks he had found in the boxes when Kirithishli finally returned from wherever she had disappeared after giving him his assignment. His rapid progress surprised her, seeing how she had no idea he was so well-versed in library magic, and she apparently also found it a little disappointing.

"You're no fun," she sighed dramatically. "I wanted to show you that trick when I came back, after you spent 2 hours painstakingly searching for matches in that monster of a book. The expression on your face would have been priceless."

Zorian simply raised an eyebrow at her, but otherwise stayed silent. Kirithishli showed her maturity by sticking her tongue at him like a 5-year-old, before eyeing the book he was leafing through.

"Found something interesting?" she asked.

"Not really," Zorian said, snapping the book shut. There was nothing particularly interesting in it anyway. "I sort of hoped I would find a book on powerful ancient magic and the like, but no such luck."

Kirithishli snorted. "Even if you did find something like that, it would do you little good. Contrary to what various adventure novels may have led you to believe, ancient magic is almost always inferior to what we have available now. Those spells that are lost are usually lost for a good reason – generally for being too impractical, requiring ingredients or conditions that no longer exist, or because they would be considered massively unethical in the modern age. For example, you'd be hard pressed to find participants for orgy ritual magic these days, and Heruan volcanic spells relied on conditions present in one particular volcano that hasn't been active for more than 200 years."

Zorian blinked. "Oh. Well that's disappointing."

"Quite," Kirithishli agreed. "And even when those spells can be cast without issue, they tend to be infuriatingly inflexible and long to cast. Mages of old didn't have the sort of shaping skills modern mages have, so they compensated by making their spells long and hyperspecialized. There were hundreds of color-changing spells, for instance, but most of them differed only in which color the spell changed the affected objects into. It has been a persistent trend in modern times to generalize spells, since better training methods allow modern mages to make up for the spells' lack of precision with the sheer control they have over their magic."

"Making a lot of old spells obsolete to a properly trained mage," finished Zorian. He had always known that most history books presented a heavily idealized image of their ancestors – their portrayal of the desertification of northern Miasina (he refused to call it 'Cataclysm', as if it was some natural occurrence beyond Ikosian control) and subsequent exodus to Altazia was proof enough that they were given a sugar-coated version of history – but he hadn't realized Ikosians were also crappy mages in addition to being shortsighted assholes. "And you have to be one if you plan to get certified. You know, I've always wondered why so many really easy spells are classified as first circle ones. I thought it might be a deliberate policy by the Guild to encourage certification, but I guess a lot of those were not nearly as trivial when they were first rated."

"That, but you also have to consider things from the perspective of the spell's maker," Kirithishli said. "It's a lot more prestigious and profitable to make a 1st circle spell than a 0th circle one. So they almost never classify a spell as anything less than 1st circle, and the guild allows them to get away with it, probably for the very reason you stated. A determined person could probably get the guild to lower the classification on a lot of those spells, but you'd make a lot of enemies, especially the spell crafter interest groups. It would be a thankless task, and you'd constantly have to watch out for people trying to roll back the changes."

Zorian digested this information in silence. He had no intention of involving himself in such high-level politics, of course, either in the time loop or outside of it. If there was one thing his parents had driven into his skull with their endless sermons, it was that his strengths did not lie in that area. Granted, that probably wasn't what those sermons were designed to do, but that wasn't his problem. Still, things like these were useful to know. He'd have to prod Kirithishli for more stories in the future.

- break -

When Kirithishli told him to go home, Zorian was all too happy to oblige her. It had been a long (and boring) day, what with the regular classes, his session with Xvim, and working in the library, and all he really wanted was to go back to Imaya's place and relax. Sadly, it was not to be, because the moment he stepped out of the library he was accosted by a shady-looking man that had been waiting for him just outside the entrance.

Well, maybe 'accosted' was a too strong of a word – technically, the man in question was just leaning on a pillar next to the entrance, not blocking his path or even speaking to him. Nonetheless, the moment the man glanced up and their eyes met, Zorian knew the man had been waiting for him, and him alone. Middle aged, dressed in a cheap, rumpled suit and unshaven, he almost looked like one of Cyoria's many homeless people, but there was a confidence in his posture that didn't fit that image.

He halted in his tracks instantly, and an uneasy silence descended on the scene as they both analyzed one another. Zorian had no idea who the man was or what he wanted to do with him, but he wasn't inclined to be charitable. He had not forgotten the way he was assassinated in one of the initial restarts, and had no wish to repeat the experience.

"Zorian Kazinski?" the man finally asked.

"That's me," confirmed Zorian. He didn't think lying would work, and it would be better to have a confrontation close to the library than to get ambushed in an empty street on the way home.

"Detective Haslush Izketeri, Cyoria's police department," the man said. "Ilsa sent me to be your divination instructor."

Zorian didn't know what to say. Ilsa picked a *detective* as his instructor? So much for his idea of talking his new divination instructor into teaching him the restricted divination skills he needed to actually investigate this time loop business. Why did it have to be law enforcement, of all things?

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"That's great," Zorian said flatly. "I was wondering when Ilsa would find someone."

If his lack of enthusiasm bothered the man any, he didn't show it. He turned and walked away, gesturing Zorian to follow after him.

"Come on, kid, let's go find a tavern to sit in," he said, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jacket.

Oh yes, a tavern – the perfect learning environment. Gods, not only was the man a detective, he was unprofessional as well. His unkempt appearance sort of suggested it right from the start, but Zorian always tried to not judge too harshly on appearances alone – too many people did it to him, and he always found it very annoying.

His thoughts must have been more visible in his demeanor than he thought they were, because the man quickly started to justify himself.

"Come now, don't look at me like that," the man said. "It's not like we'll be doing anything too serious today. It's been a long day for both of us, I think – you're tired, I'm tired, we don't know each other, and we'll accomplish nothing if we just jump straight into lessons right away. Hell, maybe we'll decide we don't like each other and call this whole thing off. So today, we're just going to share a drink and talk."

Okay, so maybe Haslush was smarter and more capable than Zorian gave him credit for. He had to stop judging people so quickly. Though...

"I don't drink alcohol," Zorian warned.

Haslush gave him a curious look. "Religious taboo?"

Zorian shook his head. He was never very religious – the gods had been silent for centuries, and as far as Zorian was concerned that meant they either killed each other off or abandoned their creations to fend for themselves. Hell, listening to some of the stories from the age of gods, he couldn't help but think humanity was better off without them – they had a disturbing tendency to throw around plagues and curse entire cities on the flimsiest of pretexts. He didn't think it was a coincidence that humanity only started to advance, both socially and technologically, *after* the gods had fallen silent.

"Bad experiences," he simply said, not wanting to discuss that topic any further.

"Ah," Haslush said, content with his answer. "That's okay, you can order some fruit juice or something. Hell, I can even show you a spell I use when I'm on duty but don't want to offend people by refusing an offered drink."

Now that sounded useful! Zorian looked at Haslush and the man correctly interpreted that as permission to go on.

"It's a neat little alteration spell that converts alcohol into sugar," Haslush said, raising his right hand to show a plain metal ring on his middle finger. "I have it imprinted into this ring so I don't have to visibly cast it – visibly casting a spell on your drink is often resented even more than outright

refusing it, believe it or not. The moment I touch the glass the deed is done.”

“Convenient,” Zorian said appreciatively. That spell would have saved him so much trouble over the years. “But I thought organic matter cannot be restructured through alteration spells?”

“Usually not, but that’s because most of them are impossibly complex and poorly understood, not because organic compounds are somehow impossible to replicate,” Haslush said, studying various tavern signs as they walked. Apparently he wasn’t merely looking for the closest one. “Both ethanol and glucose are fairly simple molecules, and quite well understood, so there is no difficulty in converting one into the other.” He suddenly stopped in front of a nearby sign, studying it for a moment before turning to face Zorian again. “I think this is a nice place. What do you think?”

Zorian’s experiences with taverns were very limited and generally unpleasant, so he simply gestured Haslush to go in before following after him.

It wasn’t as bad as Zorian had feared: the insides of the tavern were dark and the air was a bit stale, but the tables were clean and the noise was manageable. Haslush picked an out of the way table in the corner and cast a long, complicated spell on it after they both ordered a drink. Probably a privacy ward of some kind.

Zorian expected the man to start interrogating him the moment the spell snapped into place, but it didn’t play out like that. If Haslush was interrogating him, he was doing it too subtly for Zorian to notice. Hell, the man didn’t even ask him about Daimen, which was always nice. Gradually, Zorian began to relax and started asking questions of his own. Questions like ‘how come a detective has time and inclination to tutor a third year student in divination magic’?

“Hah,” snorted Haslush. “A good question. Usually something like this would be the last thing on my mind, but yesterday my commander dumped a really silly case on my lap. Apparently there is a rumor circulating around the city about mentalist spiders lurking in the sewers, and I’m supposed to check it out.” He rolled his eyes with a sigh. “Mentalist spiders, honestly...” he mumbled.

Zorian struggled not to let his surprise show and somehow succeeded – largely because Haslush was paying more attention to his drink than to him at the moment. He started a rumor without even realizing it? He supposed he shouldn’t be surprised, since he had told Taiven about the spiders right in front of Imaya and his sister – between Taiven and those two, they probably blathered about it to a dozen people *at least*.

“Anyway, after work I went to meet with my good friend Ilsa so we could complain about our problems to each other over a drink or two, when she told me she was having problems finding a divination tutor for you. And at that point I realized I have a perfect solution for my problem. I could pawn off the case to some other poor schmuck, help a friend in need, and settle a long-standing argument between me and my commander in one fell swoop. See, a couple of years ago the bureaucrats in Eldemar decided to launch an initiative for getting more mages interested in a career in law enforcement. Only, instead of doing something concrete to attract new talent they asked mages already working inside the police force to go introduce the profession to mages in training on their own initiative.”

“Ah,” said Zorian. “So you’re supposed to do things like this anyway?”

“Yeah, but I’ve been kind of slacking off in that regard, so my commander is constantly nagging me about missing my quota. Can you blame me though? We get paid extra for doing it, but it’s a pittance considering the hassle.”

“You know better than I do,” Zorian shrugged. “How does, err, ‘introducing me to the profession’ get you off the spider case, though?”

“I don’t have time to do both,” Haslush said. He frowned for a second and then shook his head, as if to clear it. “Yup. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it.”

The discussion petered out after that, and Haslush promised to meet him again at Monday. Zorian was lost in thought as he went back to Imaya’s house, wondering whether anything would come out of the whole spider investigation. Probably not, considering how seriously it was taken by Haslush, but still. He’d have to prod the man for additional details after a week or so.

- break -

Zorian tapped his foot impatiently as he waited for Imaya to open the door. He had the key to the front door, but that was no help – Imaya had an annoying habit of leaving the key in the lock, and today was no exception. He couldn’t enter without her help.

She probably liked it that way.

The sound of unlocking brought his attention back to the door itself, which flung open to reveal a concerned-looking Imaya staring at him.

“Umm... did something happen?” he asked. Did Kirielle do something stupid while he was gone?

“I should be the one asking that,” she said. “Where were you? You were supposed to be back hours ago.”

“Uh...” Zorian floundered. “What’s the problem? It’s not like I’m coming in the middle of the night or anything...”

The annoyed look she was giving him told him he shouldn’t have said that. Not that he understood why – it’s not like there was a rule saying he had to rush back home after class, after all. Back in Cirin, his parents never cared what he did in his free time, so long as he didn’t neglect his duties or embarrass them in the process. It was an alien feeling to have someone concerned for him just because he didn’t come home on time.

"Look, I'm sorry but I had to meet with my divination instructor after class and the meeting sort of dragged on," he said. "Really, Miss Kuroshka, you're going to lose your nerves if you freak out every time I'm late from classes. It's not the first time I've been held up after class, and it's certainly not going to be the last."

She sighed and shooed him inside, apparently somewhat mollified by his speech.

"In the future, try to notify me when you're going to be late," Imaya said. "Surely there is some piece of magic that can transfer messages within city limits, yes?"

That was a good idea, Zorian had to admit. "I'll see what I can find," he promised.

"Good," Imaya said. "Your sister has been asking for you for a while now, you know?"

Zorian groaned. "She hasn't been a bother, hasn't she?"

"No, she's a little angel," Imaya said, waving his concerns away. Zorian silently rolled his eyes at the idea of Kirielle being an angel. If Kirielle was so nice then why did Imaya want him to come home so badly? "She spent most of the day drawing, playing with the magic cube you gave her, and talking with Kana. Or should that be talking *at* Kana? I swear, that child is far too quiet. I have to talk to Kael about it one of these days. It's not normal for a child to be so withdrawn..."

Zorian quietly nodded, pleased that the cube he made was such a success. It was nothing special, just a simple stone cube with a bunch of light-emitting sigils arranged into a childish puzzle. He found a design in one of the books Nora recommended to him back when she had been tutoring him in spell formulas and decided making one would be doubly useful: it would give him some practical experience using spell formula and give Kirielle something to pass the time with.

"Sounds like she had fun today," Zorian remarked. "What did she need me for, then?"

Imaya gave him a strange look. "You're her big brother. She doesn't need a special reason to miss you."

"And the real reason?" Zorian pressed.

"Kana dozed off and your toy ran out of mana and went inert," Imaya finally admitted after a second of silence.

"Ah," Zorian nodded. He noticed the design had very little in the way of mana storage, but he wasn't feeling confident enough to redesign it while creating the cube. There was a reason why the cube had such rudimentary mana reserves, after all – large concentrations of mana tended to explode if handled inappropriately, and the cube was meant to be practice for beginners. Beginners that could totally botch things during the first couple of tries. Considering how many problems he had with simply recreating the design on the stone cube, he felt he had made the right choice when he had decided not to mess with the base design. He would simply make more of them if Kirielle still wanted to play with one – it was good practice, anyway. "She's in her room, I guess?"

"No, she's in your room, reading your books," Imaya said casually.

Zorian's eye twitched, resisting the urge to march straight into his room and throw Kirielle out. In reality, he was lucky to have a room to call his own at all. Imaya still hadn't found anyone willing to rent the other room in the house, and Zorian was grateful for it, since it meant he could keep the room for himself. Unfortunately, his ability to keep Kirielle out of it was completely nonexistent. Kirielle had no inhibitions about coming and going there whenever she pleased, and Imaya was even less inclined to stop her than their mother had been back in Cirin. She seemed to find Kirielle's behavior 'natural'.

And the little imp knew it! She knew she could get away with just about everything, since Imaya liked her better than she did him, and she exploited it to the hilt. That's why, when Zorian loudly entered the room, she completely ignored him. She was lying on his bed with an open book in front of her, her feet comfortably resting on his pillow. As he watched her, she reached towards the plate of biscuits Imaya had brought her, intent on scattering even more crumbs over his bed sheets.

"Hey!" she protested. "Those are mine! Get your own biscuits!"

Zorian ignored her and studied the plate full of biscuits he had snatched away from his demonic little sister. "You know, originally I just wanted to get your attention and stop you from making an even bigger mess than you already have, but they do look kind of tasty..."

"Nooooo!" Kirielle wailed as he opened his mouth, threatening to swallow a handful of biscuits at once. She seemed reluctant to leave his bed to get them back, though. She probably knew he wouldn't allow her to claim her spot back easily should she ever relinquish it, clever little imp that she was.

"Tell you what," he said, closing his mouth and putting the biscuits back on the plate. "I'll give you your biscuits if you get rid of all the crumbs you put on my bed."

Kirielle immediately swept her hands over the sheets a couple of times, pushing all the crumbs to the floor in front of the bed. Her task done, she flashed him a cheeky smile.

"Ha ha," said Zorian humorlessly. "Now go get a broom and do it properly. I'll eat a biscuit for every minute this mess remains in a room."

He punctuated his words by shoving one of the biscuits into his mouth. They were quite good actually.

Kirielle let out a cry of protest and jumped off the bed in a huff. She unsuccessfully tried to retrieve her plate of biscuits, but when she realized she couldn't make him give it back (and when he ate a second one) she instead ran off to get a broom and a dustpan. Apparently she also complained to Imaya, because several minutes later she showed up with another plate of biscuits, 'so he didn't have to steal from his little sister'. Whatever.

Sadly, even after he recovered his bed from Kirielle's clutches, she still returned to his room. Currently she was sprawled over his chest, having collapsed atop of him when he closed his eyes for a second.

"Why are you still here, Kiri?" Zorian sighed.

Kirielle didn't answer at first, being too busy climbing over Zorian's body like he was an inanimate object that didn't feel pain and discomfort. Once she lay firmly on the bed with him, having wriggled sufficient free space for herself, she spoke.

"I'm bored," she said. "Your puzzle broke, by the way."

"It didn't break," Zorian said. "It just ran out of mana. I can make you a new one tomorrow if you want."

"Okay."

A short silence descended between them and Zorian closed his eyes to take a little nap.

"Zorian?" Kirielle suddenly prompted.

"Yes?" Zorian asked.

"What's a morlock?"

Zorian opened his eyes and looked to the side, fixing Kirielle with a curious expression.

"You don't know what a morlock is?" he asked incredulously.

"I just know they're these white-haired blue-eyed people," Kirielle said. "And that people don't like them very much. And that Kael is one. But mother never wanted to tell me what the deal with them is."

"She didn't, huh?" mumbled Zorian.

"No," confirmed Kirielle. "She said a young lady like me shouldn't talk about those kind of things."

In the interest of avoiding an argument, Zorian refrained from making a snide comment about whether or not Kirielle qualified as a lady. Not even a derisive snort. Someone should give him a medal for self-control.

"Basically," Zorian said, "they're a race of underground humans. Though most of them don't live underground anymore. The disappearance of the gods hit their civilization hard, and the other denizens of the Dungeon have largely driven them out to the surface. Ikosian settlers sort of helped the process along by kicking them while they were down and burning down a couple of their more prominent settlements."

"Oh," Kirielle said. "But that doesn't explain why people don't like them. Sounds like they should be angry at us more than we should be at them. And Kael doesn't look like he hates us."

"Kael is probably totally ignorant of his ancestral culture. I understand a lot of morlocks are. And the reason people don't like them is that the old morlocks had some pretty barbaric customs. They liked sacrificing people to their gods, and seemed to have been cannibals," said Zorian.

"Cannibals!?" Kirielle squealed. "They *ate* people!? Why!?"

"Hard to say," Zorian shrugged. "Ikosian settlers were more interested in condemning them for their practices than understanding why they did what they did."

"Well yeah, they ate people," Kirielle said. "That's evil and disgusting. Don't tell me they're still doing that?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Zorian scoffed. "The authorities would never let them get away with something like that."

"Oh," said Kirielle. "That's good. Is that why people don't like them? They're afraid the morlocks are going to eat them?"

"It contributes," Zorian sighed. "I lost count of the number of rumors I've heard about morlocks supposedly kidnapping children off the street to eat them or what not. But there is more to it. The morlocks had their own brand of magic, which is currently banned just about everywhere, but a lot of morlocks still practice it. The guild calls it 'blood magic'."

"Sounds sinister," Kirielle remarked.

"It does, doesn't it?" Zorian said. "There is no official information about what blood magic actually is, but most people think it has something to do with sacrifice. The story is that morlocks could use a ritual killing of a person or animal to power their spells. Modern morlocks can't exactly kill a

bunch of people at whim, but supposedly they still engage in animal sacrifice, both for magical and religious reasons.”

Kirielle snuggled in closer to him, shuddering.

“I’m glad Kael and Kana aren’t like that,” she said.

“Me too, Kiri,” said Zorian, patting her on the head. “Me too.”

16. We Need To Talk

Chapter 016 We Need To Talk

Tearing out a piece of paper from one of his notebooks, Zorian wrote down a short message for Imaya, explaining that he had another of his divination lessons with Haslush and would thus be late today. He still didn't see what the big deal about being late was, but he really didn't want to argue about it.

Of course, writing the message was one thing and getting it to Imaya was another – he was at the Academy currently, and it was a long way from there to Imaya's place. He was pretty sure he had a solution, though. He had found plenty of spells for long range communication, and although not many were within his ability to cast or suitable for his purposes, one of the spell combinations seemed promising. Basically, he was going to make a paper airplane and animate it to fly under its own power. A simple locator spell should guide it towards Imaya. The method worked when he tested it with Kirielle, but that was over considerably smaller distances.

Undeterred by the somewhat experimental nature of his actions, he folded the piece of paper into a paper plane and cast his spells on it before flinging it out of the nearest window. It sailed away out of sight soon enough, tracking its target.

Well... classes were over, and the message sent. Time to find Haslush.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, Zorian discovered Haslush had arranged their second meeting in another tavern. Of course. Undeterred, Zorian walked into the place and tried to ignore the stares of the other patrons as he scanned for Haslush among them.

Haslush wasn't there. Did Zorian find the right place or had Haslush simply decided not to show up? He did have a bit of trouble finding the place, since Haslush had given very vague directions to it, but Zorian was sure this was it. He was just about to leave the tavern to see if he had missed something when he realized it.

Something was wrong. He felt an almost unnatural desire to leave this place. If he hadn't spent the dozen or so restarts suffering through Kyron's 'resistance training' he probably wouldn't have noticed it, but there was a compulsion effect targeting him.

He pulled out his divination compass and murmured a quick locator spell, seeking out Haslush. The needle immediately pointed towards an unassuming brown-haired man in factory worker getup sitting in the left corner. Sighing, Zorian shuffled over to the man and sat on one of the chairs facing his table.

"Can I help you?" the man asked in a painfully scratchy voice, staring at Zorian with hollow, bloodshot eyes. Very creepy. Very uninviting.

Instead of answering, Zorian muttered a quick dispel. A wave of dispelling force rushed towards the man, disrupting the illusion. The creepy man melted away to show Haslush pouting at him like a little kid.

"I must say, I didn't expect that," Haslush said. "I figured you'd enter and leave the tavern at least three times before you figured it out. I dare say you just broke the betting pool – only two people voted for you getting it right away."

Out of the corner of his eye Zorian saw two of the bar patrons giving him a thumbs up.

"Can you drop the compulsion spell now?" Zorian sighed. "I don't think I'll be able to pay attention to you with this constantly hanging over my head all the time."

"Oh. Right," said Haslush, snapping his fingers. Zorian's head cleared immediately and the desire to bolt out of the tavern evaporated.

"So what exactly was the point of that?" Zorian asked.

"I wanted to see where your observation skills stand," Haslush said, taking a sip from his glass. "Divination is one of the trickier magical disciplines, because failure is not obvious. You could perform a divination flawlessly and still get nothing out of it. You could mess it up totally and not even realize you did something wrong. Ask the wrong question, interpret the results incorrectly, or fail to take an important variable into account and it's all just wasted effort. Experience can help you minimize those kind of issues, but it helps to be naturally perceptive."

"I guess getting it right immediately means I scored really well?" Zorian tried.

"It means you're off to a good start," Haslush said. "We're not done yet."

And with that, Haslush reached out across the table and caught him by his wrist before he could pull his arm away. All sights and sounds around Zorian instantly disappeared, his surroundings replaced by an inky silent void. The only things he could still see and hear was his own body and Haslush, who seemed to be sitting on thin air, what with his chair being replaced by the same darkness that consumed everything else.

"Don't," Haslush warned when Zorian tried to wrench his hand free of Haslush's grasp. "It's a harmless spell, and it will disappear the moment we break skin contact. If it makes you feel any better, I'm suffering the same effects while it lasts."

"What's the point of this, then?" asked Zorian.

“How many people were present in the tavern when I used this spell on you?” Haslush said.

“What?” Zorian tried to look around him and immediately realized what the darkness was supposed to accomplish. “Oh. You want to see how much I noticed about the state of the tavern.”

“How many people?” repeated Haslush.

Zorian wracked his brains for a moment. He did get a pretty good look at the patrons of the tavern when he was scanning them, trying to spot Haslush, but he never actually counted them. And it’s possible someone left the tavern while he was talking to Haslush without him noticing it.

“Twenty... three?” he tried.

“Close. How many trophies are lined up on the wall next to our table?”

Unfortunately, while Zorian had noticed the trophies he didn’t give them more than a single glance. 15 more questions from Haslush in that vein, and Zorian was no longer feeling so confident about this. Haslush finally let go of his hand and the rest of the tavern immediately appeared again.

“Oh don’t feel so down,” Haslush said. “You’re not half-bad, really. And honestly, I wouldn’t have canceled our lessons just because you did badly in something like this. How are you standing with divination, anyway? Standard second year graduate or do you have something extra?”

“I know a bunch of library divinations and I have mastered the north finding shaping exercise,” Zorian said.

“What, north finding exercise already?” asked Haslush in surprise. Personally, Zorian felt that exercise was very easy. “Well, there goes the homework I intended to give you after today’s session. Anyway, today I’ll teach you how to analyze objects.”

He reached into the pockets of his long coat and placed a number of objects on the table in front of them: a sealed envelope, an old pocket watch, a locked box, some kind of giant nut, a spell rod, and a fancy-looking glove.

“Analyzing objects is something I do a lot, so I figure it’s a good thing to start with. Identifying what the object does, finding out who handled it last, what kind of magics and protections are placed on it... you could make an entire career out of it, and some do,” Haslush said. “I hear you’re interested in a job at the spell forges so this is bound to be rather useful for you.”

“So what do I do?” asked Zorian.

“Now I teach you the spells you’ll need and you practice on these,” Haslush said, pointing at the various objects on the table.

It was a very productive session after that, and it got Zorian thinking. Based on the man’s various comments, Haslush was clearly somewhat high in Cyoria’s police hierarchy. Maybe he could do something useful with the information about the invasion without tipping off the organizers? It might be worth dying once or twice to find out.

“I really must thank you, Mister Izketeri,” Zorian said. “You are a lot better at this than I initially gave you credit for.”

“It’s fine,” Haslush said. “I actively cultivate a somewhat unflattering façade. It helps people relax around me. So what are you trying to butter me up for, anyway?”

Zorian sighed. How should he put this then?

“Could you put up some privacy wards first?” Zorian asked.

Haslush raised an eyebrow at the request but nodded in agreement soon afterwards. He quickly set up some sort of spells over their table and then waited expectantly. He would have to get the man to teach him some of those protective spells in one of the restarts.

“I have heard there is a plot to smuggle war trolls into the city during the summer festival, after bombarding the city with artillery magic during the fireworks launches,” Zorian said.

Haslush immediately sat up straighter, so at least it seemed he wasn’t going to get dismissed out of hand. Now he just had to make sure he doesn’t get carted off to the police station.

“And I don’t suppose you’ll tell me where you heard that?” asked Haslush suspiciously.

“Can’t,” Zorian confirmed. “It seemed reliable to me, though.”

“I see,” Haslush sighed. He poured some more alcohol into his glass and took a sip. “I hate the summer festival, you know? Virtually all buildings have their warding schemes loosened while it lasts, the huge amount of visitors makes it hard to spot troublemakers in time, and the mayor and other bigheads want all sorts of stupid things done in preparation for it. It’s a perfect time for criminals and terrorists of all stripes to go wild in the city.”

Huh. Zorian didn’t actually know that until now.

“So how are these people going to smuggle in goddamn war trolls of all things, and what are they trying to accomplish?”

"Through the Dungeon," said Zorian. "As for the purpose, I honestly don't know."

"Anything else you can tell me?" Haslush asked.

"Not really, no."

"Then I have just one more question," Haslush said. "Why are you telling this to *me*, of all people?"

"There are some very high placed people involved in this, and I'm not sure who I can trust," Zorian said. "You seem like a fairly influential person who is unlikely to be involved. Also, I'm hoping you won't drag me off to a cell for questioning."

He didn't actually know whether high placed people were involved or not, of course, but he felt it was a good bet they were. He failed to see how an invasion of this kind of magnitude could be organized without the cooperation of some very influential person inside city administration.

"I'm tempted," Haslush admitted. "But all you'd really have to do is claim it was all a prank and I'd pretty much have to let you go. The mage guild was founded because mages didn't trust civilian law enforcement to judge them fairly, and they guard their privileges jealously. They would get you out within days and perform their own investigation. You'd get a slap on the wrist for being stupid and I'd spend the next year being punished by my bosses for falling for a childish trick and getting the mage guild angry at us."

"Um," Zorian fumbled. Haslush sounded more than a little bit bitter. He didn't know Cyoria's police force harbored such resentment towards the mage guild.

"It's fine," Haslush said. "I'm not angry at you. I guess I'll do some investigating and we'll talk more about it after our next session. You try finding out more from these mysterious sources of yours."

Zorian left the tavern in a good mood, though it was somewhat dampened by fear of assassins. Hopefully Haslush would be discreet in his investigation.

When he got to Imaya's place he was told by Imaya that she got his message, but she was still fairly unhappy with him – apparently the paper plane rammed straight into the back of her head when delivering his message, and that was dangerous. What if it had rammed into her face and poked out her eye?

Some people were never happy.

- break -

The house was calm, the only two occupants currently present being Zorian and Kirielle... and thankfully, Kirielle was amusing herself with doodling into her notebook instead of pestering him. That was good, because trying to levitate a snail, like Zorian was currently doing, was not at all easy. Not only was the snail alive, and thus inherently resistant to magic, but it was also actively fighting the levitation effect, twisting and bending in the air in an attempt to break free of the unseen force holding it aloft.

He was cheating a little – he was actually levitating the shell, which was largely immobile and much more solid than the actual snail. The real test of skill would be levitating a slug or something, but... well, he was having enough trouble with the damn snail at the moment.

"Poor snail," Kirielle remarked from the sidelines. "Why don't you let this one go and find another one to torture? It's going to end up traumatized if you keep this up."

"I'm not torturing it," Zorian protested, trying to split his attention between holding the snail in the air and talking with Kirielle. "It's completely unharmed. I'm not even sure if snail brains are complex enough to be traumatized. The damn thing is as enthusiastic about escaping as it was when I started this."

Kirielle looked as if she was about to argue but then just grunted and melted back into her chair.

"Where is he?" she said after a minute of silence.

"I don't know, Kiri," sighed Zorian. "Be patient. He isn't even late yet."

"Maybe we should start without him?" she tried.

"No we should not!" snapped Zorian. The snail wobbled in the air, its eyestalks swinging wildly as it sensed its bonds weakening and redoubled its efforts. "Honestly, Kiri, you can be so callous sometimes. The only reason I'm even doing this is because Kael asked me to. You should be thanking him for letting you participate."

"You're the one to talk about callousness," Kirielle grumbled. "You'd rather help a stranger you met a week ago than your own little sister. And I am grateful, I just–"

"Then be nice and wait." Zorian interrupted her, slowly lowering the snail into his hand. He clearly wasn't going to get any more work done today. "He'll be here soon enough. If you want something to do, go release the snail back into the garden."

"What? No way!"

Zorian raised an eyebrow. "Weren't you just advocating its freedom?"

"Well yeah, but I'm not gonna touch it or anything. It's slimy and disgusting and eww."

Zorian rolled his eyes and put the snail into a small box by his side. He would release it outside later. A sound of door opening signaled Kael's arrival.

"I'm here," Kael said. "I'm not late, I hope?"

"How did you know he was coming?" Kirielle asked suspiciously, turning to Zorian.

"Alarm spells," Zorian said dismissively. "And no, Kael, you're not late. Though Kirielle was impatient like usual. Anyway, you said you need my help to catch up to 3rd year curriculum, right? Which part do you need help with?"

"I really don't know," Kael said. "As I said, my education was somewhat spotty so even though I know a lot of things, there are things that formally trained mages take for granted that I'm not even aware of. Why don't you give me a brief overview of your first two years and we'll see where to go from there? Ilsa said she will test me three months from now, so there is plenty of time to work with."

Zorian gave his sister a knowing look, but she was avoiding his eyes. He was sure that Kael knew exactly where he was deficient knowledge-wise, but Kiri had probably asked him to play along for her, being largely ignorant about magic herself. He really didn't know why she was so adamant to learn magic Right Now, as opposed to later, in a proper school environment.

Honestly, as much as he cared for his sister and liked Kael, he probably wouldn't be taking Kirielle with him to Cyoria too often. He spent most of his time in the house dealing with Kirielle, Imaya or Kael (and occasionally Kana), leaving little time for his personal self study. Relatively speaking, of course – Kirielle already complained he spent too much time studying and not enough having fun or paying attention to her.

Stolen from Royal Road, this story should be reported if encountered on Amazon.

But all things considered, he could take it easy every once in a while. He could set aside a few hours on helping Kael study for his test, even if he would never actually live to take it during the time loop, and if Kirielle wants to listen in then so what?

He gave them both a brief explanation of the first two years in the academy. Magic-wise, most of the first year was spent on teaching students how to consciously and consistently draw on their magical core, mostly by making them activate various magical objects. There was even a first year class called 'Operation of Magic Items', which was exactly what it said in the title. They also worked on their memorization by doing increasingly complex strings of gestures and chants shown to them by teachers, a practice for later study of invocations. The rest was theory: introductions to various magical traditions and disciplines, learning how to understand the basics of Ikosian language, biology, history, geography, law and mathematics. Not all of it was strictly related to magic, but- wait, who's that?

"We'll have to postpone that for the moment," he said, looking at the door. "Someone is-"

Before he could say anything, the door slammed open and Taiven barged into his room in her usual aggressive manner. She scanned the room quickly and immediately stalked towards him when she noticed him.

"...coming here." He finished with a long-suffering sigh.

"Roach!" she exclaimed excitedly. "You're just the man I... wait, am I interrupting something?"

"Yes?" Zorian tried.

"Never mind, it will only take a minute." She shoved a newspaper into his face. "Did you see this?"

He sighed and snatched the newspapers out of her hand so he could put them on the table. There, now he could actually see what she was taking about. Let's see...

Academy Student Kills Oganj!

Yesterday morning Zach Noveda shocked the world when he announced in front of gathered reporters that he had slain Oganj, the feared dragon that had terrorized northern Altazia for more than a century. Naturally, such a bold claim requires suitable proof, and the young Noveda heir had certainly delivered when he summoned the dragon's corpse for inspection. Alliance officials invited in for the occasion have confirmed the body almost certainly belongs to the infamous Terror of the North, although further examination is necessary before they are willing to present Zach with the promised bounty for killing the beast...

Zorian read the article in stony silence. He was dimly aware of Kirielle and Kael staring over his shoulder so they could see what had captivated his attention like that, but he didn't let that distract him.

Was this the reason for all those short restarts? Because Zach wanted to kill a dragon? Zorian wasn't sure what to think about that. On one hand, the mage dragon was a menace, and killing him was an impressive feat. On the other hand, it seemed like a waste of time and effort – what did Zach really gain from this, other than combat experience? Dragon magics were of no use to humans, and Zach was already so rich that he wouldn't

gain much from Oganj's hoard.

Whatever game Zach was playing, Zorian couldn't figure it out. Or did the other time traveler just do whatever popped into his head at any particular moment?

"Hey, Roach, you went to class with this guy, right?" Taiven prodded after a while.

"Yeah," he confirmed. "He was supposed to be in my class this year too, but failed to show up when the classes started."

"He ran away from home," Taiven said. "There was a recent scandal about that a week ago. They asked him about it in the article but he kind of dodged the question there."

Zorian nodded. Zach simply told the reporters he had 'a great number of disagreements with his former guardian' and refused to elaborate. There was an interesting story in there, Zorian was sure, but if the newspapers hadn't managed to dig something up on the whole thing then Zorian definitely wasn't going to accomplish much by poking his nose where it didn't belong.

Zach also told the newspapers he intends to go back to school 'for a few months' when he was prompted for his immediate plans. Great. He would have to lay low during the next few restarts, until Zach got tired of the academy again.

"Isn't Oganj the dragon that annihilated an army sent to kill him?" Kirielle asked. "Or was that mother just trying to scare me?"

"A small army, and Oganj lured it into a trap," Kael said. "The general seemed to think Oganj would wait in his lair while the army approached. He instead decided to do something about it before it reached him. He carved exploding runes into the walls of a canyon and lured the army inside. The only reason anyone survived is that some of the mages teleported out before the whole thing collapsed on top of them."

"And I heard he killed one of the Immortal Eleven, too," Taiven said. "So how the hell did this Zach guy kill the thing? Is he some kind of legend or what? Why didn't you tell me you had that kind of guy in your class?"

Zorian sighed. What the hell was he supposed to tell her?

"Let me put it like this," he said carefully. "During the first two years, Zach had trouble with just about everything. He was such a poor mage that people weren't sure if he would pass his certification, and you know how easy that thing is."

"That... doesn't make sense," Taiven said. "Even if the whole killing Oganj thing is a trick of some sort, he still summoned a corpse of a fully grown dragon. Even I can't summon something that big yet."

"I guess everything changed during the school break," Zorian shrugged. "Somehow he went from a borderline failure to amazing genius between year two and three."

"That's totally ridiculous," Taiven huffed. "How would that even work?"

"Time travel?" suggested Zorian shamelessly.

"Like I said, ridiculous," Taiven countered immediately. "Are you sure he wasn't faking incompetence?"

"I'm not sure of anything, Taiven," Zorian said. And he really wasn't – even after a whole year of being trapped inside the time loop he still felt the entire situation was all kinds of crazy. "And the few things I do know are so insane you wouldn't believe a word of it."

"Oh, now I just have to hear them," said Taiven, crossing her arms in front of her chest defiantly. "Go on, just try me."

"Tell, tell!" agreed Kirielle. Kael didn't say anything, but Zorian could tell he was curious as well.

Hm. He could tell them about the time loop, but even if they believed him, what would that accomplish? They were no more qualified to solve this mystery than he was, and if they went around telling that story to people they could blow his cover to Zach or possible third parties. Then again, he already told Haslshu about the invasion, so he was already playing with fire in this restart...

Oh to hell with it, as if they'd ever believe him anyway.

"If I told you that Zach and I are time travelers perpetually reliving this first month of school, and that a giant army of monsters and hostile mages invades the city during the summer festival, what would you say?"

Taiven raised her eyebrow at him.

"Well, go on," Zorian prompted.

"You're right," Taiven sighed. "I don't believe a word of it. So you're saying the things you know are *that* insane?"

"At the very least," Zorian confirmed.

"Huh," Taiven said speculatively. "Sounds interesting, but you'll have to tell me those stories some other time. I kept you long enough, I think. See

you around, Roach!"

Zorian watched as Taiven left before turning back to Kael and Kirielle. "So. Shall we continue where we left off?"

They both remained silent, staring at him.

"Um," he said. "Why are you staring at me like that?"

"Is it true?" Kirielle asked fearfully. "Are you really a time traveler?"

Zorian opened his mouth and closed it again. What?

"Your friend may be too oblivious to recognize an answer couched as a hypothetical, but we're not," Kael elaborated. "You really do believe that, don't you? That you're a time traveler?"

"I... yes. If it's a delusion, it's a very convincing one," Zorian said carefully. "The magics I learn in each iteration of this month transfer over into the next one. Insanity doesn't give the victim spells and shaping skills."

"I don't understand," Kirielle complained.

"You and me both, Kiri," Zorian sighed. "You and me both."

"Perhaps you should explain from the start?" Kael suggested patiently. "Tell us what you do understand."

"I lived through this month before," Zorian said after taking a moment to collect his thoughts. "The first time, before I knew about the time loop, I did not bring Kirielle with me to Cyoria."

"What!?" protested Kirielle. "Zorian, you jerk!"

"I lived in one of the academy-provided apartments and I went to classes like normal," said Zorian, ignoring her. He glanced at Kael. "You did too, but I didn't know you then. However, we had an extra classmate."

"Zach?" Kael guessed.

"Yes," Zorian confirmed. "Unlike the previous two years I shared a class with him, this time he was amazing. He solved every test perfectly, he had mastered hundreds of spells and he was good enough at alchemy to impress *you*, of all people."

Kael raised his eyebrow at him.

"Yes," Zorian assured. "It was like he was completely transformed during the summer break. At the time I didn't care very much – I was curious as to how he accomplished it, but it was not my business to pry. And then the summer festival came, and everything went to hell. Artillery spells descended from the sky on the city, and an army of monsters followed in their wake. As I was running through the burning city, I witnessed Zach fighting the invaders. He was throwing high-level spells as if they were candy, fighting with a skill that no third year student could possibly possess. He fared pretty well at first, but then a lich arrived at the scene and demolished him."

He paused for a moment to consider his next words, but Kirielle evidently didn't want to wait that long.

"And then what?" Kirielle asked. "What happened next?"

"What else?" Zorian scoffed. "We died. The lich cast some kind of weird spell at us – a necromantic spell, I am told – and we were instantly killed."

"So how did you go back in time then?" asked Kirielle suspiciously.

"I have no idea. All I know is that I was suddenly back in my bed in Cyoria, with you wishing me a good morning in that uniquely charming Kirielle way. At first I thought this was something the lich did, but I would soon find out this was not an isolated occurrence. Every time I die, or at the end of the Summer festival if I don't, my soul is transported back to that morning in Cirin before I take a train to Cyoria."

They stared at him for a few seconds, and Zorian was already becoming certain they would suddenly start laughing and mocking him when Kirielle decided to speak again.

"So you are a time traveler, but you can only go one month into the past and only until one specific day," said Kirielle carefully. Zorian nodded. She understood that a lot better than Zorian had thought she would. "And you don't control any of it, except by deliberately killing yourself."

"Yes," Zorian confirmed.

"You are the lamest time traveler ever," Kirielle opinionated.

And just like that the tension was broken.

It had been three days since he had told Kirielle and Kael about the time loop and he was honestly a little bit disappointed by their reactions. They both seemed to believe him, but neither was terribly affected. Both of them were still asking him questions about it whenever they could catch him alone, and he knew Kael was researching the topic in his free time, but they continued to go about their business as if nothing was wrong. They weren't even giving him weird glances when they thought he wasn't looking or anything!

"I told you already, I've only been in the time loop for little over a year," Zorian told Kirielle. "I'm not even close to all-knowing and I can't answer these questions you keep asking me."

"I can't believe you've been going to school all this time," Kirielle grumbled. "I'd have quit after the second time."

"You'd have ended up mind wiped or slaved to Zach in a heartbeat," Zorian retorted. "There is a reason I'm doing this slowly and carefully."

A gentle knock on his door stopped their argument short. Zorian was a bit paranoid about visitors ever since he had told Haslugh about the invasion, and telling Kael and Kirielle about it only increased that. Even though he had told Kael and Kirielle not to spread the 'festival invasion' part of the revelation to other people, he could never be sure if they had listened to him. Especially not Kirielle. He kept expecting assassins to barge into the house any day now, but his paranoia had thankfully been groundless so far. Since only Kael knocked so lightly, Zorian had a pretty good idea who it was.

"Come in," Zorian invited.

Instead of coming in, however, Kael remained standing in the doorway.

"We need to talk," Kael said, a hint of nervousness in his voice. "Can you come into my room for a moment?"

"Is it about time travel?" Kirielle said excitedly.

Kael sighed. "Kirielle, I know you won't like this, but can you stay in your room while I talk to your brother? It's related to time travel, but it's a bit... private."

For a moment it looked like Kirielle was going to complain, but then she shot him a speculative look and nodded in assent. As he watched her leave back to her room, grumbling all the way, Zorian had to admit he was a little jealous of Kael's ability to control Kirielle. She never listened to him when he tried that sort of thing.

Shrugging, Zorian followed Kael into his room, where the morlock boy promptly dragged a chest from under his bed and retrieved a mysterious black book with no title out of it.

"I've been looking into your... problem... the last few days," Kael said. "I may have found something."

"You did?" Zorian asked excitedly.

Kael opened the book he was carrying and leafed through for a few seconds before he found what he was looking for. He handed the open book to him and pointed at the page.

"Based on the chant you memorized from the lich, and everything else you told me, I think this is the most likely spell he used," Kael said.

"Soul Meld," Zorian read aloud. "Requires at least two targets. Causes target souls to merge and blend into one. Typically used as a component in more complicated rituals, which heavily modify the effects. If the spell is used in isolation, the resulting entity is virtually always rendered insane or otherwise defective from the stress of the merger. Commonly used in... creation of familiar bonds, and soul bonds in general..."

That definitely sounded like a likely candidate for the spell, but where on earth had Kael found this? Frowning, Zorian leafed through the rest of the book. It was full of soul magic spells, and much of it was written in several unknown scripts that Zorian couldn't read. This... wasn't the sort of thing you could find in the Academy library, least of all with just a student clearance.

Which meant this was probably Kael's personal book.

"Kael... are you a necromancer?" asked Zorian carefully.

"A difficult question," Kael answered after a short pause. "I do not enslave the dead, or curse people. There is more to soul magic than that, though."

Well this was just great – he told his secret to one of the few people who could actually do something to put him down permanently. And he was scolding Kirielle about being reckless just a few minutes ago, too. He really was a giant idiot sometimes.

But hey, what's done is done, and at least Kael didn't seem very hostile at the moment. If anything, the other boy seemed to be more afraid of Zorian than the other way around.

"I won't report you, if that's what you're worried about," Zorian said. Partially because he was deathly afraid of what the other boy would do to him if he tried. A necromancer, of all things... "You agreed to keep quiet about my secret, so it would be hypocritical of me to betray yours without reason. Still, necromancy? Err, I mean, soul magic?"

Kael gave him a weak smile. "It's an interesting discipline, if unfairly judged. My teacher had an interest in it and I wanted to continue the tradition."

Tradition, right. Zorian thought about pressing the matter further, but decided against it. Mistake or not, he could at least get some benefit out of this – he'd just met a decent-seeming necromancer willing to answer his questions. How often does that happen?

"So if the lich performed a soul meld on me, why am I still... well, me?" Zorian asked. "As I understand it, a spell like that would have fused my soul with Zach's completely. We would both cease to exist as individual people."

"Well, I must admit I am not an expert on soul magic by any means," said Kael. "My primary strengths are alchemy and medicine, with soul magic being merely a side interest. That said, I assume the spell was simply stopped before it could complete the effect. It's entirely possible Zach committed suicide when he realized his soul was being targeted."

"It would have been a sensible course of action in his case," Zorian agreed. "Though he didn't exactly give me the impression that he was aware of the danger when I talked to him. I suppose it could have been the amnesia playing tricks on him."

"Or he may have a contingency spell placed on him, set to kill him if it detects unauthorized tampering of his soul. You already said he may not be the originator of the time loop. Whoever placed the magic on him was doubtlessly aware of the danger, as the time loop you are trapped in is clearly a work of a skilled soul mage."

"Right. So since the spell was only allowed to work its magic for a moment, we were spared from the worst effect," Zorian mused. "And I ended up with some kind of a soul bond that drags me along for the ride. Possibly. There was obviously some soul melding involved, in any case. Can you find out what the spell actually did?"

"Maybe," Kael said slowly. "Although this would involve spells. Soul magic spells, to be more precise. Are you sure you want to trust an evil, slimy necromancer with this?"

"Yes," confirmed Zorian, rolling his eyes at Kael's dramatics. Maybe it wasn't the smartest thing to agree to, but he was honestly desperate for some answers and he was getting an honest feeling from Kael. He was usually a good judge of character. "It is true that I am leery of soul magic, but that doesn't mean I automatically hate you now. Go ahead and cast whatever spells you need."

After 15 minutes of mysterious spellcasting (which had no visible effect on him, and didn't even give him an uncomfortable feeling), Kael was forced to admit he didn't get much. The only thing the other boy could tell him was that he definitively didn't have a classical soul bond with Zach – if he was connected to the other time traveler, it was through something more exotic and subtle than that.

"I'm sorry," Kael said. "I thought soul magic as grand as this would be blatantly obvious but I guess I was wrong. Maybe if I tried it on Zach...?"

"There is no way to perform an examination on him without telling him the truth," Zorian said. "I'm not sure I want to do that yet."

"Of course," Kael said. "Although I'm not sure what else I can do. I'd have to be a vastly better soul mage to help you with this, and if you're right I just don't have the time to become one. Even if you convinced me of all this right at the start of the time loop – and I'm not sure you could do that so soon, before I have gotten to know you a little – one month is not enough to get anywhere in a field like soul magic."

"Uh," fumbled Zorian after a few seconds of silence. "Maybe you could teach me soul magic?"

"You would be willing to do that?" Kael asked in mild amusement.

"You said there is more to soul magic than cursing people and enslaving the dead," Zorian said. "And I really do need answers that only soul magic can provide."

Also, if he learned soul magic personally he would no longer have to trust strangers to mess around with his soul. If someone had to cast soul magic, he'd rather it was him.

"Though I'm flattered you are willing to set aside your prejudices, the truth is you would never be good enough for what you want to do with it," Kael said. "Although most soul magic can be performed by normal mages like you, the really sophisticated spells require a certain amount of soul perception – a skill that can only be gained by drinking a special potion made from a properly harvested dirge moth chrysalis."

"And is the potion rare?"

"Dirge moths spend most of their lives in the ground," Kael said. "For 23 years they live their lives as larvae before emerging from the soil en masse as swarms of poisonous dirge moths. The moths live for exactly one day before laying their eggs and dying. In case you're curious, the last emergence of the moth swarms was less than a decade ago."

"There will be no dirge moth chrysalises for at least another decade," realized Zorian.

Kael nodded. "And the potion requires a fresh chrysalis – they cannot be preserved."

"And there is no other way to gain soul perception?"

"Maybe there is, but I only know of this one," Kael said. "There are some rituals involving human sacrifice that claim to provide the same benefit to

the mage, but I have never tried them and I suspect you would not want to either."

"Definitely not," Zorian agreed.

After a few more minutes of discussion Zorian left Kael's room, lost in thoughts.

He wasn't quite willing to give up on the idea of learning soul magic, but he had more than enough on his plate right now so he wouldn't push it. There were plenty of other restarts in which to try that later.

The moment he had entered the room and closed the door behind him he felt a very familiar touch on his mind. It was not unlike the time he had ventured with Taiven into the sewers, yet a lot subtler and less alien, like cobwebs brushing against the edges of his thoughts.

He immediately panicked, his eyes swinging from one corner of the room to another in search of his assailant while he tried to mentally block the presence from his mind. Despite his practice with Kyron, he found himself unable to do so.

[So you are Open?] a clear, confident voice resonated through his mind. Unlike the last time, there was no pain or confusing images involved... but that was somehow even more terrifying. In his last encounter, his opponent was obviously unused to dealing with humans. This one knew exactly what it was doing. *[Interesting. You have met one of us before? This will be easier than I thought then.]*

There! Did the shadows in that corner move? He was about to cast a magic missile at the spot when his whole body suddenly froze and refused to listen to him.

A dark shadow suddenly jumped from the patch of darkness in the corner of his room and landed on his bed – right in front of him. It was a spider, like he suspected, but it looked nothing like what he expected. The spider was relatively small for a giant spider breed, no bigger than Zorian's chest, and a lot more compact than the spindly, long-legged varieties that people usually associated with spiders. Wracking his brain, Zorian identified it as a type of jumping spider.

As the creature turned around to face him, Zorian suddenly found himself staring at a pair of giant, solid black eyes that gave the spider a surprisingly human-like face. There was another pair of smaller eyes on its 'forehead', for the lack of a better word, but the two big ones kept drawing Zorian's attention. The other thing he noticed, of course, was a pair of giant fangs that looked like they could pierce his skull with ease.

[Greetings, Zorian Kazinski,] the spider spoke telepathically. *[I have been wanting to meet you for a while now. You and I need to have a long, looong talk...]*

17. Sympathy for the Spider

Chapter 017

Sympathy for the Spider

For a moment, silence reigned (both literal and mental), as Zorian stared into the unblinking eyes of his adversary. Zorian wasn't one of those people who had a phobia of spiders, but it was hard not to be intimidated by a creature that could read your thoughts and have you completely at its mercy due to induced paralysis. He couldn't even try to physically overpower the effect, since the paralysis was a purely mental one – he was quite literally locked out of control of his own body.

The situation wasn't completely hopeless. As a mage, Zorian was resistant to mind reading almost by default. The ability to clear away stray thoughts and emotions, and otherwise discipline their mind, was a must for any aspiring mage. That said, controlling your thoughts for long periods of time was tiresome. It was only a matter of time until a stray thought escaped him and he slipped... *an important secret* to the blasted spider. And resistance to mind reading would do him no good if the creature grew frustrated with his resistance and decided to take a metaphorical sledgehammer to his mind.

In the end, the spider decided to speak first. Or rather, communicate telepathically to him first, as that appeared to be its only method of talking to him. It made sense, really – the spider had no recognizable mouth from which to speak out of.

[You're untrained,] the spider opinionated. [It's a pity. I would have loved to trade techniques with a human psychic. I suppose it's to be expected, though, considering the unhealthy attitude towards mind magic your species has.]

...What?

[Why the confusion? You cannot possibly be ignorant of the Gift,] the spider said, torn between bafflement and amusement at the thought. [See, right there! You just sensed my emotions. What do you think that is, if not empathy?]

Zorian's brain froze for a moment. Him, an empath? That... that was ridiculous! He was neither social nor pleasant enough to be empathic!

[What a strange chain of thought,] the spider mused. [Aranea like me are all Open, yet there are plenty of loners and unpleasant individuals among us. I'm sad to say that some even use their empathy to purposely promote discord within the Web.]

Zorian's mind was momentarily aflame with possibilities before he forcibly reined himself in and shoved those trains of thought into the back of his mind. Focus! This was a horrible time for getting distracted. He had a far more serious issue to think about.

[You must be mistaken,] Zorian thought back, knowing that the spider would pick up on his thought. [It's far more likely you accidentally attached some of your emotions to the telepathic message you sent me.]

[There is no need to be insulting,] the spider immediately sent back. [I am an aranea matriarch. If I had attached something other than speech to our communication, it wouldn't have been by accident. But never mind – if you want to deny the obvious truth of your empathic abilities, I'll play along for now. What I want to know is what your quarrel is with my Web. As far as I know we've never done anything to you, so I'm baffled as to why you felt the need to sic the enforcers at us.]

What was she- Oh. The warning he gave Taiven to watch out for telepathic spiders and the subsequent search for the creatures by the enforcers. Right. Of all the things he had been worried about during this past week, having the spiders track him down for setting enforcers at them had never even entered his mind. Funny how these things worked...

[I'm not sure if you'll believe me, but I never intended to send the enforcers after you,] Zorian sent. [All I did was warn a friend to watch out for you when she went to the sewers. It all seems to have spiraled away from there.]

[Why wouldn't I believe you? I am literally reading your mind as we speak,] the spider noted. [But that still doesn't explain how you even knew about us. We tend to be a tad secretive. Or, for that matter, why you felt the need to warn your friend to watch out for us, since we don't really attack humans without provocation.]

Well crap. How can he possibly explain that without revealing anything sensitive?

[I suppose this is something related to this time loop you're trapped in, then?] the spider asked innocently.

Zorian would have grit his teeth if he could. Damn it, how!? He pointedly didn't think about that!

[Your ability to control your train of thought is fairly impressive for an amateur, but it is a form of mental defense that only works if you know your mind is being read. I observed you and your group for quite a while before I executed this ambush. And while you are Open, and thus hard to read covertly, your friend and sister are virtually defenseless against my powers. They didn't even notice while I was trawling through their memories, much less when I skimmed their surface thoughts.]

Zorian felt like slapping himself for such an obvious oversight. Of course sharing his secrets with the likes of Kirielle would come back to haunt him – a secret is only as secure as its weakest link. He considered the situation for a moment before giving a mental sigh. It was hopeless. The spider had completely outmaneuvered him, and currently had him over the barrel. The creature seemed reasonable enough, but he would have almost

preferred that it was murderous – he could recover from death easily enough, but the things a skilled mind mage could do to him would linger with him on subsequent restarts.

[Your insistence on viewing me as an uncompromising threat despite no hostile moves on my part is honestly getting rather tiresome,] the spider sent, and Zorian detected a distinct note of annoyance in her bearing. Zorian idly wondered how the esteemed matriarch would describe her current ambush and her gross violation of his friends' privacy if not as hostile. [I came here to talk, not fight. The enforcers hadn't even managed to track us down, much less dispatch any of us, so there is no reason for hard feelings on my part. This isn't a revenge run – it's an attempt to defuse a situation before it spirals out of control. I know our kind looks frightening to your eyes, but please stop thinking of me as some slavering beast out to eat you or some sadist intending to torture you into insanity for absolutely no reason. We're no worse than humans, really.]

[I'm not sure that sets me at ease. Humans can be pretty horrible,] Zorian noted. [But I see your point. So what now? The enforcers will get tired of their search quickly enough and leave you alone, and I have no intention of taking any further action against you and your... Web. Problem solved, then?]

[Well yes,] the spider agreed. [But in the process of confronting you I found something a hundred times more interesting than a human kid with a grudge. You don't really think I'm going to just ignore the whole time loop business, do you?]

[I was kind of hoping you would, actually,] admitted Zorian. [It's not really your concern-]

[Oh, I beg to differ,] the spider interjected. [I just found out I'm being effectively memory wiped in regular intervals. I am *greatly* concerned.]

Zorian wracked his brain for a response that could dissuade her from getting involved but gave up after a couple of seconds. He was getting an impression of resolve and stubbornness from the spider, and had a feeling all of the arguments he could marshal were doomed to fall on deaf ears. He didn't know how he could read a giant spider's body language, but apparently he could. Maybe there was something to her claim of him being empathic.

[Look,] Zorian tried, [if we're going to have a serious conversation about this I would really appreciate if you released me from paralysis. This is very uncomfortable and I'd be a lot friendlier if I weren't frozen like this.]

[I don't trust you that much,] the spider told him bluntly. [All you have to do is scream and things could get uncomfortably messy.]

[I'm not going to do that,] Zorian assured. [That would just put my sister and friends in danger. I'm sure you could handle anything anyone in this house could throw at you.]

[Well, I'm not. I've lived too long to underestimate mages,] the spider said. [Tell you what, though. Why don't I simply let you go for now and leave? Later, when you calm down a little, you can descend into the city tunnels and track me down for a nice friendly chat in neutral territory where we both feel a lot safer.]

That... sounded like a great idea, actually. Well, except for the question of why-

[Why would you bother tracking me down when you can just pretend this never happened and ignore my existence entirely?] the spider surmised. [Well for one thing, I can tell you're interested in what I mean by you being Open, no matter how hard you try to hide it. You will never get a satisfactory answer unless you seek me out. Secondly, there is a reason why I accepted the idea that you're trapped in a time loop without dismissing you as crazy. I have important clues that could help you solve this puzzle and break out of the loop, but I'm not sharing them until I get something in return. I'm sure we can agree on a fair price. And finally, working with me isn't just going to be an unnecessary chore like you seem to think. I am a leader of a shadowy group of mind reading spiders that have their feelers throughout the entire city – surely you can see how a group like that could be useful in making sense of this event?]

Zorian swallowed heavily as he finally realized the seriousness of the situation he was dealing with. Her group was that big and organized? He knew the spider before him was a representative of a larger group since she introduced herself as an 'aranea matriarch', but he thought it was just a loose pack consisting of a dozen spiders or so at best. Suddenly the pitch black eyes staring at him seemed a lot more threatening than they were just a moment ago. Gods, what had he gotten himself into?

[I'm glad we were finally able to understand one another, Zorian Kazinski. Rest now, and we will talk when you're less tense.]

Zorian suddenly felt a smothering blanket of telepathic force press itself gently but firmly against his mind. He tried to resist, but the mental attack seemed to ignore his mental defenses entirely. Despite valiant efforts, Zorian soon blacked out. When he woke up a few minutes later, he was alone in the room and there was no trace of giant spider anywhere in the house.

- break -

Afterwards, Zorian thought long and hard about the matriarch's 'offer' and ultimately decided he really didn't have much choice. He somehow doubted she would patiently wait for him if he ignored her for too long, and raising a fuss about her actions would attract unwanted attention to him and might cause the matriarch to retaliate out of spite. And since she knew about the time loop, she was bound to pick something that would haunt him beyond the confines of this particular restart. Of course, there was also the fact that some of the things she said during their brief exchange interested him greatly. The potential benefits of hashing out a deal with her were simply too great to ignore.

That said, he had absolutely no intention of rushing to the damn spider at the earliest opportunity – that would just make him seem desperate. Let her wait for a while. It was a good idea to do some preparations before confronting the matriarch, anyway.

First of all, he needed to know more about these ‘aranea’ he would be meeting with. His previous searches for information about the spiders left him empty-handed, but now he was armed with an actual name of the species and his search was much more successful. He found plenty of descriptions, though they were of much poorer quality than he had hoped. Apparently aranea were considered semi-mythical due to their rarity and there were many conflicting reports circulating about them. Everyone agreed they were sentient and magical in nature, but from there the details diverged wildly. Depending on the author, all sorts of powers were attributed to them, from the ability to assume human form to the ability to manipulate shadows and other, crazier abilities. Zorian could see three possible explanations for this. One, the aranea had a dizzying number of subspecies, all with a wildly different appearance and abilities. Two, the authors were making stuff up. And three, the aranea were mages in the human sense, armed with a flexible spellcasting system capable of producing a wide variety of effects. Knowing his luck, it was definitely number three – the most worrying of possibilities. A group of one-trick ponies limited to mind magic was a dangerous foe, but one that could be countered with enough preparation. A group of mages utilizing a completely novel spellcasting system whose limitations he was unfamiliar with? That was practically the definition of unpredictability.

Still, the aranea he had met never gave any indication of knowing any magic beyond the mind-based one, so maybe this group specialized in the field or something. Having a way to deal with their mind affecting abilities was certainly a must before going off to confront them. One of the books also suggested aranea were vulnerable to light-based attacks, being nocturnal in nature and lacking eyelids. It sounded plausible to Zorian, and he was pretty sure his spell formula skills were sufficient to cobble together some flash grenades. A few more general defensive measures and he should be set. Well, as set as a mage of his own caliber and resources could possibly be – it wasn’t much, but it would hopefully buy him enough time to flee if things turned sour.

The other thing he was trying to puzzle out was the matriarch’s claim that he was an empath. The idea seemed so wrong to him. The stories he’d heard about empaths painted an image of a compassionate, sociable person possessing great wisdom, respect for tradition, and lots of friends. Zorian didn’t really fit this mold. Did that prove anything, though? Empaths were so rare – among humans, at any rate – that any sort of ‘fact’ about them was suspect. As strange as it may sound, he rated the opinion of a giant telepathic spider higher than those of human authors. If he really was an empath, however, why didn’t he... well, know it? You’d think the ability to sense other people’s emotions would be very obvious. He supposed it was possible that his abilities were too weak and erratic to manifest themselves in an unambiguous fashion. Which raised the question - how to discern the truth, then?

Fortunately, empathy wasn’t a particularly sensitive topic so nothing stopped him from asking Ilsa or other teachers for help and information. Before he did that, however, he decided to try looking for help closer to home. He had noticed their landlord had an interest in esoteric branches of magic, even though she wasn’t a mage herself. She had enough books in her house to stock a small library. It wouldn’t hurt to ask, he supposed, and Imaya was a lot more approachable than anyone else he could reach.

He approached her while she was washing the dishes one evening.

“Miss Kuroshka, could you spare a minute?” he asked. “I’d like to talk to you about something.”

“I told you to call me Imaya,” she said, halting her task long enough to give him a mild glare. “And of course I can talk to you, but I have to finish this first. Pull up a chair and wait till I’m done.”

Instead of doing that, however, Zorian moved to help her with her task. She’d be done quicker with him helping her out, and it was a cheap way to score some points with her before asking for help. She seemed momentarily surprised by his gesture, but recovered her composure quickly and continued on as if his action was totally expected.

Once they were done, Imaya sat down at the kitchen table and motioned for Zorian to join her.

“So...” she began. “What exactly is weighing so heavily on the mind of my grumpiest tenant that he would come to me for counsel? The way you’ve been avoiding me this whole time, I almost thought you hated me.”

“I don’t hate you, miss K... uh, Imaya,” finished Zorian, correcting himself after seeing her cross look. “I’ve just been pretty busy, that’s all. Kirielle kind of monopolizes all of my free time here.”

“She is quite a handful, isn’t she?” Imaya said speculatively. “Still, I can’t see what a busy boy like you would want from me. You aren’t trying to seduce me, are you?”

“What!? No!” sputtered Zorian. She was at least twice Zorian’s age, for heaven’s sake! “I am not-“

He stopped himself when he saw the barely restrained mirth emanating from Imaya.

“Very funny, *Miss Kuroshka*,” he deadpanned, deliberately not calling her ‘Imaya’ to spite her. “Very, very funny...”

“It was from my perspective,” Imaya said, laughter dancing in her voice. “But I can see you don’t take jokes at your expense too well, so let’s just move onto the reason you sought me out.”

“Well...” started Zorian, pointedly ignoring her remark about him being too sensitive about jokes. “It’s actually magic related. I noticed you have a lot of books about esoteric magic in your home.”

“It’s a hobby of mine,” Imaya said. “I always did have an interest in magic, especially the rare kind. I even went to a mage academy as a teenager, much like you did. That’s how I met Ilsa, actually – we were classmates back then. But... that was a long time ago.”

Zorian nodded, accepting her last statement for what it was – a request not to pursue that topic further. He was fine with that.

“So I assume you read all these books then?” he asked.

“Each and every one of them,” she confirmed.

“Did any of them perhaps relate to empathy?” Zorian asked. “Specifically, how can you tell if you’re an empath yourself?”

“I did read something about that topic, though I don’t have the book in question here with me.” She gave him a curious look. “Why? Fancy yourself an empath?”

You might be reading a pirated copy. Look for the official release to support the author.

“Well... maybe,” admitted Zorian. “I mean, it doesn’t sound very likely to *me*, but I met an actual empath recently, and she seemed sure I was one too. So I don’t feel comfortable with just dismissing the possibility.”

“Hmm,” Imaya hummed. “And why do you think it’s so unlikely if you’ve been told that you’re one by another empath?”

“Shouldn’t empathy be pretty obvious to the one who has it?” Zorian asked. “Well it’s not obvious to me. Off the top of my head, I can’t think of anything that would indicate I am one.”

“Nothing?” Imaya asked curiously. “I find that hard to believe – the indicators of being an empath are so common and mundane that false positives tend to be a major problem. In fact, a lot of experts insist that there is nothing supernatural about empaths – that some people are simply a lot better at reading people’s body language and environmental cues than most of humanity. It’s far more likely that you’re just ignoring the signs. For instance, can you honestly say that you’ve never had an instinctive ‘feel’ about a person you just met?”

“Well no, I can’t say that,” Zorian admitted. “I get feelings like that all the time. That isn’t anything unusual, though.”

“It might be,” Imaya said. “Just how often do you get such hunches and how reliable are they overall?”

“I...” Zorian hesitated. “I get those feelings pretty much every time I talk to someone. They tend to be pretty accurate from what I can tell. Why? Is that so unusual?”

Imaya gave him a speculative look. “A bit, yes. Every time you talk to someone, you say? How about random strangers minding their own business? Do you get these... ‘feelings’ about them too?”

“Uh, sometimes?” admitted Zorian, shifting nervously in his seat. “Some people have really intense personalities, you know? You can pick them out of a crowd from the other side of the room without even trying.”

“Interesting. How about groups of people? Can you make a spot judgment about the mood of a group without speaking to anyone?”

“Well, no,” said Zorian. “Frankly, the pressure crowds out all other sensations when I’m in a large enough group. If I’m subjected to it long enough, I lose even the ability to make judgments about individuals, much less the group as a whole.”

“The pressure?” Imaya asked, giving him a baffled look.

“It’s a... ah, a personal problem,” fumbled Zorian. “Every time I enter a big enough crowd, I feel this weird mental pressure that gives me a headache if I stay inside long enough.”

Zorian shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He hated telling people about the pressure thing, since most people immediately assumed he was either delusional or making things up. His family, for instance, had never believed him when he tried to describe the phenomenon to them as a child, believing instead that he was making things up so he wouldn’t have to follow them to their various social events. Eventually they grew tired of his claims and threatened to send him to a madhouse if he didn’t admit he was lying, so he never brought the issue up again.

“That’s... an interesting problem,” Imaya said carefully. “Tell me, is the pressure constant or does it vary according to some criteria?”

“It varies,” said Zorian. “The more people there are in a crowd and the more densely they’re packed the stronger it is. It’s also stronger if the crowd is...”

He trailed off as he suddenly realized something. Gods, he was so *stupid!*

“Yes?” Imaya prodded. “If the crowd is what?”

“...emotionally charged for some reason,” finished Zorian lamely.

A short silence descended on the scene, before Zorian rose from his seat and began angrily pacing around the room.

“Your empathic abilities are so strong that you literally feel the emotions of a crowd as tangible mental pressure bearing down on you,” said Imaya after watching him pace around for a while, “and you think there is nothing to indicate that you’re an empath?”

"It's not that easy! How was I supposed to know what the pressure was?" Zorian protested, nervously running his hand through his hair. "It's just... there. It has *always* been there, a constant annoyance that was with me ever since I was a child. Do you have any idea the sheer amount of trouble this thing has caused me? Isn't empathy supposed to be a boon? Most of the time I did my best to ignore it, vainly hoping it would go away in time."

"Well, yes," Imaya agreed. "Empathy is usually depicted as a great gift to the person who has it. But there are plenty of reports of empaths whose powers are so strong or volatile that they are crippled by them instead. Considering some of the horror stories I've read about, your case is relatively mild. It could have been worse."

"It could have been worse" – that could easily serve as a summary of his entire life so far. Oh well – there had to be a way to rein in his errant empathic abilities somehow, and he had plenty of time to find it. The aranea probably knew how, though he suspected he wouldn't like what they would ask in return.

"Zorian?" Imaya asked after a few moments of silence. "I can see this is a somewhat sensitive topic for you, but can I ask you a question? Well, two questions really."

"Sure," agreed Zorian. She did end up helping him, even if he didn't imagine her help to play out the way it did, so the least he could do was satisfy her curiosity.

"I get the feeling that you didn't like the idea of being an empath, even before you knew what you do now," she said. "Why is that? Maybe I am projecting somewhat, but I can't imagine why you *wouldn't* want to possess an inborn magical ability. I hope you don't think you're a freak just because—"

"No, no, it's nothing like that," Zorian quickly assured. "I know a lot of civilian-born students react badly to anything that may make them... abnormal... but I'm not like that. No, the real reason I didn't like the idea of being an empath is... far more stupid than that. Actually, I'm kind of embarrassed to even admit it, so can we just move on?"

"No," Imaya said, a smirk on her face. "This I definitely got to hear."

Zorian rolled his eyes. Served him right for admitting it was embarrassing. Oh well, it's not like she'd remember this conversation once the loop reset.

"All right, but you can't tell this to anyone, okay?"

Imaya mimicked sealing her mouth shut.

"It's because empathy is usually portrayed as a *feminine* ability, one reserved for girls and girly men," admitted Zorian.

"Ahhh," nodded Imaya. "Of course a boy would be bothered by something like that..."

"I'm not sexist or anything," Zorian hastily added. "But I already receive a lot of comments about my supposed lack of masculinity, and they're annoying enough as it is. I really don't want to see how bad they would get if they had this sort of 'proof'."

His family was the worst offender in that regard, especially his father, but he would keep that little tidbit to himself.

"I won't tell anyone," Imaya said. "And if it makes you feel any better, there is no evidence that empathy manifests itself more often in women than it does in men."

"I figured," Zorian said. "Very few magical abilities are gender specific, unless they're artificially designed to be that way."

"And I also think those people have no idea what they're talking about," Imaya said with a supposedly innocent smile that had a hint of mischievousness behind it. "I think you're a very handsome young man who will someday make some girl very happy indeed."

"T-thanks. What was the other question you wanted to ask, again?" said Zorian, trying to change the subject to something less embarrassing. She had her fun, no need to torture him further.

"I assume you will try to develop your ability further?" Imaya asked. Zorian nodded. "In that case, I'd like you to keep me informed about your progress. I find stuff like this incredibly interesting."

Zorian agreed, though it was essentially an empty promise. She would remember none of this after the next restart. Their conversation done, Imaya returned to her household chores and Zorian went back to his room to plan his visit to the aranea. He really didn't want to find out what the matriarch would do to him if he didn't show up soon.

- break -

"Well, this is it," Zorian said out loud, standing in front of the entrance to the sewers. The matriarch didn't tell him where exactly in the sewers she hoped to meet with him, but he knew where he had met the spiders the last time he had been down there, so he intended to start from there. "The point of no return. I once again offer you the chance to turn back. You don't have to risk your life with me, Kael."

He gave a pointed look to the morlock following after him, trying to use his newly found (newly recognized?) empathic abilities to gauge the other

boy's mood. Sadly, the boy's emotions were too well controlled at the moment and his control over his empathy sucked. Regardless of how Kael truly felt about this trip, he was clearly determined to see it through. Why, Zorian didn't know. When he told Kael about the aranea matriarch's ambush and the resulting conversation, he did it because he wanted to have someone to bounce ideas from and Kael seemed like the best choice (he already knew about the time loop and he was clearly very intelligent), not because he had wanted Kael to come with him. Kael, on the other hand, insisted that coming alone on such a meeting was the height of idiocy and that Zorian needed a partner to cover him. Zorian reluctantly agreed, not entirely comfortable with risking someone else's life in this thing, no matter how logical it was. Kael seemed amused that Zorian cared more about his safety than his own, considering that Kael would be restored to normal once the loop restarted and Zorian might not be, but Zorian's moral sense had yet to adapt to the implications of the time loop and he was horribly bothered by the idea of leading Kael to his death in the tunnels and leaving his daughter all alone in the world... even if it was only for a week or so.

"I told you to drop it," Kael sighed. "I'm definitely going with you. If nothing else, then so this 'aranea matriarch' and I can have a conversation about ethical uses of mind magic."

Oh right – Kael was still kind of bitter that the spider searched through his memories in her quest to piece together what Zorian's motives were.

Finally, they descended into the tunnels, Zorian leading the way. He chose his way carefully, occasionally leaving a magical trap behind them in the form of stone cubes covered in spell formula. If they had to flee, the traps should be able to surprise any pursuers by backtracking where the traps were. Most of them simply erected a forcefield to delay the attackers, but a couple had more... aggressive effects. At the very least it should force the pursuers to slow down in order to deal with the cubes and give them enough time to reach the surface.

Kael, meanwhile, was their anti-mentalist support. He had put a mind shield spell on himself, and would remain under the spell's effects constantly. If the meeting at any point turned sour, Kael would immediately cast the spell on Zorian as well. Kael seemed sure that the spiders had a method of communicating with humans other than telepathy and suggested that they both use the spell right from the start, but Zorian knew he had to keep his mind 'open' if he wanted these talks to be in any way productive. His instincts, which Zorian now recognized as his uncontrolled empathic abilities, were telling him that aranea placed great significance on mind-to-mind communication. Shutting them out completely would be seen as an insult, even if they did happen to have alternative methods of communicating.

As they approached the spot where Zorian had first met the aranea during his romp through the sewers with Taiven and her group, he felt a telepathic contact brush against his mind. Like the first time he had met the sentient spiders, this one was cruder, more forceful than the feather-light touch the matriarch had displayed during her 'visit' to Imaya's home.

A stream of psychedelic images and alien emotions hit his mind like a sledgehammer, causing him to stumble back in shock. Kael immediately shifted into defensive posture but Zorian signaled him to stand down. He was pretty sure at this point that the aranea he was in contact with had no hostile intentions. Apparently the minds of humans and aranea were different enough that telepathic communication was difficult, and this particular one never learned how to do it correctly.

As suddenly as it came, the 'communication' stopped. The presence remained, however, and Zorian soon felt another aranea connect with him, using the first one as a sort of telepathic relay.

[Ah, so you've managed to find us in the end,] the distinctive mental voice of the matriarch spoke in his mind. [Good, I was beginning to fear I should have left instructions on how to find us. Stay where you are, please, I will be with you shortly.]

"She's coming," said Zorian to Kael, who nodded gravely.

They didn't have to wait long. The matriarch soon skittered into view, flanked by two other aranea guards. The fact that he was able to pick out the matriarch among the three aranea, despite the fact that all three of them were fairly identical to his eyes, was probably just another proof that he really was empathic. Things like these made him wonder just why he had needed a talking spider to point it out to him before figuring it out.

[I originally intended this to be a private talk between just the two of us,] the matriarch spoke to his mind. [But since you saw fit to bring a guard, I decided to do likewise. Oh well, at least you didn't shut me out of your mind like your friend did, so you're still better than most humans I converse with.]

"Kael isn't here just as a guard," Zorian said, speaking out loud for Kael's benefit. "He is involved in this thing as surely as you are, and I'd like him to participate fully in the discussion. Do you perhaps have a way to communicate vocally for his benefit?"

The matriarch seemed to consider it for a moment before she suddenly started waving four of her front legs in front of her, tracing some complex gesture in the air. Zorian tried for a moment to decipher what she was trying to communicate before he realized she wasn't trying to talk to him.

She was casting a spell.

"There," a feminine voice declared from the direction of the matriarch, though her mandibles didn't move at all. "This is the aranea equivalent of the 'magic mouth' spell that you are no doubt familiar with. It's just a sonic illusion, but it should be enough."

Huh. So they did have more than just mind magic in their arsenal.

"I thank you for your consideration," Kael said guardedly, obviously threatened by the spiders but trying to stay polite.

"Far from me to refuse such a simple request," the matriarch said guardedly. She was obviously a little suspicious about Kael herself, probably because his mind was protected behind a mind shield spell. The spell made him immune to her abilities, but it also seemed to paint him as a threat

to the aranea.

“Please, child,” the matriarch scoffed. Zorian heard the words with his flesh and blood ears, but he also felt them broadcasted to his mind – she might be vocalizing her words for Kael’s benefit, but she clearly wasn’t going to give up communicating with Zorian ‘the proper way’. “I could get past your silly human mind magic any time I wanted to. No, the reason I’m bothered by his mind ward is that it blocks me off from his mind completely. How am I supposed to trust him if he won’t even let me read his emotions and surface thoughts? It’s *rude*.”

Zorian’s mind boggled at the mindset that considered putting your surface thoughts up for scrutiny as being basic courtesy, but he supposed that’s species differences for you. Kael didn’t appear to be as understanding.

“Rude!?” he demanded, indignant at the accusation. “You think you have a right to just barge into people’s minds as you please, no permission given or asked, and you call *me* rude!? You spied on my personal memories, damn it, I have every reason to protect myself!”

The matriarch sent him a telepathic equivalent of a sigh, though no sound was vocalized for Kael’s benefit. “So did I,” she said calmly. “Your friend was a possible enemy that I needed to know more about, and you were one of the weak points I could target in order to get the needed information. Your mind was completely unprotected, after all.”

“So why didn’t you sift through Zorian’s memories, then? Wouldn’t that be quicker and more relevant to your quest?” Kael asked.

“Hey!” Zorian protested.

“I have limited myself to skimming his surface thoughts as a courtesy, because he is *Open*,” the matriarch said. “Among Aranea there is an unofficial custom to ask for permission before delving deeper into the minds of non-enemy psychics, regardless of species.”

Kael narrowed his eyes. “And if a person isn’t... ‘*psychic*’?”

“Flickerminds are fair game,” the aranea matriarch said dismissively.

“All right, let’s stop trying to piss each other off now and get back to business!” said Zorian with a clap of his hands, hoping to halt the argument before it got out of hand. “We were talking about the time loop and how you can help me with that. Before we get to that, though, I really have to ask – when you say I’m ‘open’, are you referring to my empathy?”

Kael gave him a surprised look at that, since Zorian never told him anything about being empathic.

“Being *Open* implies being empathic, but they are not the same thing. Empathy is just one of the powers available to you, and a bit of a low-hanging fruit at that – that’s why you can use it, despite being completely untrained in the psychic arts. Openness often manifests itself as a low, uncontrolled empathy in the beginning, coupled with a gift for divinations and an occasional prophetic dream.”

“I... what?” fumbled Zorian, trying to wrap his head around this new information. Just when he had thought he had things a little figured out, something like this happened. What the hell is being ‘open’ or ‘psychic’, then? Was she saying he was a full-blown telepath or something?

“You could be that with enough training, yes,” confirmed the matriarch. “I can teach you more about it... provided we come to some kind of mutually acceptable agreement about this time loop business.”

“And what exactly do you want from Zorian in that regard?” asked Kael suspiciously.

“Why, my dear Kael, the same thing *you* want from him as well,” the matriarch said with a hint of mockery. “I want in on this time loop.”

For a moment Zorian wondered what she was talking about, but then his eyes widened as he understood what she meant.

“You want to keep your memories with each restart? To loop around with me and Zach?” asked Zorian incredulously.

Kael shifted uncomfortably in his spot, refusing to look at him in the eye, while the aranea matriarch stared straight back at him without a hint of shame on her face.

“I... I guess I can see why you would want that,” said Zorian hesitantly. “I mean, I’m not too happy about my situation, but even I can see that I’m benefiting massively from it. But you seem to have gotten the wrong idea – both of you.” He glanced at Kael, but the morlock was still avoiding his eyes. He probably thought Zorian would be angry at him for wanting to ‘take advantage of him’, but Zorian wasn’t really angry. Just confused. “The thing is, I don’t know how to bring anyone into this loop. I don’t even know how the details of how I got sucked into it, much less how to replicate it. I *can’t* bring you into it.”

“We didn’t get the wrong idea, Zorian,” Kael sighed. “We’re not stupid. We know you can’t do it now. We know you won’t be able to do it by the time this time loop ends.” He gave the matriarch a weak glare. “Or at least *I* know. Maybe the great aranea matriarch knows something this poor flickermind doesn’t.”

“I agree with the morlock,” the matriarch said, refusing to rise to Kael’s provocation. “It is highly implausible that you’d be able to bring us into the time loop as you are now.”

“You’ve completely lost me at this point,” Zorian complained. “What *do* you want, then?”

"My idea was to store memory packets in your mind, allowing your soul to ferry them when the time resets itself," the matriarch said nonchalantly. "It's not quite as good as having your entire soul sent back, but it would be good enough for my purposes."

"And I would agree to that... why?" asked Zorian suspiciously. That sounded like it would require some serious messing with his mind. Far more than he was comfortable with, in any case.

"I'm sure I can find something to tempt you with," the matriarch said, punctuating her message with a mental shrug. "You need information about the loop that I have. You want to learn how to control your empathy. You need my help in countering the invaders. Need I go on?"

Zorian sighed and turned to Kael instead of answering her.

"I wanted to connect you with some people and have you figure out, with their help, how your connection with Zach works. Then you could apply that knowledge to bring me into the time loop," said Kael. "It would probably take quite a few restarts, and I don't have anything nearly as tempting as our esteemed matriarch over there, but on the other hand it is something that will definitely help you learn more about this time loop in the process."

Left unsaid was that those people Kael wanted to connect him with were probably all necromancers and that having them mess around with his soul was every bit as dangerous as letting the aranea screw around with his mind, and possibly more so.

"I see," sighed Zorian. "Well, I'll set aside Kael's proposal for now, since that's not what we came here to discuss."

"That's fine with me," Kael said quickly. "I still have a lot to think about in that regard."

"Right," said Zorian. "Then let's move on to the details of the matriarch's proposal. Just out of curiosity, do you have a name? If we're going to do business, especially so sensitive, I'd like to know who exactly I'm talking to."

The matriarch didn't answer verbally. Instead, she sent a short burst of telepathy containing the same sort of psychedelic jumble of images and concepts that the less-skilled aranea bombarded him with in the initial greeting. Thankfully, this particular burst wasn't painful, just confusing – probably because it was so relatively short. After mentally dissecting the chaotic message in his head, he realized this was the name he asked for. Translating the concepts into something appropriate for human communication proved a bit of a challenge, however.

"Spear of Resolve Striking Straight at the Heart of the Matter?" questioned Zorian curiously.

"As good an approximation of my real name as any," said the matriarch. "And yes, I know that's too unwieldy to use in human conversation. Your language is very crude, so it's hard to translate aranea names into it without ending up with such overdramatic-sounding drivel. You can just continue calling me 'matriarch' and I won't hold it against you."

Kael snorted derisively at the matriarch's swipe against human speech, but didn't say anything. Zorian, for his part, was considering how to proceed.

"Alright then," said Zorian. "You told me that there is a reason why you took the time loop seriously. Why don't you tell us what you mean by that."

Before the matriarch could answer, a loud roar pierced through the relative silence of the tunnel, quickly followed by several more similar ones. Color drained out of Zorian's face as he realized the identity of the creatures that produced the roar.

A band of war trolls were coming their way.

18. The Pact is Sealed

Chapter 018 The Pact is Sealed

He should have known, really – every time he got even slightly closer to getting to the bottom of this mess, some complication sprang up to hamper his progress. It was uncanny. He was half-tempted to conclude the (as of yet unconfirmed) third time-traveler was messing with him, but he would have expected something far more decisive than a pack of war trolls if that were the case.

...and now that he thought about it, it was kind of scary how radically his perspective must have shifted during the last year if he started considering troll war bands a nuisance rather than an existential threat.

[Not this again,] the aranea matriarch complained telepathically. [How do those things keep finding us? I had the whole web warded against divinations and everything...]

Zorian filed in the back of his mind the fact that this wasn't the first time the matriarch encountered the war trolls, but at the moment he didn't really have enough time to consider that little tidbit in any appreciable detail. He exchanged a knowing look with Kael, and then they both turned around and started running in the direction they came from. Zorian motioned for the aranea to follow after them, and received a thought of assent from the matriarch in turn.

[We can't outrun them,] the matriarch noted as they ran. [Especially us aranea – aside from short bursts of speed, we're actually a lot slower than humans.]

[It's fine,] Zorian thought, certain that the aranea would pick up on it. [Me and Kael prepared a couple of surprises for pursuers behind us. They should slow the trolls down enough for us to reach the surface.]

[Ah. An insurance against me in case the talks turned sour?] the matriarch surmised. [You hid it well from my surface scans. I would have been caught totally off-guard if I had truly planned to double-cross you. Then again, I don't think I could have caught up to you if you decided to run anyway, so it was mostly a wasted effort. Or would have been, had there been no war trolls.]

[Information on aranea running speed is a tad hard to come by in human books,] Zorian thought irritably, slowing down to let the aranea overtake him. They were just about to pass the first trap and he didn't want to seal the aranea on the other side of the forcefield along with the trolls. [Can't you use your mind magic to pacify those things?]

The war trolls rounded a corner in a tightly-packed mass of green flesh, howling like lunatics and waving their huge swords and maces around like they were twigs, but Zorian was ready at that point. He sent a pulse of mana into the pair of nearby cubes covered with sigils and a sheet of force sealed the corridor. It wouldn't last long if a bunch of trolls kept beating at it, but he never counted on it being an insurmountable obstacle in the first place.

[Sadly, whoever is controlling them has learned to shield their minds against us after the first few conflicts,] the matriarch said. [It's not foolproof, but we won't be able to pick their defenses apart before they smash us into pulp.]

There was a terrible racket behind them, and Zorian chanced a glance back to the barrier to see what was happening. The sight that greeted him brought a pleased smile to his lips – the trolls had apparently failed to arrest their momentum properly and ended up crashing head-first into the barrier. Probably because the relatively narrow corridor didn't allow the trolls to advance in a single line and the ones in the back didn't let the ones in the front break up the mad charge. Or maybe they just didn't recognize the forcefield for what it was? No matter, the point was that they were currently all tangled on the floor in a great big confused mass, and would take some time to reorganize. That should give them enough of a lead to escape cleanly, even with the slowpoke aranea weighing them down.

Just to make sure he activated the next two barrier traps as well, but the two cubes holding explosive traps he simply scooped up and took with him. They were weapons of desperation, truth be told, and he wasn't sure if he could activate them without blowing himself up along with the target. Besides, he was pretty sure they didn't have enough power to seriously damage a troll, being designed to handle much squishier targets.

Zorian was worried about how they were going to smuggle a trio of giant spiders past the entrance guards, but he needn't have worried – the aranea seemed to be able to edit other people's senses in real time, effectively erasing their presence to the victim. Zorian had to admit he hadn't thought the aranea's mind magic was quite so... *subtle*. It would appear he was still taking them far too lightly.

But anyway, they were back on the surface and totally safe. Huh. He hadn't expected the whole thing to end so... favorably. When he realized a pack of trolls was coming after them, he fully expected he was heading for an early restart. It seemed good things *did* happen to good people occasionally. Still, as happy as he was at his current fortune, his talk with the aranea wasn't finished yet, so the four of them quickly relocated themselves in a deserted alley to continue their conversation.

"We should be safe enough to talk here," the matriarch said in her magically-assisted voice. "I can't sense the presence of any minds that don't belong here. Not even those blasted cephalic rats."

"The what?" asked Zorian.

"Another psychic creature we've recently come to share this city with," the matriarch groused. "They look much like regular rats, except the top of their head looks like it has been sawn off, leaving their brains visible."

"Oh," Zorian said. "I actually saw something like that once, back in my original live-through of this month. I never went down that street in any of the subsequent restarts, though."

"Probably for the best," the matriarch said. "It is likely they are working for the invasion forces. They only appeared recently and the trolls started harassing us when we tried to exterminate them."

"Are the rats intelligent?" asked Kael. "You seem to be implying they're some kind of spies, yes?"

"They are psychic, like us," the matriarch said. "Their minds are telepathically linked to one another, forming a collective intelligence. Individually, they are little more than particularly cunning rats, but the more of them group together, the smarter they get. And the stronger their telepathic abilities become. They're small enough to get anywhere and the death of any particular rat is inconsequential. Each one acts as a relay for the full power and intelligence of the entire swarm. They're almost perfect spies, better than even us aranea. As I said, we tried to get rid of them before they could muscle in on our territory... but we failed to account for the fact they weren't working alone."

"Crap," Zorian said. "With those things running around the city, it's no wonder the invaders are so well informed. They could be pulling information straight out of people's minds without anybody realizing it. All they need is to find one person that is privy to sensitive information and whose mind is unprotected, and they can blow a hole in the whole system."

"Yes," the matriarch confirmed. "Aranea can do something similar, but not nearly to the same extent. We're too big to move as freely through human settlements as cephalic rats do, and our individual members are not as expendable as individual cephalic rats. They can get into many places where we can't, especially warded ones – giant spiders trip defensive wards in ways that a couple of funny-looking rats do not."

Zorian frowned as he suddenly realized something. With these cephalic rats on the loose in the city and working with the invaders, there was no way the invasion organizers remained ignorant of the time loop in every single restart. Zorian himself had not advertised his situation much, but Zach did. Sometimes very visibly and explicitly, if Zach hadn't been speaking in hyperbole when Zorian talked to him. So whoever was controlling the cephalic rats knew about Zach being a time traveler in at least some of the restarts... and never did anything about it. Zorian found that difficult to explain. Did they just refuse to believe what their agents on the ground were telling them? That sounded uncharacteristically sloppy considering how well the invaders seemed to be organized otherwise.

"An interesting point," the matriarch said, breaking him out of his thoughts. "I'm beginning to understand why you're so reluctant to deal openly with this Zach. But we're getting distracted here, dancing around the real issue. You heard my offer, Zorian. I have been very generous about my information thus far, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to put my foot down now. I want a straight answer – will you let me send a memory packet through you or not?"

Zorian sighed. What a difficult question. He wanted – no, *needed* – what the matriarch was offering... but he really didn't trust her with this. And really, how could he? Mind magic was only a hair's breadth better than soul magic in terms of abuse potential, and that was only because mind magic had well-established counters whereas soul magic did not.

"You're asking a lot," Zorian complained.

"I offer a lot," the matriarch countered. "And besides, I'm taking as big of a risk here as you do. I have no guarantee that you will actually track me down in each restart and alert me to the memories I stored inside your mind. What stops you from playing along for a few restarts, until you've gotten everything you wanted from me, and then meticulously avoiding contact with me for the rest of the time loop? Nothing. I have taken a leap of faith and decided to trust you. Is it so wrong to expect a similar commitment from you in turn?"

A short silence descended on the scene as Zorian digested her words in his head. He supposed there was some merit in what she was saying, though he wasn't quite buying the idea that she was risking as much as he was. His risk was more final and immediate than hers.

Oh well. No pain, no gain.

"Fine," he said. "I agree to your terms."

- break -

"You are a braver man than I," Kael told him as they slowly walked back to Imaya's place.

Zorian absent-mindedly rubbed his forehead instead of giving him a proper answer. He didn't feel noticeably different after the aranea was finished with the procedure, to be honest. Kael was worried about possible dormant command spells that the matriarch may have implanted along with the memory packet, but...

"I actually had a reason to think it might not be as dangerous as it sounded," Zorian finally said.

"Oh?" Kael prompted.

"Yeah. I researched the limitations of mind magic before we went to talk to the matriarch, both the classical spellcasting type and the telepathic abilities of magical creatures known to use them. I even asked Ilsa and our combat magic instructor for advice. I probably made them really

suspicious of what the hell I'm doing but whatever. Anyway, everyone seems to agree that even expert mind mages can't just rewrite someone's brain on a whim, or in a stealthy manner. It takes a great deal of time and you basically have to knock the victim unconscious or they will be fully aware of what you're trying to do to them and fight it with everything they got – physically and mentally. If the matriarch tried to do something truly terrible to me, we would have known quickly enough."

"I'm not really sure I could have done much for you, even if I noticed the deal had gone bad," Kael said. "I do have some modest combat skills, but I doubt they'd be enough to fight off three giant spiders that are all within jumping distance of me."

"It doesn't matter," said Zorian, reaching into his pocket to retrieve one of his two unspent explosive cubes. He held the stone cube in his palm so Kael could see it. "All I had to do was send a pulse of mana into these and both me and the matriarch would have ended up in pieces. I very much doubt the matriarch could have incapacitated me faster than I can pulse my mana."

"Suicide?" Kael asked, sounding surprised. He shook his head. "I stand by what I said. You are a braver man than I."

"As Zach once told me, the time loop skews your perspective on dying," said Zorian, putting the cube back in his pocket. Now that he thought about it, his impromptu security system reminded him of the similar system that protected Zach from the lich's soul meld spell. He should probably start carrying something like this all the time, just in case. Something way lighter and less noticeable than two big stone cubes, though.

"It's still possible she used something less comprehensive than a full personality rewrite on you, though," Kael said after a few seconds.

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"I know," Zorian said. "But you heard what she said at the end. The memory packet should last for a year, at minimum. I plan to avoid the aranea in the next several restarts while I look for a way to examine my mind for such things. Even if the magical expertise is beyond me, I'm sure I can find an expert to hire so they can take a look at me."

"Ah. Good idea," Kael nodded. "Of course, that means it will be a while before you can question the matriarch again. She did say she wasn't saying anything until you deliver the memories to her reborn self in the next restart."

"An acceptable delay," Zorian shrugged. It wasn't like he had nothing to do while he waited, and Zach had indicated he would be spending the next several restarts in Cyoria as well. Hell, even in this particular restart he had to see what Haslush would do about the invasion and what Zorian could do to help him. If he ended up staying in Cyoria during the summer festival at all, that is. He wasn't sure he wanted to do that, all things considered. "So... do you want to tell me your master plan for getting yourself into this time loop now or later?"

"Later," Kael grumbled. "I haven't even ironed out all the details in my head yet. Stupid spider and her big mandibles..."

"I'm pretty sure her speech didn't involve mandibles in any way, actually," Zorian said. "It was a pure sound illusion."

"Really? Wasn't my mind shield spell supposed to protect me from mind effects like illusions, even if they're beneficial?" asked Kael, frowning in confusion.

"The matriarch's spell wasn't targeting your mind. It created actual sound waves," said Zorian.

"But then it's a sound spell, not an illusion no?" Kael stated more than asked.

"Officially, any spell that creates 'fake' scenery is an illusion, regardless of the means it uses to do so. Many illusions are made primarily out of actual light and sound, but they're still illusions."

"That's... surprisingly imprecise," Kael said.

"I understand it's because a lot of actual structured spells from illusionary disciplines combine mental illusions with... well, let's call them physical ones. Theoretically, you could separate the two into different categories, and many tried, but in the end the Eldemar mage guild decided to just admit defeat and lump them together."

"How surprisingly practical of the Guild, then," Kael said. "I guess even they get an attack of common sense from time to time."

Zorian said nothing. He didn't need empathy to deduce that his morlock companion had a bit of a grudge against the Guild for some reason. Personally, Zorian thought the mage guild was doing a pretty good job overall, but he wasn't so impressed with them that he would defend them in front of others.

The rest of the walk passed in relative silence.

- break -

As the start of the summer festival approached, Zorian became more and more certain that Haslush wasn't going to do much about the invasion. He's wasn't sure whether the man had decided Zorian's 'suspicions' were merely a rumor or whether he was ordered to drop the issue, but he no longer seemed very interested in the whole matter. For Zorian, this was a sign that he should take Kirielle and get out of the city before the invasion starts – he had no interest in getting murdered by the invaders again, and even less in having Kirielle die alongside of him.

He would have to see whether he could talk Kael and Imaya into leaving with them.

But although the date was fast approaching, such problems weren't a pressing concern yet. Currently, he just wanted to have something to eat and lie down a little. Kirithishli had given him some truly mind-numbing tasks to perform today, and he wasn't in the mood for plotting. Conveniently, the moment he walked into the house he was assaulted by the smell of food wafting from the kitchen. Imaya's insistence on keeping her informed of his comings and goings was somewhat annoying, but Zorian had to admit it was convenient how she timed her meals to match his and Kael's schedule.

He entered the kitchen and was immediately tackled by Kirielle.

"Brother, I hurt my hand!" she wailed, waving her hand in front of his face. "Hurry, you have to heal it!"

Zorian snatched her wrist to stop her from moving her hand so much and inspected the 'grievous injury'. It was a shallow cut – a scratch really – that would probably heal on its own by the end of the day. Out of the corner of his eyes he could see Imaya trying not to laugh.

Zorian suppressed the urge to sigh. He knew his family would make fun of him if they knew he was an empath, but he honestly didn't expect Kirielle to descend to this level. She *knew* he wasn't a healer, association between empathy and the healing arts notwithstanding. Though considering his excellent mana shaping skills, he would probably make a good healer with enough training... something to consider, at least.

Schooling his face into a serious expression, he slowly turned Kirielle's 'injured' hand this way or that, pretending to study it in detail. Finally, after a thoughtful hum, he looked Kirielle straight in the eye.

"I'm afraid there's nothing to be done, Miss. We will have to cut it off," he concluded gravely. He then turned towards Kana, who was sitting at the table but studiously watching the entire exchange, and gave her a deep, meaningful look. "Fetch the saw."

Kana nodded seriously at him and motioned to leave the table, only to get stopped by a laughing Imaya who assured her that he was 'just joking'. Zorian was pretty sure the little girl understood that all too well and was just playing along. Did they even *have* a saw in the house?

In any case, Kirielle wrenched her wrist out of his grasp at his declaration and pouted at him.

"Jerk," she declared, sticking her tongue out at him.

The meal was relatively quiet, except for occasional outbursts from Kirielle. But that was Kirielle for you – she was a loud person by nature, though Zorian was pleased to say she did have calm periods from time to time. Mostly when she was reading or drawing. It still surprised him a little every time he saw her do that, since it seemed rather out of character for someone like Kirielle to be so absorbed into a book or a drawing. Doubly so because he knew from personal experience that mother and father didn't think much of hobbies like that and tried to discourage them as much as possible.

After the meal, Zorian retreated back to his room, Kirielle following after him. Zorian didn't feel in the mood to chase her off and let her, but she seemed to be in a fairly agreeable mood today and left him largely at peace. He was currently sitting cross-legged while practicing his shaping skills, while Kirielle was lying on her stomach and drawing something on the floor, a small pile of papers scattered around her. Eventually, though, her pen stopped moving and she spent the next several minutes nervously chewing on the tip of it. Zorian was versed well enough in her tics by now to know his peace and quiet would end soon after.

"Zorian?" she suddenly asked.

"Yeah?" he sighed.

"Why do you study so hard?" she asked, giving him a curious look. "Even though nothing really matters in this time loop you're stuck in, you still keep working all the time. Don't you want to have fun from time to time?"

"You're wrong," Zorian said. "First of all, everything matters. You are what you do, and if I were to start doing stupid things just because there is seemingly no consequence for them, those actions would eventually come to define me. Secondly... I actually find studying fun. Well, maybe not all of it, but you get the idea." There was a short silence, but Kirielle seemed reluctant to continue the conversation, even though she clearly wanted to say something. Zorian decided to help her out. "Why do you ask? Is there something you would rather be doing?"

Kirielle's eyes darted between him and the pile of drawings on the floor several times, before she finally reached a decision. She scooped up the papers into a neat stack and promptly plopped into Zorian's lap.

"Can you look at my drawings and tell me what you think?" she asked excitedly.

Oh. Well that wasn't too bad. He never paid much attention to her drawings, especially since she tended to hide them whenever he tried to get a better look, but from what he had glimpsed they were pretty good. Hell, he was feeling in a good mood so he wouldn't even mock her... too... much...

Damn.

Zorian watched and listened in silence and Kirielle animatedly showed off the fruits of her labor, explaining what the drawings represented. Not that she needed to do so, because the drawings were frighteningly realistic. She wasn't just good – she was freaking amazing. Zorian could swear

he was looking at drawings of a professional artist rather than some childish drawings of his little sister. One of the drawings was a very detailed scene of Cyoria's cityscape that was so chock full of little details that Zorian was shocked Kirielle actually had the patience to put them down to paper, never mind draw them properly.

"Kirielle, those are absolutely amazing," he said honestly. He had intended to make a few jabs at her skill at first, but he honestly couldn't see anything remotely worth mocking in these. "Why on earth is mother not bragging to everyone about having a budding little artist for a daughter?"

Kirielle shifted uncomfortably in his lap. "Mother doesn't approve of me drawing. She won't buy me any supplies and she yells at me whenever she catches me doing that."

Zorian gave her a baffled look. What? Why on earth would she do that? Mother was close-minded and status-obsessed, but not actively malicious or anything. He picked up Kirielle's stack of drawings and leafed through it again, stopping at a very nice portrait of Byrn, the boy he and Kirielle interacted with on the train to Cyoria. Kirielle had never even seen the boy after that day, yet she was able to create a very faithful rendition of him, presumably by working from memory alone.

"Wait," he said suddenly. "Is that why you keep stealing my notebooks and writing supplies?"

"Ah! I thought you didn't even notice," she admitted. "Since you never complained about it to mother. Thanks for that, by the way."

Well, he never said anything because he thought mother wouldn't do anything about it, even if she knew. But hey, all was well that ended well, and he certainly wasn't going to tell Kirielle the truth and destroy whatever gratitude he just earned...

"What about the books, then? I suppose she disapproved of those too?" Zorian guessed.

"Yeah," Kirielle said, clutching her drawings close to her chest. "She won't buy me any. She says a lady shouldn't waste time with such things."

That he actually expected, truth be told. Mother didn't like it when *he* spent his time reading, so he imagined she would be none too happy to see her darling daughter picking up such a hobby. Still didn't explain why she didn't want Kirielle to draw, though.

"Well, that's mother for you," said Zorian. She seemed to be getting rather upset, and Zorian could totally understand. It would appear her situation had more similarities to his own than he had ever dreamed about. 'Don't worry about it. It was the same with me at first. She'll lay off once she sees she can't bully you into submission."

"It's not the same!" Kirielle suddenly snapped at him.

Now what?

"Kiri..."

"You don't get it! It's not the same because you're away from home most of the year and she can't do anything to you while you're away! You and Daimen and Fortov are here, learning magic and doing whatever you want, *and I'll never get to do that!*" She buried her head in Zorian's chest, her tiny little fingers digging painfully into his arms. "It's not the same because I'm a *girl*..."

Zorian wrapped his arms around Kirielle, rocking her gently to calm her down while he digested what she was telling him. Finally, a realization hit him. Traditionalists in Cirin often held a view that educating female children was a waste of time and money. Hell, some of them even went against the law and refused to send their daughters into elementary school to learn how to read and write! It didn't help that mage academies tended to be rather expensive, even lower quality ones...

"They aren't going to send you to a mage academy..." Zorian concluded out loud.

Kirielle shook her head, her face still buried in his chest.

"They say I don't need it," she said, sniffing sadly. "They already have a marriage arranged for me for when I turn 15."

"Well isn't that nice for them," said Zorian coldly. "You know what, Kiri? You're right. It's not the same. I had to defy mother and father all by myself... you, on the other hand, have *me*."

Kirielle peeled her face from his chest and gave him a searching look.

"You never wanted to help me before," she accused. "Every time I asked you to teach me magic you blew me off."

"I didn't know what you were dealing with," Zorian shrugged. "I thought you were just impatient and didn't want to waste my time on something you were going to learn in due time anyway. But rest assured, if mother and father don't change their minds over the years, you will always have a teacher in me."

She stared at him for a few seconds before she snatched one of his arms by the wrist and gripped it in an oath-making position.

"Promise?" she asked.

Zorian squeezed her hand tighter, eliciting a yelp from her.

"Promise," he confirmed.

- break -

Two days before the summer festival, Kael finally laid out his plan to Zorian. It was a lot less concrete than the matriarch's one, and basically involved talking to a number of individuals that Kael thought might know something about soul magic or time travel. None of them were in Cyoria, though, and would require Zorian to basically blow off school in order to travel across the country (and in some cases even across borders). The morlock also hinted that he knew a couple of individuals living in the Great Northern Forest, but he admitted it might be a bad idea to visit those until he could actually defend himself properly. Zorian memorized the names and locations, but it would be a while until he could visit any of them.

The end of the restart was totally uneventful – He, Kirielle, Kael and Kana boarded the train heading out of Cyoria on the night of the festival and spent the last remaining hours playing card games to pass the time. Imaya refused to go with them, which was fairly unsurprising, giving the suddenness of their request and the sketchy nature of their warnings.

And then, like always, Zorian woke up in Cirin, Kirielle wishing him a good morning. He didn't take her with him this time, which turned out to be a good idea, as Zach did indeed come to class in that particular restart. The other time traveler tried to strike up a conversation with him, but Zorian was determined to avoid him and gave him a cold shoulder. After a few days, Zach seemed to admit defeat and gave up, but Zorian could see that the other boy was watching him way more closely than he did most people. Zorian's freedom to act as he saw fit was consequently somewhat limited, and he mostly amused himself with honing his shaping skills, combat magic, divinations, and spell formula. Taiven was not informed of the 'rumors' behind giant telepathic spiders in the sewers, as he didn't want to meet the matriarch just yet.

An entire restart passed in this fashion. And the next one. And the next. In total, it took six restarts before Zach stopped approaching him at the start of each restart and otherwise pay attention to him. Despite this, Zorian was pleased with what he had accomplished.

He had spent three of the six restarts learning from the ever-enthusiastic Nora Boole (the other three restarts were spent learning from Haslush) and had gotten skilled enough at spell formula to create a lighter, more inconspicuous version of his explosive suicide switch. It was still a cube, though a much smaller one made of a combination of wood and stone – he made two of them in each restart now and attached them to his key so they would appear as an ornament.

He had also found a mage specializing in mind magic and had him inspect his mind for implanted compulsions and other nasty surprises. Sadly, the man was rather baffled by the memory packet and couldn't confirm it only contained memories. He did confirm, however, that it was currently dormant, and also that no other magical effect was currently active in his mind. If there was some kind of trap in the memory packet, it had yet to activate.

The seventh restart saw Zach still in class, but he appeared to have finally given up on Zorian as a lost cause. It was time to get down to business.

19. Tangled Webs

Chapter 019 Tangled Webs

One thing Zorian found interesting about the restarts was that small, seemingly inconsequential choices exerted incredible influence on what happened in the restart. Conversely, actions that he felt should throw everything out of whack often tended to have muted, or even non-existent effects. Case in point, the last time he had gone into the sewers to meet the matriarch, convincing Ilsa to grant him an access permit to enter the sewers had been trivial. Thus, when Zorian marched into Ilsa's office a few days after the beginning of classes, after he realized Zach had decided to give up on befriending him in this particular restart, he expected the request to be easily granted.

He was wrong. No matter how much he reasoned and pleaded, Ilsa refused to allow a newly-minted mage like him to risk his life in the underworld. He tried to demonstrate his (at this point rather advanced) combat magic skills, but Ilsa wasn't interested and simply shooed him out of her office. It took nearly an hour for Zorian to calm down and realize what the difference was.

Last time he came with Kael. A self-taught genius mage who was also a single parent and had probably dealt with danger before in his life. If Kael thought Zorian was ready to go down into the tunnels beneath the city and was willing to accompany him to boot to make sure he was safe, then that was good enough for Ilsa. This time he came alone, though. No Kael, no permit.

Not that Zorian was going to be deterred by such a minor setback, of course. He knew at least one person who already had a permit to go down there and might be persuaded to help him.

"Roach, I hate you. You do know that, right?"

Zorian released a long-suffering sigh, opting to keep an eye on the tunnel in front of him instead of turning around to look at Taiven. He didn't need to turn around to know she was making faces at him. "No, Taiven, I don't. After all, you only told me so five times already. Maybe I'll remember it if you say it a few times more?"

"I just don't get it," Taiven complained, ignoring his sarcasm. "You refused to follow me down here when I asked you, saying it's too dangerous. And then you come back to me a few days later, asking me to take you into the tunnels."

Yes, and he was very much regretting it. Why couldn't she have waited by the entrance like he had asked her to? He still didn't know how he was going to explain aranea to her when they found the damn spiders. Hopefully the aranea would be savvy enough to hide in the shadows while he talked to them telepathically – kind of a hassle, but should be enough to arrange a proper meeting in the future somewhere more accessible.

"I mean, were you trying to piss me off?" Taiven continued, undeterred by his lack of response. "Because I'm feeling pretty angry right now, let me tell you..."

"Taiven, please," Zorian pleaded. "I said I was sorry! How many times do I have to apologize? You of all people should understand, considering how many times you pulled stuff like this on me."

"Not quite like this," Taiven grumbled. "At least tell me where we're going."

"I actually don't know," admitted Zorian. He was relying on one of the aranea scouts inadvertently contacting him by trying to read his mind, since he had no real idea where their home territory was. "I'll know it when I see it, though."

"Zorian, I swear, if this is your idea of a prank..."

"I'm totally serious," Zorian assured her. "I'm pretty sure we're getting close, it shouldn't take too..."

An alien presence skittered across the surface of his mind, withdrawing immediately when it realized its intrusion was detected. Its telepathic touch wasn't as subtle as that of the matriarch, but Zorian definitely received an aranea feel from it.

"Wait!" he protested, hoping that the aranea hadn't physically fled already. "I want to talk to you, aranea! I have important information for your matriarch!"

"Zorian, what the hell are you talking about?" Taiven asked, thoroughly baffled at his actions. "And who are you talking to, anyway? There is no one here."

Zorian said nothing, choosing to wait in silence for a while. Seconds passed in utter silence as Zorian patiently waited for a response from the spider. Taiven seemed to be torn between feeling irritation at his behavior and agitation at the potentially dangerous situation. Eventually, the aranea decided to re-initiate contact...

...by stepping into the open right in front of him and Taiven.

Taiven gasped in shock at the appearance of the huge hairy spider and immediately moved to draw her spell rod, only for Zorian to snatch her by her wrist and motion her to stand down. She gave him a baffled look before glancing at the spider in front of them. The aranea stood motionless, observing them silently with its huge pitch black eyes but not making any threatening gestures. Taiven seemed to realize that the spider was no

threat at the moment and relaxed, moving her hand away from the spell rod attached to her hip.

“Zorian...” she began, radiating a mixture of anger and worry at him.

“I’ll explain later, I promise,” Zorian said with a sigh before turning to deal with the aranea. “And you! Couldn’t you have been a little more discreet? Why couldn’t you have stayed in the shadows and contacted me telepathically?”

The aranea reconnected to his mind and sent a burst of amusement at him. [If you wanted to speak to me telepathically, why haven’t you called out to me telepathically to begin with? Aren’t you psychic yourself?]

Zorian grimaced. If only it was that easy. Finding information about mind magic from his fellow mages was like pulling teeth, since the mage guild took a very dim view on mind magic of any sort, no matter how benign. Nobody could tell him what being ‘psychic’ meant, much less teach him how to telepathically contact someone. He did track down a spell that allowed a mage to establish a telepathic connection with someone, but the spell was painfully crude – it worked only on other humans, the target had to be willing and able to lower their spell resistance, and the link only allowed word communication devoid of emotional and other connotations.

[I am untrained,] admitted Zorian. [I don’t know how to contact someone telepathically. I only know how to piggyback answers on a connection someone else made.]

He wondered about that, actually. Nobody taught him how to do that, yet the concept seemed to come naturally to him. Is this what it meant to be ‘psychic’? Perhaps being psychic simply meant he was some sort of instinctive mind mage with inborn skills in the field.

[That’s so sad,] the aranea said. [You are incomplete. But I suppose it could always be worse. You could be a flickermind like your friend there.]

Zorian glanced at Taiven, suppressing a snort of amusement. It was a good thing he was talking to the aranea telepathically, because he could just imagine how Taiven would react if someone called her a ‘flickermind’.

“What?” Taiven asked, apparently having noticed his look.

“Nothing,” Zorian mumbled, shaking his head. [Miss aranea, I- err, you are a miss, right?]

It was hard to tell, but he was pretty sure the aranea he was talking to had a ‘female feel’ to her. Plus, the aranea were led by a matriarch, so it would make sense for outsiders like him to mostly meet the female members of the species.

[All aranea are female,] the spider said.

[What, really?] Zorian asked. [How on earth does that work? Do you just divide like microbes or spontaneously get pregnant or what?]

[Nothing that exotic. It’s just that our species is extremely sexually dimorphic, and the males are both smaller in stature and pretty much subsentient. We don’t consider them real aranea,] the spider explained. [If you talk to one of us and they’re smart enough to talk back, they’re female. The males would probably attack you in lieu of conversation, though you’re unlikely to ever meet one unless you somehow gain access to one of our settlements.]

Zorian digested that information for a few moments and then decided not to ask any further questions on the topic. It was interesting, but not really relevant at the moment, and he didn’t know how long he had before Taiven snapped from the pressure and started throwing around spells and demanding answers. She wasn’t exactly a paragon of patience.

[I’m sorry to be inconsiderate but I really need to speak to the >matriarch<.] Zorian said, doing his best to reproduce and send the weird aranea ‘spear of resolve’ concept that the matriarch said was her name instead of calling her ‘the matriarch’. Hopefully this would help convince the aranea to take him seriously when he told them about memory packets from another timeline.

[I have been listening to your conversation with >Watchful Eyes That Miss Nothing of Importance< for a while now, Zorian Kazinski,] the familiar presence of the matriarch announced.

Having the ability to throw your mind to any location inhabited by one of your subordinates must be really convenient.

[It is,] confirmed the matriarch. [Now. How about you introduce yourself and tell me how you know my real name? Then we can move on to this important information you have for me...]

[I am Zorian Kazinski, mage in training.] Zorian said. [And the reason I know your real name is that you told it to me yourself... right before you shoved a memory packet into my mind and told me to give it to you later.]

[I... don’t remember that,] the matriarch said hesitantly.

[I know,] Zorian said. [If you had been able to retain the memory of that encounter you would not have bothered with putting the memory packet inside my mind.]

[That’s quite a claim,] the matriarch said after a short silence. [How do I know that you’re telling the truth? This could be a trap. You could be related to the people that have been sending trolls at us all this time.]

[Honestly, I have no idea how to prove the truth of my words to you,] Zorian said. [Your other self was sure you would have a way to prove the authenticity of the memory packet, even without additional proof, and didn't tell me anything I could convince you with.]

[I see,] the matriarch said. She was silent for a few seconds as she thought it over. [Give me access to your mind so I can see this memory packet for myself.]

[Of course,] Zorian said, offering no resistance when the matriarch delved deeper into his mind. He turned to his companion, who seemed to be at the end of her wits as she watched his silent staredown with the giant spider. "Taiven, I'm communicating with the spider telepathically. Everything should be fine, but if I fall to the floor and start screaming in the next few minutes, feel free to blast it to oblivion."

He still had his suicide cubes with him, but it never hurt to have precautions. Taiven immediately nodded at his words and Zorian saw the aranea in front of him twitch her legs uncomfortably at the implied death threat. The matriarch said nothing, too absorbed in her work.

Several minutes later, the matriarch's presence retreated from his mind.

[I... I need to think about this,] the matriarch said in a daze. [Come back in three days and we'll talk.]

[Wait!] protested Zorian. [I need a way to get down here without going through any of the official entrances. Otherwise I will need to bring Taiven here every time I want to come down here, and I'm not sure she'll want to talk to me after this.]

Zorian was immediately blasted with a mental image of the local section of the tunnel system, along with 8 different ways to access it from the surface without going through any checkpoints. Wow, people weren't kidding when they said the local underworld had more holes than a sponge. In any case, that was apparently the end of his conversation with the aranea, because the spider in front of him promptly leaped into the darkness and disappeared, leaving him alone with Taiven.

He cast a weary glance at said girl, only to flinch at the frown she was giving him.

"Okay, now that the spider is gone, I guess you can explain to me what on earth I just took part in. Start talking," she commanded.

Stupid aranea and their indiscretion... what the hell was he going to tell Taiven now? Hmm...

"Before we get to that I would like to point out that if you had waited for me at the entrance like I asked you to--"

"Zorian!"

"Just saying," said Zorian lightly. "Okay, here's the thing. I'm an empath. Do you know what that means?"

"Not... really..." Taiven said slowly.

"It means I can sense other people's emotions," said Zorian. "And sadly, the ability is currently an instinctive ability. I have no conscious control over it, and it often causes problems for me, so I have been looking for help in mastering it. Sadly, I have found no one willing to help me on the human side, so I... broadened my horizons. The spider you saw was an aranea – a sentient, telepathic species of spiders that I hoped to talk into teaching me how to control my powers."

Taiven stared at him for a few moments, opening her mouth at one point only to simply close it soon afterwards. "And what did they say?" she finally asked.

"They'll think about it," Zorian shrugged.

Taiven shook her head in disbelief and started walking toward the exit, motioning him to follow.

"Let's get out of here, monster charmer," she said. "We should discuss things somewhere else. Somewhere I can sit down and have a drink."

He followed.

- break -

True to her words, Taiven led him into an open-air tavern so they could sit down and relax while they talked. Well, so *she* could sit down and relax – Zorian didn't find the experience all that fun, especially since she made him pay for her drinks out of his own pocket. Strangely enough, Taiven accepted most of his explanation without complaints, finding his decision to seek help from a species of monstrous spiders 'ballsy' rather than reckless and stupid, but things degraded from there. She was displeased that he had originally planned to meet with the aranea without backup and wanted to know whether he had done things like that before, and who had watched his back if he had. That kick-started a heated argument about the wisdom and necessity of 'going solo' and his ability to fight his way out should things ever go sour. Zorian honestly didn't know whether she was upset because he was putting himself in danger, or that he hadn't invited her along with him.

Probably the latter, since she quickly started insisting he should take her with him next time he went into the sewers to meet the aranea matriarch. She'd only get in the way and try to get him to spill his secrets to her, so he refused. Taiven didn't like that at all, but seemed to realize nothing would be gained by pressing the issue directly. Instead she switched tracks and suggested she should help him develop his combat magic. Zorian knew this was a trap – that she simply wanted to wipe the floor with him in a 'friendly spar' in order to show him how overmatched he was against a serious opponent (and thus be more amenable to take her along like she asked) – but he agreed anyway. He was curious how long he would last

against her, and he had nothing to lose except perhaps his pride.

That was how he found himself facing Taiven in her family training hall, fingering his rod of magic missiles and trying to decide how to approach this... practice spar. The training hall was, according to Taiven, heavily warded to protect people inside from spell damage, but usage of lethal spells was still not recommended. Sadly, while the ban on lethal spells was totally sensible for a spar, it completely eliminated a lot of his arsenal. He never really put much thought towards battles that weren't the 'kill or be killed' sort, so his spell choices tended towards the destructive end of the scale.

"I see you invested into a spell rod," Taiven said with a confident smile. "Must have cost you quite a few pieces."

Left unsaid (but heard loud and clear) was the implication that the money was wasted. Zorian had no chance in hell of overwhelming Taiven's defenses with magic missiles, and they both knew it. That's why he didn't even intend to try – getting into a battle of attrition with someone who had bigger mana reserves than he did was a fool's game. The prominently displayed spell rod was a deception, intended to give Taiven the wrong idea about his opening moves. His real ace in the hole was the shielding bracelet hidden under his right sleeve.

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"I made it myself," Zorian said. "So it didn't cost me anything."

"Really?" Taiven said, surprised. "I had no idea you were that good at spell formula. I mean, I knew you were interested in them, but..."

"You have your talent for combat and I have mine," Zorian said smugly. He was quite pleased with himself for getting so good at spell formula – not only was this something he had been interested in since before the time loop, it was also something that could easily ensure his financial independence once he found a way out of the time loop. Spell formula were widely known to be a difficult field to master, and experts in the field were well paid for their services. Zorian was already good enough that he could start taking commissions today if he was so inclined, and would only get better as he went through the restarts.

"Whatever. In the end, you are overmatched even in the equipment department, despite your fancy self-made spell rod," said Taiven, stretching her hand to the side of her and causing a staff mounted on the nearby wall to fly straight into her palm. He knew it was a spell staff even before Taiven channeled a burst of mana into it and caused a series of glowing yellow lines to light up across its surface.

"Show-off," he said. He was definitely learning how to do that himself one of these days.

"Ready?" Taiven asked, pointing the staff threateningly towards him.

"Ready," confirmed Zorian, twirling the spell rod in his hand.

Taiven reacted immediately, sending a small missile swarm consisting of 5 magic missiles at him. She was fast, far faster than him, and Zorian could see in her face that she considered herself already victorious.

"You are way too presumptuous, Taiven," he thought, raising the hand that held the spell rod in order to erect a shield in front of him while throwing a vial full of white liquid at her with his other hand.

The missile swarm crashed into Zorian's shield like a hammer. If Taiven had been facing old Zorian, the one that existed before the time loop, then this would have been the end – any shield he may have erected to defend himself would have been sloppily done and would have broken like glass under the onslaught. But she wasn't. She was facing Zorian the time traveler, who had spent quite a lot of time repeating this month. Almost two years, by his count.

In the grand scheme of things, two years was not a huge amount of time. Nonetheless, that was still two years of continual combat magic practice, most of it focused on a handful of spells - including shield. His shield spell was nearly flawless. The plane of force was practically invisible when not under strain, and Zorian could overcharge it a great deal to strengthen it further.

The shield held. The missile swarm crashed against it ineffectually, causing the nigh-invisible surface to turn opaque under the strain but doing little else of note.

Before Taiven could collect her wits and try another attack, Zorian sent a mana pulse at the vial flying towards her. The vial shattered in midair, as if crushed by some unseen fist, and a thick white smoke billowed forth from the spot as the liquid turned to gas.

The vial wasn't anything special, just a simple alchemical mixture that caused coughing fits in whomever inhaled it, but it was enough to incapacitate Taiven, who stumbled out of the smoke dazed and off guard. Zorian mercilessly used her moment of weakness to send a smasher straight into her torso, hoping that was the end of the fight but half-expecting Taiven to throw a shield at the last second to save herself.

Something, perhaps his empathy, warned him to dodge when Taiven suddenly thrust her staff towards the incoming missile (and by extension, him). It was a good thing he did, because she didn't cast a shield – she launched a massive battering ram of force that batted his attack aside like a snowflake and continued towards him unimpeded. Sadly, his dodge was only partial, and while he avoided the main thrust of the attack he was still caught in the outer area of effect. The attack sent him spinning like a rag doll and he soon found himself crashing head-first into the cold, unforgiving floor of the training hall. It was probably only because of the cushioning wards in the room that he didn't end up with a cracked head or a concussion at the end of it.

Since Taiven seemed to be more interested in coughing her lungs out than trying to finish the fight, he remained on the floor for a while, waiting for his head to stop spinning. Apparently he made the coughing gas a bit stronger than he intended. He laboriously climbed back to his feet and walked towards the recovering Taiven.

“You have a very strange definition of non-lethal,” he told her.

“Serves you right, you *cough* cheater!” she growled.

“I got you good though, didn’t I?” Zorian smiled.

She huffed and swung her staff at him lightly, obviously expecting him to dodge the slow-moving object. In the interest of showing off, Zorian erected a shield instead, causing the staff to bounce off and wrench itself out of her hand.

Taiven looked at the shield curiously and gave it a couple of good hard knocks. The plane of force didn’t even turn opaque, much less give way to her hits.

“What the hell is that shield of yours made of, anyway?” Taiven asked. “It took 5 missiles without breaking and it looks... different. It’s almost entirely transparent; I can see it only because I’m standing so close to you at the moment. Back when we were fighting, I didn’t even see it until my attack hit. I thought you were trying to shield yourself with your hand or something at first.”

“It’s just a shield spell, just greatly overcharged and superbly executed,” said Zorian. “I spent a lot of time practicing that spell.”

“Still wouldn’t have helped you without that stupid trick you pulled,” Taiven scoffed. “This was supposed to be a spell battle, dammit!”

“You said you wanted to see how I fight,” Zorian shrugged. “By the way, how did you know where to fire that attack of yours? You had your eyes shut pretty tight from what I could see.”

“Oh. That’s just a little trick one of my teachers taught me,” Taiven said. “I doubt it would help you much, though – it’s pretty wasteful in terms of mana usage.”

“What do you mean?” Zorian asked.

“Well, it’s a pretty simple move that involves expelling a large quantity of mana and saturating the area around you with it. You can then sort of sense your surroundings through the resulting mana cloud. The information you gain is very rudimentary, but you can easily spot concentrated mana constructs like that magic missile you threw at me. I actually didn’t know where you were, even with the aid of the mana cloud, but I figured that if I aimed in the direction from which the attack came from I’d probably catch you as well.”

That sounded... awfully familiar. Zorian was pretty sure he used the exact same thing for his secret unlocking trick, except that he focused more on using the mana cloud as an extension of his tactile sense rather than perceiving mana sources. Of course there was quite the difference in scale from flooding a lock with his mana to saturating the entire greater area around him. He simply couldn’t afford to be that wasteful with his mana.

However...

“Taiven,” he began, “let’s say for a moment that I saturate a large-ish bubble of air around my head with this method. Would I be able to sense mana-charged marbles within that volume with this method?”

Taiven blinked and gave him a curious look. “I... suppose. You’d probably have to spend some time mastering the skill to get a cloud sensitive enough to detect such low-powered sources, though.”

“But it would be easier than trying to sense mana-charged marbles with my inborn mana sense alone, right?” Zorian pressed.

“Way easier,” Taiven confirmed. “Actually, just about any method would have been easier than *that*. Gods, you’d have to be, I don’t know, archmage-level good or something to sense a mana source that weak with no spells or other aids.”

Zorian suddenly felt incredibly stupid. Of course Xvim’s task seemed impossibly difficult – he was doing it wrong! Xvim probably expected him to use a method like this to sense the marbles. The asshole just didn’t bother giving him proper instructions on how to go about doing it. Or any sort of instructions, for that matter.

Gods, he hated that man.

- break -

Following an argument about who won their little spar (Zorian claimed it was a draw, Taiven claimed she totally won in the end), Taiven insisted on more fights to resolve the issue, and Zorian saw no reason to refuse. He lost all subsequent fights, of course – Taiven was strong enough to simply overpower him if she so chose and he no longer had the element of surprise on his side. Still, he felt he had done well, since Taiven actually had to work to bring him down. Even she admitted that if he caught his opponent off-guard and was ruthless enough in his opening moves he could bring down even professional battlemages, though she warned that he could easily get in legal trouble that way. The mage guild looked very dimly on people who escalated fighting into the lethal realm, even in self-defense.

And anyway, finding out what exactly Xvim expected of him made the whole thing worth it all on its own. Most of the skill was already familiar to

him, so it only took a few hours until he was able to create a diffuse mana cloud around his head. Granted, he couldn't really feel mana sources as such, but a marble was a physical object as well. Thus, when Friday came around and Xvim unveiled his oh-so-clever training method to him, Zorian calmly identified where the marbles were going as they zipped around (and occasionally at) his head. Xvim wasn't impressed, of course. He simply started throwing a quick succession of marbles at him and demanded that he sort them by magnitude of mana emissions. Which he couldn't do, of course, since he was sensing them by more rudimentary means. Oh well, he wasn't too concerned – now that he knew what to do, he fully expected to master the skill properly soon enough. Possibly by the end of the restart, unless Zach decided to tackle another dragon or something similarly insane.

Fortunately, Zach's primary interest at the moment was trying to organize some kind of 'mother of all parties' that involved inviting the entire class to his mansion during the summer festival. Being aware of the time loop, Zorian was one of the few people who understood what Zach was doing. He was trying to get as many students as possible out of harm's way without having to explain anything to them. Zorian had no idea what Zach planned to do with all those people when the attack started, or how he intended to deal with Ilsa and her insistence that everyone must attend the school dance.

3 days went by, and Zorian was back in the sewers. Finding aranea proved very easy, since they were expecting him this time. Any doubts about whether or not he was going to be taken seriously were wiped out when the forward scout he met took him to a familiar figure. The matriarch had decided to talk to him in person, rather than simply project her mind through one of her subordinates.

[Well, I have had time to digest the memories my... 'other self' sent me.] the matriarch began. [The story is... not as implausible as you might think, and the memories contained some pretty damning proof. I suppose we should 'swap stories' now, no? Of your experiences, I only know the basics you told your friends, and you know precious little of why I'm not scoffing at the idea of time travel.]

[I suppose that would make sense...] Zorian said carefully.

[But you want me to go first.] the matriarch surmised. [Very well. First thing you should know is that my web has been in a conflict with your so called 'invaders' for several months now. They were an infuriating, but manageable opponent... up until a week ago, when they suddenly developed a disturbing amount of precognition about our tactics and abilities. They had counters for secret skills that have been passed on from matriarch to matriarch for generations and have never been used within living memory up until that moment. They had counters for personal abilities that were unique to a single aranea. They even seemed to know how we were going to react in response to their increased threat and aggressive moves. In short, the amount of insight they possessed about us was downright implausible. Believe it or not, time travel was seriously discussed as a possible method they were using to obtain their information.]

[Not divinations?] Zorian asked.

[We know divinations, child.] the matriarch said. [If there is a field of magic beside the mind arts that we excel at, it is that. It is good that you mention divinations, though, because they hold a piece of the puzzle as well. You see, our web routinely tries to forecast the future with divination, with varying amount of success – highly disruptive events tend to make any future forecasts useless. What do you think happened when we tried to forecast the future during the past week?]

[It didn't work?] guessed Zorian.

[Oh it worked. It gave wildly different results every time we repeated the forecast, no matter how little time passed between one forecast to the next, but it worked. So long as we didn't try to extend the forecast beyond the day of the summer festival. Beyond that date, the forecast returns a blank. Each and every time. It is as if everything beyond that date simply ceases to exist.]

Zorian swallowed heavily. He had often wondered what happened to everything when the time loop restarted itself, but had ultimately dismissed the question as unknowable. He didn't know whether to be relieved that he had no need to worry about leaving a soulless corpse in some alternate reality or disturbed that everything was literally being deleted when the time loop reset.

[I'm surprised I hadn't heard about that,] he remarked. [You'd think that some of the human oracles would have noticed something like that.]

[You underestimate the difficulty of future forecasting.] the matriarch said. [It takes quite a bit of skill to read the future, and the process is time consuming and tedious. It doesn't help that the results are often useless... or worse, misleading. And even if you do bother to forecast the future, odds are that you're only doing it for few days at the time, since the predictions get more and more unreliable the further you try to extend the predictions. I hear complaints that such forecasts are a waste of time all the time from my fellow aranea, and our oracles can actually achieve a small measure of accuracy in their predictions. Still, I imagine you're right – there are probably human organizations that have run the forecasts and encountered the same thing, but are keeping quiet for a variety of reasons. Nobody likes a doomsayer... well, nobody of any authority, in any case. It would be nice to have independent confirmation of our findings, but I suspect few diviners would feel comfortable with sharing their secrets with a bunch of giant spiders. Perhaps if a certain young mage with an interest in divinations were to talk to them?]

[I'll see what I can do,] said Zorian.

[I'll give you a list of names,] the matriarch said. [Now how about you give us some details about the time loop and your experiences in it?]

Zorian gave them a basic rundown of the situation, leaving out many of the details he considered irrelevant and a tad too personal. The matriarch had only given him the bare bones version of their story as well, so he didn't feel too bad about that.

[That bond between you and Zach is really inconvenient,] the matriarch remarked. [I don't blame you for not taking a chance with it, but are you

sure you can't talk to Zach without triggering it? Who knows what useful things the boy knows about this whole thing? Surely if you inform him of your fears he will agree to keep his distance.]

Zorian wasn't nearly so sure. He knew Zach meant well, but he always did have problems with patience and self-control, and none of his previous encounters with the boy convinced him he'd changed all that much in that regard. Zach would have probably found another time traveler immensely fascinating and kept pushing at the boundaries until the soul bond either activated fully or was shown to be harmless.

[I'm surprised you haven't already ripped the knowledge from his mind,] Zorian remarked. [Isn't he a... err, 'flickermind'?]

[He isn't psychic, but he does have some skill in shielding his mind,] the matriarch said, not at all ashamed to admit she had already tried to steal his memories. [Not well, but enough that I can't do more than read his surface thoughts. Now stop dodging the question.]

Zorian sighed. [Everything I found out about soul bonds suggests that there probably isn't any bond between me and Zach. Soul bonds tend to be really obvious to even basic detection spells. My divination instructor in one of the previous restarts showed me a spell for detecting soul bonds and I used it in school a few times – every student with a familiar is clearly connected to their partner, and the two soul-bonded twins are also clearly bonded to each other. There is absolutely no link between me and Zach that I can see. There is no way an accidental side-effect of an offensive soul mutilation spell has such sophisticated effects when even properly created soul bonds light up easily on detection spells.]

[Curious,] the matriarch said. [What is it, if not a soul bond, though?]

[Kael thinks that when the soul merge was terminated by our deaths, the link between us was *cut* rather than carefully untangled. As a consequence, a piece of Zach's soul ended up fused to mine, and the reverse is probably true for Zach. The control function of the time loop probably got confused at that point, and rather than decide which one of us is the real Zach decided to simply loop both of us.]

[That would explain why Zach was absent during the first few restarts, and why he was so very sick when he finally did show up,] the matriarch said. [You probably both spent a number of restarts in a coma while your souls healed and integrated all the foreign bits, but he probably drew the short end of the straw when the spell was cut and ended up with far more soul damage than you.]

[It would,] agreed Zorian. [And honestly, it's the most plausible explanation I've got.]

[So why don't you want to talk to Zach, then?] the matriarch asked. [Oh, I see... the third time traveler.]

[Yes. It's pretty obvious at this point that there is at least one more person inside the time loop besides me and Zach. That someone is aiding the invaders and has gods know how big of a lead on me in terms of time spent in the time loop, so I definitely don't want to catch their attention. And they know of Zach. I mean, they have to – he really isn't all that secretive about his status as a time traveler and his activities. But they aren't doing anything about it. Zach is clearly trying to fight the invaders, so why leave him unmolested?]

[Because his actions don't matter in the long run,] the matriarch guessed. [From what you told me, he's trying to become strong enough to personally contest the entire invasion force. There is not much chance of that happening, even if he has all the time in the world to prepare.]

[That, and he's possibly already been neutralized,] Zorian said. [I'm pretty sure that Zach is the key figure in this time travel business - the original time traveler. He has too much potential in terms of money, family legacy, mana reserves and so on – he could benefit from the whole time loop setup better than virtually anyone else, and I don't think it's accidental. Furthermore, if I am indeed in this time loop because I have a piece of Zach's soul fused to mine, that means it's him the time loop recognizes as the legitimate focus of the spell. The thing is, his past actions indicate ignorance of any sort of purpose or master plan, as if he had simply been dumped into the loop with no warning or information.]

[You think his memories have been edited,] surmised the aranea.

[I think Zach entrusted his secret to the wrong person,] Zorian said. [They couldn't just get rid of Zach – as I said, he is the key to this spell – but they could eliminate him as a threat. Shift his attention in a harmless direction and so on. But I'm not Zach. I am not integral to this time loop in any way, and can be disposed of at whim. If I talk to Zach, and he's being watched, or if Zach is unable to keep his mouth shut in front of the wrong people, I could end up being... deleted.]

[Well...] the matriarch said. [You're certainly one paranoid human. Then again, that might be the only reason why you're still in possession of your entire memory, so maybe I shouldn't talk. You do realize you're going to have to talk to Zach at some point, right?]

[Hopefully not before I identify the third time traveler,] Zorian said.

[Then we should make it a priority to track him down,] the matriarch said.

[How?] Zorian asked. [I don't even know where to start. It could be anyone.]

[Considering you said Zach managed to kill old Oganj single-handedly, it is clearly not 'anyone'.]

[He wasn't always that strong, though,] Zorian pointed out. [In the first few restarts, any decent mage could have overpowered him, even some of our classmates. For that matter, it could be a matter of backstabbing rather than losing in combat – someone could have drugged him or lured him into a heavily warded trap area.]

[Even a classmate, you say?] the matriarch asked speculatively. [That's interesting. Didn't you say Zach is fairly obsessed with learning more about

the rest of your class? He would probably think nothing of sharing a secret with one of them, especially since they're 'just' students... How well do you know them as a whole? Are any of them acting strange?]

[I'm... not really very close to any of them,] Zorian admitted. [I don't think I would know if they started behaving strangely, so long as they didn't go completely out of character. I can think of a few that I'm sure aren't time travelers but...]

[Try to investigate,] the matriarch said. [It would be terribly embarrassing if it turns out the third one was hiding in plain sight all along, no? Try to see if you can connect any of them with the invaders as well.]

The matriarch gave Zorian a list of human diviners that might know more about the irregularities related to future forecasting and they both agreed to meet in another three days. Zorian was a bit annoyed that the topic of his empathy and getting it under control never came up but he supposed the matriarch wanted to see how useful to them he was before investing their time to teach him their (possibly secret) mind arts.

It was nice having someone on his side in this whole tangled mess. He just hoped he wasn't making the same mistake with the aranea that Zach did with the person behind the invasion.

20. A Matter of Faith

Chapter 020 A Matter of Faith

Zorian didn't like temples. Partially it was due to his bad experiences with them as a child, but mostly due to his inability to understand the reverence with which the priesthood spoke of the vanished gods they were supposed to be venerating. Virtually every story he had read or heard about the age of gods made the divinities sound like gigantic jerks, so why would anyone want them *back*? Nobody could ever give him a satisfactory answer to that question, least of all his parents, who were religious only so long as the neighbors were watching.

The temple in front of which he was standing at the moment did nothing to dispel that unease. The large, dome-like building on the outskirts of Cyoria was larger and far more imposing than any other temple Zorian had previously been in, despite being described as one of the smaller ones in Cyoria. Still, the aranea matriarch had claimed this temple housed the best (human) future forecaster in the city, so his unease would have to be set aside for the sake of accomplishing the mission.

He hesitantly stepped towards the heavy wooden doors that served as an entrance to the temple, warily glancing at the huge stone angels that flanked the doorway. Lifelike and grim-faced, the angels appeared to gaze down on him as he approached, judging him and finding him lacking. Try as he might, Zorian couldn't completely dismiss his unease with the statues, since there was a very real possibility they were guardian golems or some other sort of security. He was just about to open the door and walk inside when he noticed a series of images carved into the door and paused to study them.

Although the carvings on the door were fairly stylized and disjointed, he recognized instantly what they were about. They formed a crude sort of comic, depicting a familiar story of how the world was created according to Ikosians (and by extension, most religions drawing their traditions from them). According to Ikosians, the world was originally a swirling, shapeless chaos, inhabited only by the 7 primordial dragons. One day, the gods descended from the higher planes of existence and killed all of them save one. This last one they refashioned into the material world that humans now inhabit, turning her body into dirt and stone, her blood into water, her breath into air and her fire into magic. The vast networks of tunnels stretching beneath the surface of the world are dragon veins, now empty of blood that had been turned into the seas but still flooded with magic emanating from the Heart of the World – the fiery, still-beating heart of the primordial dragon that rests somewhere deep underground. Far from being content with her fate, the World Dragon still rages against her bounds, giving birth to natural disasters like volcanoes and earthquakes. Unable to strike back against the gods themselves, the dragon takes her anger out on their favored creations – humans – by utilizing her heart, the one thing the gods have not seen fit to take away from her. Pieces of it continually flake off from the main mass, giving birth to horrifying monsters whenever they hit the ground, at which point said monsters begin their ascent to the surface to terrorize mankind...

And so on. Zorian didn't believe there was much truth in the old story, but the whole thing was pretty horrifying if one took it at face value. With gods like that, it was no wonder the Old Faiths were steadily losing converts to new religions that popped up after the gods disappeared.

"Can I help you with something, young man?"

Zorian wrenched himself from his musings to look at the man who spoke to him. He found himself facing a young, green-haired man in priestly robes. The man's relaxed posture and friendly smile set Zorian at ease, but he couldn't help but wonder about that green hair. As far as Zorian knew, the only people who naturally had green hair were members of House Reid, and it seemed rather out of character for one of them to go into clergy. That particular house was infamous for their links to crime syndicates.

"Maybe," allowed Zorian. "I am Zorian Kazinski, mage in training. I was wondering whether Priestess Kylae was around and willing to talk to me? Oh, and sorry about worrying you. I suppose I had been staring at the entrance a little too long."

"Junior Priest Batak," the man introduced himself. "And don't worry, a lot of people are intimidated by the gates. It's why I like to greet newcomers personally like this. As for Kylae... well, she is currently in the middle of a ritual, but if you're willing to wait an hour or so I'm sure she'll be happy to hear you out."

"Sure," Zorian agreed. This was far better than he expected, to be honest – he half-expected the man to put him through some kind of religious test before allowing him to see the head priestess. Waiting an hour or two was a minor price to pay really. "Err, so should I come back later or...?"

"Nonsense," the man scoffed. "Come inside and I'll make us something to drink while we wait. It'll be nice to have someone new to chat with for a change. We get so few visitors these days..."

Uh oh, it seemed that he might still end up being subjected to a test, only this one in the form of 'casual' conversation instead of something overt.

"Slow week?" Zorian asked as they entered the temple. The interior was pleasantly cool and fairly dark, with rays of multicolored light streaming down from several high-placed stained glass windows, as well as totally empty. He was grateful for the lack of crowds, but it was unusual to see a temple completely deserted like this.

"I wish," Batak sighed. He led Zorian through rows and rows of wooden benches that filled the temple's main hall, his steps echoing hauntingly behind him. "More like a slow decade. The aftermath of the Weeping has not been kind to this place."

"What do you mean?" Zorian asked. "What does the Weeping have to do with this place?"

Batak gave him a judging glance before sighing heavily. "Though the gods have gone silent, the priesthood has never been completely powerless. Most priests have some skill with magic, and higher ranks can usually call upon the aid of angels and other lesser spiritual entities, but our real claim to authority came from various hidden mysteries that were entrusted to us before the gods departed to the unknown. Over time a lot of those were stolen or otherwise lost, but the one thing where we were always unmatched was the healing arts. As such, when the Weeping Plague started spreading across the lands like wildfire, we were expected to do something about it. Sadly, not only were we as powerless against it as anyone else, our close contact with the infected quickly resulted in massive casualties within our ranks. With the subsequent shortage of qualified priests, peripheral temples like this one were all but abandoned, both by believers and by the Holy Triumvirate."

Zorian looked around him, but failed to see any evidence of decay in the interior of the temple. The temple was clean and intact, and the altar – made out of white marble and framed with silk or some other expensive cloth – looked practically brand new. Plenty of stone statues were scattered throughout the building, seamlessly melding into the walls or support beams, and most of the remaining unadorned space was taken up by wooden panels that had various religious imagery carved into their surface, much like the main doors. In short, it was an absurdly luxurious building by the standards of rural temples such as the one in Cirin, and better maintained to boot. Zorian was almost afraid to ask what Cyoria's main temple looked like if this one was not considered important enough to keep running.

Batak led him to a small, unassuming door next to the altar and ushered him to what was apparently a more informal setting. Rather than being a classical office, it was instead a combination of a kitchen and a living room, far messier than and not nearly as lifeless as the main temple had been. Batak immediately started preparing some tea and started peppering him with questions. The questions were fairly standard – who he was, what he did, where he was from, who his family was, that sort of stuff – so Zorian felt comfortable answering them honestly. Strangely enough, Batak didn't ask him a single question about his religiosity, something Zorian was glad for. Zorian, in turn, asked a couple of questions about Batak and Kylae, trying to understand what they were even doing here if the temple was abandoned.

Batak was all too happy to enlighten him. Apparently the church leadership didn't feel comfortable with simply demolishing the temple... or worse, leaving it to the mercy of the elements and looters. A perfectly understandable sentiment, in Zorian's opinion – not only would it be a shame to consign such a majestic building to oblivion, it would also be a blatant admission of weakness from the church. In the end, Batak and Kylae were assigned to the temple, ostensibly to keep the temple running but in reality more to keep it presentable and ward off thieves and squatters.

Finally, after he finished his cup of tea, Batak finally decided he had danced around the issue long enough.

"So," said Batak. "You never did tell me why you're here, mister Kazinski. Do you think you could perhaps tell me what you need to speak with Kylae about or is this too sensitive for the ears of a mere junior priest?"

Zorian thought about it for a second before deciding it probably wouldn't hurt to tell the man why he came. Future forecasting wasn't illegal or anything, after all.

"Well..." began Zorian. "For a start, I heard that Priestess Kylae is skilled at forecasting the future through divinations."

Batak stiffened slightly, but quickly forced himself to relax. His smile did slip off his face, however.

"She is," he said. "It is a difficult field to practice and I doubt anyone could claim mastery of it in any real sense, but she is as close to an expert as you're likely ever going to get."

"But there are other people who dabble in it regardless, one of which has sent me to speak with Kylae about her findings," said Zorian, privately enjoying the mental image of the aranea matriarch hissing at him for calling her a 'dabbler' in the field. "Some of the results she had gotten out of her predictions have been very... irregular."

All pretenses of good cheer had left Batak's face by the time he finished talking. Silence stretched into uncomfortable seconds. Zorian was starting to wonder if talking about the topic was somehow taboo or if he had otherwise insulted the man somehow when the junior priest spoke again.

"And these... irregularities... when exactly do they appear? How far did your mysterious backer project her predictions before they went haywire?"

It was at this point that Zorian realized: Batak already knew. He was no more a mere junior priest than Zorian was just an innocent messenger.

"There is only one real irregularity, and it appears on the day of the summer festival. Specifically, the prediction returns a blank beyond that date... almost as if the whole world disappears after that point. But you already knew that, didn't you?" asked Zorian rhetorically.

Instead of answering him, Batak spat out a very unpriestly curse and started pacing around the cramped room in agitation.

"I'll take that as a yes," Zorian sighed.

Batak stopped pacing to give him a wary look. After a few moments, the priest visibly forced himself to relax.

"I'm sorry," said Batak, "I didn't mean to be rude, it's just... well, it's probably best if I go and fetch Kylae now so we can discuss this together."

"Isn't she doing a ritual at the moment?" Zorian pointed out curiously. He knew it was a very bad idea to stop magical rituals halfway through, but maybe the ritual Kylae was performing was purely religious in nature?

"Well, sort of," Batak said sheepishly. "I don't think she'll be terribly bothered if I interrupt her. Not for this, in any case. Please wait here while I

go get her.”

As Zorian watched Batak hurriedly leave, he couldn’t help but wonder why Batak was so spooked out by the termination date they uncovered. Zorian was certainly spooked, but that was because he knew exactly what was causing it, but to Batak and Kylae it shouldn’t look terribly unusual. Much like soul-related magics, the field of future prediction was very poorly understood, and strange never-encountered events probably weren’t unheard of. Zorian sincerely hoped that Batak’s agitation meant they knew something important about the anomaly that he and aranea matriarch had missed.

It wasn’t long before Batak came back with a middle aged woman back in tow. Zorian’s first thought was that she was surprisingly young for a high priestess, but he supposed with the manpower shortage among the priesthood they couldn’t afford to be too picky about such things. For her part, the priestess gave him a long, searching look upon entering the room before giving him a strained smile and sitting down next to Batak, so that both of them were facing him.

“Hello, mister Kazinski,” she said. “I am Kylae Kuosi, the high priestess of this temple. I hear you’ve wanted to speak to me. Specifically, that you wanted to speak to me about future prediction?”

“About the termination date on the day of the summer festival, yes,” Zorian confirmed.

A short exchange followed where they both confirmed they were indeed talking about the same thing and then the priestess leaned back on her chair and gave Batak a mild glare.

“I told you it was not a mistake,” she said.

“And I told you it wasn’t you who was the problem,” Batak shot back. “I guess we were both right.”

Kylae sighed before refocusing on Zorian. “I don’t suppose you could introduce me to your master so I can discuss this directly with her? Not that I have anything against you but you just don’t have the necessary expertise and all your information is by necessity second-hand...”

“Sorry,” Zorian said. “I’m afraid my ‘master’ definitely wishes to stay hidden. I agree she could help you better in person, but this is how things are at the moment.”

And it was vanishingly unlikely that would change any time soon. According to current church dogma, aranea were classified as monsters – servants of the World Dragon, to be precise – and therefore not to be dealt with. Kylae and Batak seemed fairly liberal as priests go, but probably not that liberal. Admitting he was speaking on behalf of a giant sentient spider would have led to him being forcibly expelled from the temple at best.

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“If I may ask, though, why has this gotten you so spooked?” Zorian asked curiously. “I mean, I know why me and my, ah, master are concerned, but why do you have a problem with it?”

The priestess looked at him curiously. “And why *are* you concerned, if I may ask?”

“Trade?” offered Zorian, suppressing a smile in favor of a most innocent expression he could manage. Hook, line and sinker.

The priestess shared a silent look with Batak, somehow communicating without words with her fellow priest. Apparently they knew each other quite well if they could manage that. Maybe they were lovers? If Zorian remembered correctly, priests were forbidden to have relationships with each other, and thus had to look for romantic options outside the church hierarchy, but it wouldn’t be the first time such rules were ignored. In any case, after a few seconds they seemed to reach a decision and turned again towards him.

“We will share our concerns with you, but only if you go first,” the priestess said. “And be warned – I can tell when people lie to me. It is a supernatural ability and has never failed me before, so please don’t waste my time with lies and half-truths.”

Well. That was kind of inconvenient. Zorian didn’t detect any attempt at barging into his mind, so whatever ability she had probably wasn’t mind-based in nature. Was she instinctively divining the truth of his statements? Peering into his soul? He supposed she *could* be bluffing, but he somehow doubted it.

In the end he decided to take a risk. He fired off a couple of divinations to make sure they weren’t scried and that there were no cephalic rats around and then started to speak when they returned negative.

“Let’s see if this will be a sufficient price for your help, then,” Zorian sighed. “The reason we’re concerned is that there is a well-funded, well-organized group of terrorists planning to take advantage of the summer festival to cause trouble. Some parts of their plan – like their usage of artillery spells and war trolls smuggled through the Dungeon – was fairly pedestrian. But there is a more exotic component to their plans – one that wreaks havoc with future prediction by its very nature.”

There was a brief moment of silence as the two priests stared at him incredulously.

“That... is not what I expected to hear,” the priestess said. “Gods and Goddesses, this is way above my pay grade. I... don’t think I want to

know more, to be honest. I don't want to get involved into such things."

"Probably for the best," Zorian agreed.

"If that is indeed the true cause of the irregularity, though, then my own reasons to panic about it are largely misplaced," the priestess mused.

"I'd still like to hear about it, if it's not a problem," Zorian said.

"It's about the angels," Batak interjected. "Ever since the gods have gone silent, angels have sort of taken their place. They can't grant magical powers to the priesthood or work miracles the way gods could, but they can be summoned in order to provide advice or give aid with their considerable personal abilities."

"And what did they say about the anomaly that got you so spooked?" Zorian asked curiously.

"That's the thing," the priestess sighed. "We can't ask them because no one has been able to summon them since about a week ago. We've been in contact with churches as far as Koth, and they report the same thing – even the most approachable of celestials are ignoring us. Hell, I've even heard rumors that demon worshippers cannot contact their vile masters any more. It is as if something has cut the entire material plane off from the spiritual realms."

Zorian swallowed heavily. A week ago... the start of the time loop obviously.

"Quite disturbing, isn't it?" said Kylae. "Coupled with the timeline simply cutting off a few weeks from now, well, I must admit it had really gotten me spooked. Finding out the two are basically unrelated certainly makes me rest easier."

There was further conversation after this, but none of it was terribly productive. He promised Batak and Kylae to be discreet about their troubles with contacting the spirit world and left.

Unlike the priestess, Zorian didn't feel like the conversation had eased his worries.

- break -

Following his visit to the temple, Zorian decided to sit down in one of the many restaurants scattered throughout the city and consider this new information with a bit of food and drink. There was no doubt in his mind that the severing of the link between the spiritual planes and the material one was caused by the time loop, but what that meant was less clear. Was the material plane the only one experiencing the time loop, isolated from everything else within some kind of 'time bubble'? The fact that his current timeline seemed to literally end when the time loop restarted strongly suggested this. Apparently the spell wasn't snatching up a bunch of souls and putting them into their past bodies like he initially assumed – it was literally rewinding time itself in the targeted area while leaving a couple of souls intact in the process. No wonder the spell was so easily transmissible – compared to reverting everything one month into the past, the cost of looping an additional soul or two was probably utterly inconsequential.

And that, if true, was very disturbing. That was not human magic. A hundred or so mages in possession of a mana well and a whole lot of time to prepare could affect a medium-sized country at most. The time loop must have enveloped the whole continent, *at least*, for the boundary to have not been noticed after a day or two. News spread fast these days. And frankly, Zorian had a hunch the time loop enveloped the entire planet. This was like something straight out of the age of gods... but if higher beings were involved, why was the time loop allowed to go off its intended course so severely?

His musings were interrupted by the scraping of a nearby chair. Someone had decided to join him.

"Oh," he said. "It's you."

"Is that the way to greet a friend, Roach?" Taiven complained.

Zorian rolled his eyes at her.

"Hi, Taiven," he said blandly. "Fancy seeing you here. I mean, this place is pretty far from your usual haunts. It's almost as if you decided to track me down to this place..."

"That's because I did," Taiven said. "What are you doing on the edge of the city, anyway?"

"I was visiting a temple nearby," Zorian answered. "Lovely architecture."

"You, visiting temples?" Taiven scoffed. Zorian said nothing. "Fine, be that way. I won't pry. In case you're wondering, I'm here because I asked around to see if I could find a human empath that could help you control your powers."

"You did?" asked Zorian, suddenly a lot more alert and enthusiastic about this conversation.

Taiven smiled sheepishly. "I kind of did find someone willing to help you, but I'm not sure whether it's something you're willing to go for. The woman in question is a healer in one of Cyoria's big hospitals and she's only willing to teach you if you agree to an apprentice contract with her and become a full-blown healer."

Zorian clacked his tongue in disappointment. He did intend to learn the basics of magical healing at some point in the future, but that was a long way off. Learning medicine wasn't something you do in your spare time and would doubtlessly require him to dedicate most of the restart on mastering that one field. He had too many things on his plate as it was.

"No, that doesn't work for me at all," Zorian sighed. "I have nothing against healers but that's not the career I'm aiming for."

"Yeah, I kind of figured," Taiven said. "It really would be kind of a shame to let all that work you sank into spell formulas go to waste. I guess the spiders are still your best bet, huh?"

"Yeah," agreed Zorian. "Although... to tell the truth, they have been dragging their many feet in regard to teaching me. Maybe if they thought I actually had valid alternatives to their help they'd hurry up a little? What was the healer's name, anyway?"

Taiven narrowed her eyes. "You've been down there alone again?"

Uh oh.

"Maaaaaybe..."

She reached out across the table and cuffed him in the shoulder. It hurt.

"Zorian, you moron," she complained. "I told you not to do these things alone! Even if you trust the freaky giant spiders that much – and I don't really think you should – there are other things down there! No matter how capable you are, it's always smart to have another set of hands and eyes with you. Unless you think I couldn't keep up with you?"

"I don't think that at all," Zorian said. "I just didn't want to be a bother and..."

"I already said I don't mind helping," Taiven cut him off. "You can't use that as an excuse."

"...and the Aranea are kind of prejudiced against non-psychic people," finished Zorian.

"Non-what?" asked Taiven incredulously.

"Psychic. People who are like me and them. I don't quite have a comprehensive explanation what being psychic entails, but it seems to be some kind of instinctive affinity for mind magic. That's where my empathy apparently comes from – the aranea claim it's a weak form of mind reading, and that I could actually do more once they actually deign to teach me."

Taiven seemed at a loss for words for a moment.

"You're reading my mind?" she finally said. "I didn't give you permission to do that!"

"I'm only getting vague impressions of your emotions, and not even that consistently," said Zorian with a long suffering sigh. "Besides, that's why I'm meeting with the aranea – to learn how to not do that unless I want to. How did you think empathy works, anyway?"

"I guess I didn't," admitted Taiven. "But we're getting off track – why does me not being psychic matter to your new spidery friends?"

"How should I know? Prejudices rarely make much sense."

"Well go ahead and ask them the next time you see them!" Taiven said. "Because if you can't give me a proper answer the next time I ask, I'm going down there to ask them myself, with or without your permission. It's total bullshit!"

- break -

Aside from his visit to the temple, none of the other future forecasters were in any way helpful to Zorian. A fair number of them didn't even want to talk to him, and those that did hadn't made long-term predictions and hadn't noticed anything strange. Well, one of them did *claim* to have done so and found nothing of note, but he was an obvious fraud and spent most of the talk trying to get Zorian to part with his money in exchange for a 'more detailed reading of the future'.

So Zorian turned to the matter of his classmates and the possibility that one of them was the third time traveler. Zorian didn't think there was much chance of that, but better safe than sorry. Besides, it was a good way to look for clues as far as he was concerned, and he had been thinking of getting to know his classmates better anyway.

Including him, there were exactly 20 people in Zorian's class – 12 girls and 8 boys. Of those, there were three people he was almost certain weren't the third time traveler – Akoja, Benisek and Kael. The first two because he actually knew what their normal behavior and personality were before the time loop and had interacted extensively enough with the both of them in various restarts to judge them unchanged, and Kael because of the events that took place in the previous restart. Trying to write down everything he knew about the rest, he quickly found two classmates that were very suspicious: Tinami Aope and Estin Grier.

Noble House Aope had a very shady reputation. The House began its existence during the Witch Wars, when one of the major witch clans agreed to defect to the Ikosians' side if they were given the status of a formal House in return. The Ikosians, ever pragmatic, agreed. No doubt they thought they could milk the renegades for their magical secrets and then quietly sideline them until they could be officially removed, but that never

happened. Instead, the Aope rose through the ranks of the Ikosian political system, leaving a trail of broken rivals in their wake, until they eventually stood on top as one of the more prestigious Noble Houses in all Altazia. This extreme success wasn't a result of *just* being very competent politicians, though – Aope were rumored to practice all sorts of dark, forbidden magic stemming from their witchy roots. Necromancy. Demon summoning. *Mind magic*.

Of course, this was all just a rumor. Certainly no one who valued their life and career would ever suggest that Tinami Aope, the first-born daughter of the current head of Aope household, was practicing forbidden magics. Perish the thought. And in fact, the girl was painfully shy and withdrawn and in general looked like she wouldn't hurt a fly.

That didn't prove anything, though. Beware of the quiet ones and all that. If there was one person in the class who had easy access to magics that could screw Zach over and hijack the time loop for their own ends, it was probably Tinami. Even better, her withdrawn nature would ensure that very few people knew her enough to realize she was acting strangely unless she did something totally crazy.

Estin Grier, the second suspect, was primarily suspicious because of where he came from. He and his family had immigrated to Altazia from Ulquaan Ibasa – the infamous Island of the Exiles. Since the island was populated mostly by mages exiled there in the wake of the Necromancer's War, that made Estin the second person who could plausibly have access to forbidden magics without too much trouble.

Also, Zorian was fairly certain that the mages leading the invasion force came primarily from Ulquaan Ibasa. The island was one of the few places where one could find enough necromancers and war trolls to explain the numbers of them present at the invasion. It was also the last recorded home of Quatach-Ichl – the lich general that fought the Old Alliance in the Necromancer's War and whose physical description matched almost exactly with the lich that had so thoroughly trounced Zach in that fateful battle where Zorian was dragged into the time loop.

Of course, those two were only the obvious suspects, and the third time traveler, if indeed present among his classmates, was no doubt far more cunningly hidden. Realizing he didn't know enough about people in his class to really make a judgment, Zorian decided to seek the aid of the one person who could no doubt tell him something about everyone.

"Hello, Benisek," Zorian said, sitting next to the chubby, talkative boy. "Can I ask you to do me a favor?"

"Sure," Benisek said. "What do you need?"

"I need basic information about everyone in our class. What's the latest gossip about them and so forth."

- break -

[Well, that is certainly an interesting turn of events,] the matriarch remarked. [A confirmation of the cut-off point in the time line and another clue as to the true nature of this time loop is far more than I had hoped for. I must admit I hadn't actually expected you to find anything useful among human diviners, but there you go. I don't suppose you have anything on your classmates yet?]

[Not really,] Zorian responded. [I'm only starting with the investigation. Truthfully, this is bound to be a task spanning numerous restarts, so you shouldn't expect quick results.]

[Yes, of course. Well, I have nothing else to add so unless you have any additional questions we can meet each other next week to check on each other's progress?]

[Actually, I have two questions,] said Zorian.

[Ask away, then.]

[First question: Can you explain to me what exactly you mean by 'flickermind' and why you disdain them so much?] Zorian asked. [You keep saying that word and it sounded terribly insulting and bigoted.]

The matriarch twitched her legs, emitting some complex emotion that Zorian couldn't decode with his limited empathic abilities. That tended to happen a lot, actually, since the aranea were so thoroughly different from humans in both body and mind.

[I apologize if we offend,] she finally said. [It had been quite a while since we had a real, sustained contact with a human, and there are bound to be misunderstandings and points of contention.]

[I notice you didn't actually answer my question,] pointed out Zorian.

[It is like you suspect: a flickermind is a creature that isn't psychic like you and me. I'm sure they can be wonderful people, but I – as well as most of my fellow aranea – find it hard to truly take them seriously. It's like meeting a society of people that are born blind... they can obviously manage without sight, but you'd probably still consider them fundamentally crippled.]

[You never did tell me what being psychic entails, you know?] Zorian pointed out.

[Everything, from the smallest grain of sand to the very gods themselves is connected through the great invisible web that suffuses all creation,] the matriarch said. [Psychic people are open to these connections, and contact the minds of others, or even the universe itself, to perform what you humans call magic.]

[That explanation sounds... almost religious,] said Zorian.

[The great invisible web does feature prominently in our spirituality,] the matriarch admitted. [What was the other question you wanted to ask me about?]

[Ah, yes. I had found a human empath that might be willing to teach me some of her skills. I wanted to ask you for your opinion-]

[No!] the matriarch interrupted. [That's a terrible idea! Your human empaths are bad teachers! Their 'training' consists of nothing but showing people how to shut off their link to the Great Web and keep it closed most of the time! They brainwash their students into believing that sensing emotions is all there is to their powers and that the rest of the mind arts are immoral! They make a mockery of the great gift!]

Zorian blinked in shock. He had intended to produce a reaction by broaching the topic in question, but he had no idea the matriarch would be affected this strongly! Anger and outrage simply *poured* off the matriarch, making it clear that she cared about this issue very, very much. For the first time since his first encounter with her, he remembered that she was actually quite a terrifying creature.

[That's a lot stronger denunciation than I expected,] Zorian admitted, forcing himself to remain calm. [Care to suggest an alternative, then? I really want to get this ability under control.]

[Have I not promised to help you with that?] the matriarch asked.

[And then you ignored the issue completely,] Zorian answered.

[I thought you needed time to come to terms with it. You didn't exactly act thrilled when I first informed you of your gifts. Maybe if you hadn't waited six months before contacting me we would have been on the same wavelength?]

Ouch.

[But no matter,] the matriarch said, [this whole argument is pointless. If you want to learn how to use your gift effectively, I'll be happy to help. Come back tomorrow at this time and we can begin with your lessons.]

She turned to leave before pausing and sending him one final parting burst of communication.

[And then, once you experience the Great Web in its full glory, you can go to that human empath and see for yourself who is right.]

21. Wheel of Fortune

Chapter 021

Wheel of Fortune

In the tunnels beneath Cyoria, Zorian sat cross-legged with his eyes closed, trying to sense the minds of nearby aranea with his own. That was the task he had been given by the matriarch as his first lesson, and it reminded him uncomfortably of Xvim's mana sensing exercise.

It wasn't going too well. That was another thing it shared with Xvim's bullshit lessons.

[It has only been 3 days,] the disembodied voice of the matriarch admonished him. [You've barely even started. Don't be impatient.]

"There's got to be a better way of learning this," Zorian complained. This kind of trial and error method was something he could have done without her help. As far as he could see, the only way the matriarch was really helping at the moment was by being an experienced practitioner ready to step in if something went wrong. Which, now that he thought about it, was quite valuable when messing around with something like mind magic. Or any magic, for that matter.

[That, and there is also the little fact that it's easier to sense and contact Open minds than those of... non-psychics,] the matriarch remarked, fumbling a little towards the end. [I somehow doubt you would find many Open individuals to practice on back on the surface. Fewer still would be willing to let you connect to them. Anyway. I realize that these initial stages are tedious and boring, but they are necessary. And if I have not explained things satisfactorily, I apologize, but I do not know how to do it any better. This ability is not something I learnt, it is something I *do*. Aranea learn how to do this as very young children, much like human children learn how to walk and talk. Can you explain to someone who has been paralyzed all their life how to move their legs?]

Zorian frowned. So he wasn't even able to master telepathic baby skills? Wonderful. Just wonderful. Taking a deep breath to calm himself, he tried to consider the task in front of him and how to solve it. Yes, yes, the matriarch insisted he should just keep trying until he eventually succeeded by sheer weight of effort, but he was a mage damn it! Mages did things smarter, not harder.

Being psychic meant being a natural mind mage. For all that the matriarch kept bringing in her weird aranea spirituality into it, that's what it all boiled down to. A psychic could read thoughts and emotions, trawl through people's memories, hijack their senses and motor control, communicate with them telepathically and gods know what else, but all of it was mind related. Even the matriarch admitted that aranea used modified human magic for things like her speech spell and the rest of their non-mentalist magical arsenal.

Divinations were the key, he felt. If psychic powers were mind-based, why did they also enhance divinations?

[Not all divinations,] the matriarch remarked from the sidelines, apparently following his train of thought. [Only the ones that put information directly into your mind. The Gift helps you interpret the results of such spells more easily, and since most high-level divinations pour at least a part of the information straight into your mind... well, you can imagine how useful that can be.]

Suddenly, something clicked in Zorian's mind. According to the books he read about the mind arts in the academy library, spells that were meant to read people's thoughts were not terribly difficult *in principle*. The problem was that the result was totally incomprehensible to most users, unless they spent years training themselves how to interpret the results. Spells that aimed to establish telepathic communication also suffered this problem, though to a lesser extent – so long as the people in question spoke the same language, they could at least exchange verbal communication in such a fashion. In other words, human mind spells were remarkably like a divination that tried to simply dump its output into the mind of the caster... which wasn't something most mages were equipped to handle.

Taking it all together, it seemed obvious to Zorian that one of the defining powers of a psychic was their ability to make sense of information entering the mind directly – whether it was other people's thoughts or something more exotic, like divination results. The immediately interesting part was that it was a *passive* skill. Using it wasn't something he had to specifically activate, it was a state of being, so if he wanted to sense the minds of nearby aranea perhaps he should stop trying to push his power out towards his surroundings and concentrate inward. He took a deep breath, visualized the results as motes of light around him and then just... opened his mind.

Blazing suns erupted all around him, including a couple in places where he hadn't expected there would be any aranea to begin with. Apparently the matriarch brought more guards with her than she had openly displayed to him.

[Your first success,] the matriarch remarked, her telepathic probe breaking his concentration and causing the entire vision to burst like a dream. [Well done. Things should go a lot faster from now on. I'd congratulate you on your fast progress, but I have to be honest and admit I have no idea how fast humans usually progress in this.]

"Perhaps things would have gone faster if you had actually told me I was doing things wrong," Zorian said with annoyance. "Why didn't you tell me I was supposed to concentrate inward instead of outward?"

[I did; it's not my fault if you dismissed it as pointless aranean superstition,] the matriarch said airily. [And I actually didn't know that the problem lay there in particular. I suppose my tendency to respond to your thoughts makes you think I can understand them in totality, yes? The truth is less impressive, I'm afraid. Telepaths like you and me labor under many of the same limitations that plague human mind magic, it's just that we advance much faster in the field and don't need a structured spell to use our abilities. Unless you structure your thoughts into actual speech, the most I get from you from my surface scans is a very fuzzy image of your current emotional state and your general intentions. This is doubly true because

you're human and I'm an aranea, two radically different species that don't even share the same general body plan, much less mentality.]

"Huh, so language and species *do* matter to a psychic," Zorian remarked. "I was wondering about that."

[It's usually not a big problem, since most creatures tend to think in words when they engage in conscious thought,] the matriarch said. [So long as two creatures speak the same language, they can freely engage in telepathic conversation, no matter how different their underlying thoughts. If they *don't* share a language... well, admittedly, not all is lost. Psychics *can* potentially communicate with completely alien minds. It involves structuring your thoughts into general concepts that are hopefully broad enough to be understood by the recipient but not so broad as to be meaningless. Unfortunately, this method is very crude and tends to be both painful and disorienting to the target. I believe you experienced it already when you met one of the less human-savvy araneas in one of the previous restarts.]

"So it's not just because you're more powerful that you speak with me so easily?" asked Zorian.

[No. I took the time to learn human language, mentality and culture. As did a number of other aranea that occasionally interact with humans. However, our web is extensive enough that most aranea can remain largely ignorant of human ways while they go on about their business, which is why most of my guards are silent around you. Trust me, they aren't usually this withdrawn, but if they tried to talk to you they'd just give you a headache.]

"Does that mean that mental attacks are easier than communication?" Zorian asked curiously. "I mean, if botched telepathic communication is practically a mental assault to begin with, it shouldn't take much to simply fry a creature's brain and be done with it."

[It's called a 'mind blast', and it's the simplest telepathic attack there is,] the matriarch said. [It's also the simplest one to defend against. You should really stop worrying about me attacking you. Aren't the explosives you constantly carry in your pocket enough to reassure you?]

"They help," Zorian said. "But in this particular case I wasn't alluding to the possibility of hostilities between us. I was just curious."

[Well, good. Anyway, we should get back to developing your mind sense before we get too off-track,] the matriarch said. [You made your first successful stab at it, but it is far too shaky to be useable at the moment. You need to be able to sense minds around you instantly, without having to sit still with your eyes closed and preferably while doing something else entirely.]

Zorian sighed. He was definitely getting flashbacks to Xvim on this.

- break -

The rest of the month was fairly unremarkable and mostly spent on honing the mind sense and trying to sense the intensity of magic sources through a mana cloud. Though the matriarch refused to teach him anything until he got his mind sense (relatively) mastered, he already noticed her lessons gave him some rudimentary control over his empathy – enough that he could keep it shut with enough concentration, but not enough to focus it on specific people or otherwise refine it. That alone made the lessons useful, since it should make social events infinitely more bearable for him.

And speaking of social events, Zach had been increasingly pushy about bringing him to his summer festival party. After the boy kept bugging him a few times, Zorian relented. Yes, it would bring him uncomfortably close to the other time traveler for the evening, but he was curious about how his empathy suppression would fare in a live situation and also how Zach's mansion looked from the inside. Besides, he was trying to get to know his classmates better, and this was a good opportunity to chat up some of them without looking completely out of character.

"Is it really okay for me to come with you?" Taiven asked as she walked beside him.

"For the last time Taiven, *yes*. Zach made it clear that the more people we invite along with us the better," Zorian said. Not surprising if you knew what Zach was trying to achieve. "Look, if you don't want to come—"

"Oh no, I totally do. It's not every day you get a chance to attend a party at the Noveda mansion. It's just that I find it a bit strange, that's all. I'm kind of surprised you agreed to come, though – isn't this sort of thing an anathema to you?"

"It's either this or attending the official dance organized by the academy," Zorian said. "My only real choice is to pick my poison."

"Ah, I see," Taiven nodded. "I guess that in that case this does appear to be a better option."

Zorian glanced at Taiven from the corner of his eye, feeling slightly guilty. The truth was that his main reason for inviting her along was to personally see how she would fare against the invaders. He knew she was a lot better than him at combat magic, but probably not all that much better, and he wanted a comparison point that wasn't as ridiculous as Zach or an experienced battlemage like Kyron.

Then again, this was Taiven - she probably ended up fighting the invaders in every restart anyway, just not where he could see her. At least this time she would have the advantage of fighting alongside a combatant of Zach's caliber.

They barely knocked on the door before Zach came along and ushered them inside. He probably knew they were coming the moment they stepped through the outer gate, now that Zorian thought about it – it would make sense to have some kind of detection field woven into the ward scheme that protected this place.

"I'm glad you decided to come," Zach told him as he led them towards the dining hall, where the party was apparently supposed to take place. "Considering how you behaved towards me lately, I half-expected you to ignore your promise to come and stay in your room."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Zorian said curtly. For one thing, Zach hadn't even bothered him all that much in this particular restart. Was the other time traveler trying to bait him into unmasking himself or had he simply spent so much time in this time loop that he was having trouble sorting events according to which time loop they happened in?

"Uh, what's going on here?" Taiven asked, looking between them uncertainly. "Is there something I should know or..."

Zach glanced towards her before turning towards Zorian and giving him a thumbs up. "New girl, huh? Man, you have a new one every time I see you. I wouldn't have pegged you as that kind of guy."

"What?" asked Zorian and Taiven simultaneously.

Zorian was honestly baffled for a moment, but then realized what Zach was mixing up his restarts again. Akoja, Ibery and Taiven: Zach had seen him with all three of them in various restarts. But that... that was totally different! None of them were even interested in him!

"Zorian is a man-whore?" Taiven asked in a worryingly calm voice.

"I am not!" Zorian denied hotly before focusing his anger at an amused-looking Zach. "And you! Stop spreading stupid rumors about me! I know for a fact you've never seen me with a girl until this evening! And you wonder why I've been avoiding you this whole month..."

Zach winced. "Sorry, sorry, I was just messing with you. Don't worry, I'm sure your girlfriend won't leave you over a couple of stupid remarks by yours truly. Or if she does, she was never worth bothering with in the first place."

"Oh really?" Taiven said. "You don't think he'd be devastated to lose a girlfriend as powerful, smart and sexy as-"

"Taiven, don't you start too," sighed Zorian. "Zach, she's not my girlfriend. She's just a friend."

"Who happens to be female," Zach said, wiggling his eyebrows.

"Yes," Zorian said, gnashing his teeth in irritation.

"Ah well, at least you already have a girl to dance with for the evening," said Zach lightly.

Zorian kind of doubted that. Taiven was a very attractive girl, with a nice athletic figure and the face of an angel, and she liked men who were similarly gifted in the appearance department. Chances were high that Taiven would find someone else to dance with once they hit the crowd. Zach maybe, if the way she was checking out his backside was any indication.

"You know, this place is pretty empty," Taiven whispered to Zorian as they walked. "I know he's the last of his House and all, but I can't even see any servants milling around the place."

"Most of the servants were dismissed from service by my guardian while I was still a small child," Zach said. It did not surprise Zorian that he'd heard her – Taiven was very poor at whispering. "Since my parents died while I was still a baby, he had free reign to do what he felt was necessary to keep House Noveda standing until I was old enough to take over. As part of that, most of the maintenance staff and other contractors were found to be unnecessary and fired."

"And you don't agree with his actions?" Zorian guessed. He could definitely detect an undercurrent of hostility when Zach talked about his guardian, which fit in with the fact that he regularly brutalized the man at the beginning of a lot of restarts.

Zach gave him a curious look before sighing.

"Let's just say he and I have our disagreements and leave it at that," Zach said.

"You know, I never did find out what happened to your family," Taiven said. "How come you ended up being the last of your House?"

Zorian punched Taiven in the shoulder for asking such a question of their host, and punctuated it with a firm glare when she shot him a scandalized look. He wasn't sure what she was scandalized about, though – did she really not realize how inappropriate her question was, or was she just surprised it was him hitting *her* for once instead of the usual Taiven-on-Zorian violence?

"Oh leave her alone, she's just being upfront about her curiosity," said Zach. Somehow he knew what had transpired, even though he had his back turned to them when it happened. "I kind of like her attitude, to be honest."

"Figures," Zorian grunted. Now that he thought about it, Taiven and Zach both had the same devil-may-care attitude about things, so *maybe* it hadn't been the best idea to have them meet each other...

And with that, Zach launched into a protracted explanation of the Noveda House's downfall... most of which Zorian completely ignored in favor of studying various paintings and portraits along the way. Truth be told, Zorian had already tracked down all information about Zach and House Noveda that he could get his hands on, so very little of what Zach was saying was new to him.

While tragic, Zach's story was by no means unique, and could be boiled down to two main causes: Splinter Wars and the Weeping.

The Old Alliance was a complicated construct, a patchwork empire made out of a multitude of bickering, semi-independent states that only

sometimes listened to orders coming from Eldemar, but for all its faults it was quite successful at suppressing outright warfare between its member states. Armed conflict was rare and highly limited in scale, especially since the Alliance had no major outside enemies to defend against. Thus, when the Old Alliance shattered and its component states started mobilizing their forces for war, it was the first time in nearly a century that actual war would be waged in the region. And it would be a bucket of cold water straight into the face of every battlemage in Altazia, for it would be the first time ever that firearms were used in warfare on a mass scale.

Firearms were known to Altazia for centuries at this point, but they were not held in very high regard by the generals and decision makers of Eldemar and other powerful countries. Initial attempts to make use of them had shown them to be unwieldy and almost as dangerous to the user as they were to the target. Artillery mages were a lot more mobile and effective than any cannon, and the less said about hand-held firearms the better. Still, enough people remained interested in them that the technology never died and gradually improved as time went by. However, even after naval powers started arming their ships with cannons, even when a couple of mercenary groups began using rifles successfully, handheld firearms were still ultimately seen as a dead end. There was nothing that riflemen could do that a properly trained archer couldn't do better, and bows and arrows were a lot easier to enhance with magic than rifles and their ammunition. The one advantage rifles had over alternatives was that they required almost no training before they could be used effectively, and countries of the Old Alliance had no use for barely trained conscripts.

Until the Splinter Wars, that is. With the dissolution of the Old Alliance, every state suddenly scrambled to arm itself for the coming conflict, and having a passable army immediately was more important than having a proper one a decade from now. Smaller countries, inherently unable to compete with the likes of Eldemar when it came to magical might, invested particularly heavily into firearms as an alternative to combat magic. Eldemar, being one of the few countries with a fully functional traditional army, felt no need to play around with these 'commoners' toys'.

No one really expected firearms to be as devastatingly effective as they ended up being. Even the countries that made heavy use of them expected them to do little except stall the advance of classical armies and perhaps motivate them to look elsewhere for easier prey. Instead, massed rifleman armies absolutely savaged traditional ones, catching established powers completely off-guard. Instead of larger powers gobbling up every minor power and city-state around them and then duking it out among themselves (the outcome everyone had been expecting), the larger powers ended up weakening themselves instead, often splintering into their component parts as their internal enemies smelled weakness. Although nations eventually adapted their forces and battle doctrines to firearms technology, the damage had been done, and every subsequent Splinter War only made Altazia's political fragmentation worse.

This was especially true because the Splinter Wars caused immense casualties to the mage Houses that were the intellectual and political elite of Altazia's nations. The reason was simple – being a battlemage was a highly prestigious occupation and many Houses used their military involvement as a way to gather influence and reputation, which they then used as leverage in furthering their political and mercantile interests. With the advent of the Splinter Wars, the demand for battlemages only increased, causing many more mages to enlist in the various armies in search for glory and wealth. This backfired spectacularly as casualties began to mount. Unfamiliar with the strengths and limitations of firearms, and often outright dismissive of them, many mages fell prey to snipers, artillery strikes and massed rifle fire. Many noble houses were thoroughly crippled by the losses they sustained, House Noveda being one of them.

House Noveda had been fundamentally a military house, even if they were active in a lot of other fields as well. According to Zach, House leadership considered military service to build character, and every male member was expected to serve at least a few years in their youth. Quite a lot of female members enlisted as well. Very closely connected to the Eldemar royal family and very traditionalist in attitude, the Noveda supported Eldemar's military ambitions whole-heartedly, conscripting every available battle-ready member into the war effort. All this meant that when Eldemar began the Splinter Wars by launching a massive, multi-pronged assault on its smaller neighbors, House Noveda members were right there at the forefront of the offensive.

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And they paid dearly for it.

Still, while House Noveda was heavily diminished in the immediate aftermath of the Splinter War, they were not yet done for. Given a few more decades, the House could have recovered somewhat and reclaimed its former glory and political influence. Sadly, that's when the Weeping came and ruined everything.

Nobody knew where the Weeping came from. It simply started to spread among the soldiers one day, a deadly, incurable disease that struck down everyone who contracted it, heedless of age, health or even magic. Once a person contracted it, their death was all but certain – they would first collapse into fever and delirium, then become blind, and then start to leak blood out of their eyes before finally expiring. Regular healers were useless, no magic could cure it, and even the church and its lost mysteries of the gods failed to halt its spread. In the end, nobody could do anything except wait for the disease to burn itself out, which it eventually did. As mysteriously as it appeared, the Weeping disappeared after blazing across the entire continent.

The exact number of deaths from the Weeping was still debated, but most writers agreed that somewhere between 8 and 10 percent of Altazia's population perished in the epidemic. Some groups suffered more, while others were completely unscathed, seemingly without rhyme or reason. Zorian's family was completely untouched, for instance – both of his parents and all of his siblings survived the epidemic completely unscathed, which made them all very, very lucky. Conversely, Zach lost absolutely everyone to the Weeping. The few Noveda that survived the Splinter Wars all contracted the sickness and died, leaving a hollowed-out shell of a House whose only surviving member was a small child, too young to even care for himself.

"...which is how the whole sad story ends," finished Zach. "If nothing else, the Weeping finally put an end to the Splinter Wars. But that's enough

of such depressing topics. We're here!"

Indeed they were, and boy was Zorian happy for his rudimentary control over his empathy – Zach's chosen meeting hall was a lot smaller than the academy dancing hall and the mood was a lot more informal and unrestrained, making crowds denser and rowdier. This would have been pure hell in his normal state.

Just as he was contemplating the best way to go mingle with the other students (hopefully giving him an opportunity to dig for personal information while they chatted), the choice was taken from him. Taiven also wanted to mingle, though her reasons were almost certainly more benign than his own, and she decided that the best way to do that was to have Zorian introduce her. Convenient.

After talking to a couple of people he was reasonably familiar with and knew he could talk to, mostly Kael and Benisek, Zorian moved onto people that seemed like they wouldn't mind getting interrupted. Of course, in a group of this size, it was silly to expect it would only be them approaching others.

"Alright, who else do you know here?" Taiven asked.

"Well, that tall, green-haired girl having a heated argument with those two guys is Kopriva Reid."

"Wait, she's *that* Reid?" Taiven asked. "One of those gangsters goes to the same class as you do?"

"Why, Taiven, are you suggesting that House Reid has something to do with organized crime?" Zorian asked with a small smile. "That's quite a serious accusation, you know. Nothing was ever proven, after all."

"Whatever. The bottom point is that I'm not going anywhere near the gangster princess. Anyone else?"

Zorian scanned the crowd again. To be honest, he always found Kopriva to be a pleasant enough person to talk to, at least in the small number of times they actually interacted. She was a bit blunt and had a habit of swearing like a sailor when things didn't go her way, but she never did anything... well, gangster-y. A small group of girls glancing his way suddenly caught his eye.

"See that group of five girls over there?" he said to Taiven. "That would be Jade, Neolu, Maya, Kiana and Elsie."

"They look... giggly," said Taiven with a sour expression. "Pass."

"Oh it's too late for that," said Zorian. "See how they're glancing in our direction? They've already noticed us and are debating how best to approach and interrogate us."

"Zorian, don't tempt fate," Taiven warned him.

"It's not tempting fate, it's knowing your enemy. They just saw one of their classmates walking around with a girl they know nothing about – there is no way those five would let that go without investigating," said Zorian, even as the group of girls he spoke of shared a nod and marched over in their direction. "See, what did I tell you? They're already coming this way."

Taiven gave him a quiet groan, but then quickly schooled her face into a pleasant façade as the girls approached. Zorian understood her perfectly – he wasn't particularly looking forward to the upcoming conversation, but he knew it was coming the moment he had entered the room so he was prepared for it. And, while he didn't really think any of those 5 was the third time traveler, he had promised to himself he wouldn't skip over any candidates without giving them at least a cursory scrutiny.

This was going to be a long evening.

- break -

True to his prediction, once the introductions were done and the actual dancing had started, Taiven found herself some tall, handsome older student and left him to find someone else on his own. Whatever, he didn't like dancing anyway. He promptly used his expert skills at avoiding attention to retreat to the periphery of the dancing throng, seeking some out of the way corner where no one would bother him. He quickly noticed he wasn't the only one who had that idea. Tinami Aope seemed to have already found one such corner and was... looking pretty awkward, actually. Ho-hum. Somehow he doubted she *really* wanted to be left alone, with a face like that.

"Hello, Tinami," he greeted, causing her to jerk in shock at being addressed.

"Um..." she fumbled. "Zorian, right?"

"That's me," confirmed Zorian. "Care for a dance?"

"Oh. Oh! But didn't you already come with a girlfriend? Won't she mind?" Tinami asked.

Zorian pointed towards the spot where Taiven was dancing with her partner. "Also, Taiven is just a friend, not a girlfriend."

"Ah," she said, fidgeting uncomfortably. Zorian wordlessly offered his hand to her. "Um, okay then..." she said, grabbing Zorian's offered hand with surprising forcefulness and dutifully following him onto the dance floor.

In the next 30 minutes, Zorian tried to engage Tinami in conversation with only mild success, and he suspected it was only because of these highly specific circumstances she was willing to open up even a little to him. She really was a very shy girl, and he somehow doubted she was secretly the third time traveler pretending. Her awkwardness seemed quite real, and surely a time traveler as old as Zach would have grown out of that by now?

“So as a hobby, you raise... spiders?” asked Zorian curiously.

“Tarantulas,” she corrected insistently. “But, um, I kind of like spiders of all sorts. I know it’s weird, but...”

“Nonsense,” countered Zorian good-naturally. What could possibly be weird about a shy, delicate-looking girl breeding big, hairy arachnids the size of a human hand? “Spiders are really quite amazing creatures. Though I prefer jumping spiders myself – those two giant eyes at the front somehow make them more human-like and relatable for me.”

Tinami gave him an incredulous look before frowning. “You’re making fun of me,” she accused.

“Nope,” Zorian countered with an easy smile. “In fact, there is a particularly large colony of jumping spiders that I visit on a regular basis. It’s amazing what you can learn by observing the natural world.”

Tinami narrowed her eyes at him and launched into a series of increasingly esoteric questions about spiders. Since Zorian had spent a great deal of time investigating various spider species as part of his research into aranea, he actually knew how to answer most of her questions. He then tried to turn the tables on her by asking her about magical varieties of larger, more monstrous varieties of spiders, gambling that her interest mainly extended to the smaller, ‘cuddlier’ breeds. He gambled wrong. Not only did she know more about spider monsters than he did, she also knew a great deal about monster species that only looked like a spider (such as various kinds of spider demons), and about monsters with spider-derived traits.

He wondered what would happen if he introduced her to the aranea, and decided he would definitely do so in one of the restarts. It was bound to be amusing, if nothing else.

“I see it didn’t take you long to find a new girl once your lovely date for the evening left you,” Zach said behind him, causing him to jerk in surprise. He glared at the boy in response, wondering why he didn’t sense him coming – he usually always... oh, right, he’d shut off his mind for the evening so the combined feelings of the throng wouldn’t overwhelm him. The fact he managed to keep it closed with no conscious effort while being absorbed into his conversation with Tinami was an encouraging sign for his developing mental abilities.

“Why are you here, Zach?” Zorian sighed.

“I’m the host,” Zach said. “It’s my job to check up on the guests and see if they’re having any issues with the service and whatnot. Though in this case I just wondered if you wanted to see the fireworks or not.”

Oh yes, Zorian definitely wanted to see the fireworks and immediately said so. Thus, he and Tinami joined a sizeable group of people in the garden where they would have an unobstructed view of the sky. Zorian paid more attention to Zach than to the sky, though. If the matriarch’s plan went along as planned, Zach was bound to have an interesting reaction.

Zorian had shied away from acting against the invaders, and not just because he was too weak to contribute much. The fact was that trying to sabotage the invasion was bound to get the attention of the third time traveler leading it, and Zorian didn’t want to advertise his existence. So instead, he limited himself to gathering information about the invaders and waiting until he was strong enough to survive hostile attention. The aranea had no intention of doing the same, however – the invasion forces seemed to spend most of the month leading up to the invasion wiping out the aranea as a coherent force, and the matriarch had no intention of sitting on critical information for the sake of deception. Fortunately, there was no way for the invasion leaders to connect the aranea to Zorian, and the matriarch agreed with him that he shouldn’t get involved, arguing that he was far too useful as a scout and memory carrier to risk revealing himself recklessly.

So three days ago, he and the matriarch sat down to discuss a plan of action. Zorian had observed the progress of the invasion from various points in the city during the last few restarts, and he was convinced that the best and easiest way of derailing the invasion was to prevent the initial artillery barrage that preceded the invasion proper. This was especially true because he knew exactly where they were firing from – triangulating the location of their firing positions was absolutely trivial when you were tracking a brightly shining projectile moving relatively slowly across the sky. Unfortunately, he never managed to get close to one of those firing points to see what kind of defenses they had, since he was killed both times he attempted the feat. The matriarch agreed that assaulting those positions before they could fire was likely to be the best way to strike a critical blow to the invaders, and the plan was put in motion.

The fireworks started... and not a single artillery spell accompanied them. The look of increasing bafflement on Zach’s face was priceless.

“What’s wrong, Zach?” Zorian asked innocently. “You act like you’ve never seen fireworks before.”

“Err, no, I mean I did, it’s just... never mind,” Zach sighed.

Zorian shrugged and turned to Tinami, offering her a hand. “What do you think of going back inside for another dance?”

“Um, yes!” she agreed enthusiastically. “Let’s!”

Slowly, the people got tired of exploding lights in the sky and streamed back inside, leaving a frowning Zach staring alone at the sky.

Zorian's good mood was short lived. While the invaders were indeed hard-hit by the lack of their initial bombardment, the invasion wasn't called off, and they appeared to have made Zach's mansion one of their primary targets, probably because that's where Zach was and they were specifically targeting him. Perhaps if the students had witnessed the artillery spells hitting the city, Zach could have used that to assume control and organize some kind of proper defense, but as it was the attack caught them all completely unprepared. Not even Zach, with all his mighty magic, could stop the flood of invaders gaining entry into the mansion, after which several groups of students were isolated from the main group containing Zach. Zorian was in one of those.

He, Tinami, Taiven, Briam and four other students he didn't know had ended up barricading themselves in one of few untouched rooms in the mansion, desperately trying to keep the invading forces at bay. The four unknown students were almost entirely useless, but the other three were worth their weight in gold. Briam had summoned his trusty fire drake to his side the moment he realized they were under attack, Taiven knew how to cast some kind of incredibly destructive fire vortex that actually made the invaders reluctant to continue their attack for 10 whole minutes, and Tinami... well, she was clearly no stranger to fighting and behaved completely differently in a combat situation than she did in normal interaction. She didn't know any fire spells, but she did know how to fire some kind of purple beams that caused even the biggest of war trolls to collapse on the ground screaming. The beams did no obvious damage, so he assumed they were simply pain spells, but that was useful enough on its own – Tinami didn't spam those beams mindlessly, instead concentrating on causing pileups, breaking up charges and interrupting enemy spellcasters.

"Zorian, I really hope you'll be done soon, because this position is rapidly becoming untenable," Taiven shouted.

Zorian ignored her, carefully inscribing the last set of explosive runes on the walls of the corridor behind them. You didn't rush this sort of task, unless you fancied blowing yourself up before the enemies even got to you. A minute later he finished the set and rose to his feet, his knees cracking painfully from the long period he spent crouching.

"Done!" he shouted. "Everyone retreat through the corridor!"

Just as Briam, Taiven and Tinami covered him while he set up the explosive runes, he now focused on covering them while they fled deeper into the mansion. Technically one of the unknown boys helped him in this endeavor, but he wasn't very good at it – his only offensive spell was magic missile and he was firing them at the war trolls charging on them (who could soak such hits easily and keep going) instead of at the robed mages supporting them (who were a lot more vulnerable and had to concentrate on spellcasting). Zorian, aware that he didn't have the mana reserves to tank the entire enemy assault force, decided to take the mages out of the equation first. Thus, he raised the spell rod he smuggled into the mansion and fired a weak disintegration beam towards them. He didn't aim at the mages themselves – that wouldn't have done much – but at the floor in front of them, which had no spell resistance to protect it. The beam gouged a jagged line in the floor sending billowing, irritating clouds of dust in the air. That should at least mess up their aiming.

He then turned his attention to the rapidly approaching war trolls. There were very few tricks he could do to stop a war troll charge, and none of them could be done on a moment's notice. Thus, he decided to simply sacrifice a good portion of his mana reserves and hit them with an overpowered flamethrower.

It didn't kill them – Zorian's flamethrower wasn't strong enough, and these particular war trolls seemed to be particularly tough ones, brought to deal with them after Taiven cast that flaming vortex spell – but it broke their charge, and Zorian used that momentary reprieve to conjure another cloud of dust with his spell rod and fled down the corridor after the rest of the students. The other boy had broken his position and run ages ago, the useless coward, so he really hoped their confusion would last long enough for him to gain some distance. He wasn't fast enough to outrun a war troll.

A furious screech erupted around him, and he could suddenly hear one of the war trolls rapidly gaining on him. Damn it, he hated dying.

A sinister purple beam suddenly cut through the air next to his head, hitting the war troll behind him. The monster screeched again, this time in pain, and collapsed to the floor. Zorian gouged another line in the floor with his spell rod, cloaking the corridor in more dust, and then he was inside their newest sanctuary.

"Thanks," he said, breathing heavily.

"Um, you're welcome," Tinami said, fiddling with the silver amulet she was wearing and watching the dust cloud covering the corridor for any sign of movement. The amulet seemed to be the spell formula she was using to cast the purple beams.

"Here they come," Briam said.

"Remember the plan," Taiven said. "Let them all advance into the corridor before triggering the explosive runes."

"What if they notice the trap?" one of the unknown girls asked.

"Then at least they'll be hesitant to push forward so insistently," Taiven said.

They didn't bother closing the door – that would just result in them being pelted by wooden splinters and shrapnel when the mages forcibly broke down the door. They had lost two students before they learned that lesson.

Sure enough, there was a barrage of concussive beams and battering rams preceding the war troll charge. After Briam and Taiven repelled the initial charge with a fairly anemic defense, the mages moved into the corridor to provide support, sensing that victory was near. That's when Zorian

released a mana pulse towards the nearest cluster of explosive runes and the entire corridor collapsed in a deafening explosion. A huge plume of dust and gravel rushed into the tiny room they currently occupied, but Taiven was ready and immediately created a large-ish bubble of clear air to stop them from choking to death.

"Well," Taiven coughed, having been too slow to shield them from all of the dust that was obscuring the room. "That should stop the attacks for a while. Still, we have a bit of a problem. This room is a dead end. The only exit is this corridor and the window to the outside."

"The outside is swarming with enemies," Zorian said.

"We don't have much choice, though, do we?" Briam asked rhetorically. "We can't stay here."

"How are we going to get down?" one of the unknown girls asked. "We're on the second floor, we can't just jump out of the window."

"Hmm... alright, how many of you know how to cast the floating disc spell?" asked Taiven raising her own hand.

Zorian was the only one who raised his own hand to match.

"Ugh. Fine, that will have to do, I suppose. Okay Zorian, I'm going to go first and get these four dead-weights down and you follow after me with those two."

"Hey!" one of the dead-weights complained.

"Sorry, but I call it like I see it," Taiven said pitilessly. "Let's go, before even more of these assholes converge on our position to see what the explosion was all about."

And so Zorian created a large floating disc of force outside the window and jumped on it, closely followed by Briam and Tinami. At first it seemed like everything would go flawlessly – there were no enemies waiting for them at the bottom, Taiven had successfully touched down, and his disk was not giving any indication of failing under the combined weight of people standing on it. Then a flock of iron beaks suddenly appeared from around the corner and Zorian swore angrily.

There was really nothing he could do to deal with a flock of iron beaks, and Briam and Tinami weren't much better. There were about 50 of them, so even if he could snipe a couple off the sky it wouldn't mean a thing. Tinami probably couldn't make that pain beam of hers home in on a target, and iron beaks were very agile flyers. As for Briam, his attack options seemed to be strictly limited to his fire drake, and there was no reason for the flock to approach close enough to be caught in its fire breath when they could just rain their iron feathers on them from distance.

He fired off a homing piercer anyway, and noticed out of the corner of his eye that Taiven had launched a small swarm of 7 homing magic missiles. Eight iron beaks fell, but it was a drop in the bucket, and then it was the iron beaks' turn. The air in front of them blurred, and a cloud of glittering feathers was launched at them.

Faced with the choice of trying to tank several hundred magical iron feathers and trying to survive a fairly dangerous fall, Zorian knew which one he wanted to chance. He immediately dismissed the floating disc and all three of them promptly plunged towards the ground.

This would probably be the end of this particular restart – knowing his luck, he was going to break his neck when he hit the ground – but on the bright side he managed to evade the deadly feathers! As he tumbled through the air, his eyes briefly met with those of Briam's fire drake, and he couldn't help but think it was glaring at him. It was hard to tell when that thing was angry, though, since it always looked pretty pissed off to Zorian.

Suddenly, just before they were about to hit the ground, their fall was halted and they touched down on the ground as gently as a feather. Before Zorian could ask what happened, a huge swarm of flaming missiles erupted from somewhere behind him, annihilating the entire iron beak flock.

"You know, Zorian," Zach said behind him, "sometimes I wonder if you have a death wish. How do you get yourself into these kind of situations? You're almost as bad as me!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," mumbled Zorian, climbing to his feet and helping Briam and Tinami rise as well. Strangely enough, they didn't seem angry at him for what he'd done. Shaken by the experience, but not angry. Maybe they didn't know he dismissed the disk on purpose?

"Well then, I'm glad to see another group of survivors, but we should really get going," Zach said. "It's not safe staying out in the open like this. Come, I know a place where we'll be reasonably safe."

Zorian looked around him. A surprising number of students had survived the attack and were dutifully following after Zach. Actually, they probably survived precisely because they were following after Zach. In any case, Zorian and his group decided there was no harm in joining the group – it's not like they had a better idea anyway.

They didn't get far before the attackers returned in force. Zorian heard Zach swearing something about bad luck and scoffed. This was no bad luck – the attackers were clearly tracking his movements and targeting him directly. Did Zach even take any precautions to make sure it took something more than a couple of easy divinations to track him down? Knowing Zach, probably not.

But Zorian had other things to worry about, because while Zach was occupied with another flock of iron beaks, a giant brown worm erupted from the ground and started wreaking havoc right in the middle of the student throng. Zorian had only met those things four times so far in the various

restarts, and he already hated them – they could move through earth almost as if it was water, and their hide was utterly impervious to physical force. They weren't particularly vulnerable to fire, either. Zorian watched impotently as the worm single-handedly shattered student formations, sending them scattering in panic so they could be picked off one by one by the winter wolves circling the throng.

Tinami apparently didn't want to just watch. She fired one of her purple beams at the worm and finally achieved some results. Namely, she got the worm to scream out in pain before immediately swinging its toothy maw in her direction, its murderous attention now firmly focused on her. Uh oh.

With a roar that promised revenge, the worm dived back into the ground. Zorian immediately closed his eyes and tried to block out the sounds of battle, focusing on his mind sense, trying to track its movements. It wasn't too hard – even if the worm wasn't psychic, it was the only mind that was below ground, and thus easy to pick out from all the rest. He opened his mind, keeping track of the worm's mind as it swam underground. Tinami seemed rooted to the spot, aware that she couldn't separate too far from the group lest she be picked off like the rest of the students that made that mistake... and therefore couldn't really escape the worm.

Just before the worm was about to surface, Zorian wrenched Tinami to the side and dropped an explosive cube where she was just a fraction of a second before. The worm erupted from the spot only a moment afterwards, its toothy maw snapping shut around the clump of earth... as well as the explosive cube. Even as it swung its head in their direction, Zorian activated the cube and the worm shuddered and started screeching and thrashing like mad before violently vomiting some of its pulped innards. Tinami was hit by its tail as it thrashed around and was thrown to the outer periphery of the battlefield, where she lay unmoving. Zorian quickly ran up to her and was relieved to see she was still breathing and had no obvious wounds. He shifted his attention back towards the worm, hoping that it had finally died while he had not been paying attention to it.

The worm swayed in the air as if drunk, and for one sweet moment Zorian thought he'd won... but then the worm swung its toothy maw straight towards him and roared out a challenge. This time it didn't bother to dive into the ground, stretching out to an impressive length far faster than a creature of such size should be able to.

He didn't die. The worm stopped a hair's breadth away from his face, straining against some invisible bonds before suddenly turning to the side and biting down on the winter wolf that had been trying to sneak up on him while he was distracted.

[I was just in time, I see,] the voice of the matriarch spoke into his mind, and then she physically appeared, jumping out of the shadow of a nearby tree like it was the most normal thing in the world.

"Thanks," Zorian said. "But I'm not sure why you're here. I thought we agreed there should be as little contact as possible between us during the invasion."

[I decided that updating your memory packet with the information we found out today is more important.]

Zorian sighed and glanced around. Everyone was too busy fighting for their life to pay much attention to them, and it wasn't like the aranea was easy to spot in the gloom of the night.

"Make it quick," Zorian said, and the matriarch immediately set to work. Anything that tried to sneak up to them was dealt with by the giant worm, which was apparently still under the matriarch's control.

And then, after five minutes, she was gone again, and Zorian picked up Tinami and tried to rejoin Zach again, but he had barely made five steps before a jagged red beam filled his vision, plunging his world into darkness.

22. Complications

Chapter 022 Complications

Zorian woke up in his bed in Cirin, Kirielle wishing him a good morning in that charming manner of hers. He was annoyed both at himself for not paying more attention to his surroundings and at the unknown attacker that did him in. It figured that he would survive all those close calls and near-death situations, only to get killed by a simple sneak attack.

He passed the train ride sketching magic item blueprints in his notebook. Most of them were trivial things, like plates that kept the temperature of a meal constant or explosive traps that triggered on their own when certain conditions had been met, but he was toying with the idea of designing a practice dummy. He had found a combination of alteration spells that should allow him to construct a dummy out of wooden scraps and soil, but making the animation core was no simple task. And then, even if he managed that, he would have to design a warding scheme to etch into the dummy's surface, lest it disintegrate when he started hurling spells at it... possibly in an explosive manner, showering him with wooden splinters and shrapnel. He should probably also add at least a weak self-repair function, to prevent the dummy from falling apart from micro-fractures and such...

He didn't expect to finish this project in the current restart.

In any case, this time Zorian didn't wait much before contacting the aranea. Upon entering his room, he spent an hour crafting a rod of magic missiles for basic self-defense and then promptly marched off in the direction of the nearest Dungeon entrance.

Unlike his previous attempts to look for aranea, he wasn't simply walking around, waiting to stumble upon their scouts – he was trying to sense their minds with his brand new mind sense. Sadly, he sensed nothing except an occasional rat and-

He stopped, sensing a mind of unusual strength from one of the rats ahead. He mentally ordered his floating light to intensify for a moment and was rewarded with a disquieting sight of a rat missing the top of his head.

For a full second, Zorian and the cephalic rat stood still and watched one another in indecision, trying to decide on a course of action. Then – gently, hesitantly – the rat extended a telepathic probe at him, trying to worm into his mind. For one small moment, Zorian considered trying to take it on telepathically, but then discarded the thought as stupid and risky. He was completely untrained in telepathic combat, and that one rat was merely a conduit for the entire cephalic rat collective. So instead he drew his brand new spell rod and fired a magic missile at it.

The moment he reached for his spell rod, the rat immediately dropped its telepathic probe and tried to run. It was too slow. The bolt of concussive force slammed into the tiny creature with a loud crack, pulverizing its bones and crushing it into paste.

Well, so much for that. Zorian extended his mind sense as far as he could, trying to sense the rest of the collective, but found nothing. Either this one was an isolated scout or the rest had some method of hiding from his scans.

By the time he had decided to move on, the pulped body of the cephalic rat was already being enveloped by a green, translucent mass of crawling gel. The oozes that patrolled these walled-off sections of the dungeon were artificially engineered to be less dangerous and aggressive than their wild counterparts, but Zorian was never a fan of tempting fate and did his best to side-step the things as he moved past them. Acid burns were hard to heal, even with magic.

When he finally did find the aranea, the meeting was pretty disappointing. The aranea he met was one of those that didn't know how to talk to humans, so it took him 10 minutes of telepathic pantomime that left him with a raging headache, and once the matriarch finally showed up she basically told him to get lost for a few days until she came to terms with the contents of the memory packet.

Not an unexpected turn of events, but he had been hoping that the matriarch had refined her memory packet into something that could convince her past-self a bit faster than last time. The matriarch was a bit pushy and conceited, but it was nice to talk to someone about the time loop. Also, the truth was that there was little he could do to unravel the mystery of the time loop without aranea help other than steadily gathering magical skills and keeping his eyes open.

As he walked back to his room to sleep off his newly-acquired headache, he tried to think of a way to advance faster in his magical studies. He needed a teacher. One willing to teach him spells most instructors would consider too dangerous for the likes of a freshly certified student. Who did he know that would... oh.

That just might work.

- break -

The next day, when Taiven came to recruit him into her little sewer expedition she found him practicing combat spells on one of the Academy training grounds instead of sleeping in his room. He could have easily warded himself against her divination spells at this point, but having her track him down was part of the plan: he was hoping to recruit her as a sparring partner, and possibly teacher.

He had always thought he had gotten over Taiven's (oblivious) rejection of him, but apparently there was still some lingering resentment remaining because he noticed something very important in the previous restart. Something he should have noticed way sooner, had he not been unconsciously

ignoring her and pushing her away. Taiven was not at all opposed to helping him out, especially if the help was somehow related to combat. Why was he insisting on learning combat magic alone, without an instructor, when he was friends with someone who specialized in that very field of magic?

So here he was, carefully casting magic missiles at the target in front of him, trying to make them as mana efficient as possible. He was hoping that Taiven would offer to help on her own when she saw him practicing, and he wasn't disappointed. She did, however, attach a condition to her offer.

"So, in conclusion, I get a month of instruction from you, free of charge, in exchange for joining you on this sewer run of yours?" Zorian asked.

"Yup!" Taiven said happily, looking very satisfied with herself. Zorian could guess why – she just found a way to pressure him into accompanying her, and all it took was promising to do something she was inclined to do anyway.

"I suppose that's okay," said Zorian, mentally considering how he should approach this. He could, of course, simply trail after them and let them fumble around for a while – it's what Taiven expected him to do, and he was pretty sure the aranea wouldn't 'attack' while he was present. However, after some thought, he decided to go for a different path. "I have a request though. I am on speaking terms with a colony of sentient spiders living in the sewers, and I have a sneaking suspicion they're the ones that supposedly took the watch. I'd like to try actually talking to them before you go in and start burning things."

Taiven gave him a curious look. "You are friends with a bunch of giant, sewer-dwelling spiders?"

"Pretty much," Zorian agreed with her. He would describe the aranea as acquaintances and allies of convenience instead of friends, but she didn't have to know that. "I trust you and your friends can keep that a secret? I'm sure you can see why spreading that around might cause problems for me and the spiders both."

"Don't worry, I'm not a tattletale," Taiven said dismissively. "And I've yet to see Grunt and Mumble engage in any kind of gossip, so your secret is safe with us, oh great monster charmer. You think they'll just hand us the watch if we ask?"

"If the client's story is not made up, then yes. I don't see what use they would have for a pocket watch. But anyway, I have a request for you before you run off to do your thing."

"Oh? And what's that?"

"Teach me a fire spell more destructive than flamethrower," Zorian said.

"How big are your mana reserves?" Taiven immediately asked, not at all disturbed by the request.

"Magnitude 12," Zorian said.

"Hmm, a little lower than I thought, but decent enough I guess," Taiven said. Zorian decided to keep quiet about the underwhelming nature of his natural reserves. "What kind of spells are you looking for, anyway?"

"Preferably something that can one-shot a troll," Zorian said.

Taiven looked at him like he was crazy. "What? Roach, you're far too green to go around picking fights with trolls. What the hell are you on?"

"Just humor me, Taiven," Zorian sighed. "Besides, this is pure self-defense – I won't be picking fights with anything."

"Hmph," Taiven shrugged. "Says a guy who goes around meeting giant spiders in the sewers in his free time. But alright, I guess if you're going to do stuff like that you'll need some stronger spells under your belt. I expect an explanation about that soon, though."

"After the summer festival," agreed Zorian smoothly.

"I'll hold you to that," Taiven said, poking him painfully in the chest. "Now, there are two spells that kind of fit your criteria, although they will only kill a troll if you can hit the troll in the face with them – fire bolt and incinerating ray. The bolt can home in on the target and is cheaper in terms of mana use. The ray is far more damaging, but also far more of a mana hog and you need to worry about your aim."

"Teach me both," said Zorian. The bolt seemed like something that would be more generally useful for someone like him, but he needed the raw power as well.

"You sure you have the shaping skills for this, Roach?" Taiven asked. "Cause this kind of spell isn't going to fizzle out if you fail – it will blow up in your face."

Zorian snorted derisively. "Trust me, shaping skills are not something I'm lacking in," he said. He raised his arm into the air, palm pointed towards the earth, and willed some of the dust and dirt to rise towards it. The dry, loose material that covered the training ground slowly rose towards his hand in a diffuse pillar, coalescing into a rough sphere once they reached his palm.

Once he was satisfied with the size of the sphere, he pointed his palm towards one of the targets and willed the mass of dirt rapidly forward, catapulting it towards the target. Sadly, the impromptu construct was too structurally unsound and disintegrated into dust halfway towards the target, so some of the effect was ruined.

It didn't make the feat any less impressive to Taiven, though.

"Damn, that was impressive as hell," Taiven said. "How can you do that? I don't think *I* could do that... Lift a rock off the ground, sure, but diffuse material like soil? That's a pretty advanced exercise. Hmm, if your shaping skills are that good, I guess there are a few more spells I could teach you..."

Zorian smiled. This had definitely been a good idea.

- break -

During the next several days, while he waited for Taiven to gather her team for the journey into the city's sewers, Zorian got a crash course in combat magic from his friend. Taiven took a surprisingly broad approach to the topic, opting to teach him as many different spells as she could manage instead of having him practice a few until he had a firm hold over them. She claimed that he already had a core of spells he was properly proficient in, and that he needed variety and breadth of possible options more than he needed a new ace in the hole, but she later admitted she was testing him, trying to discover the limits of his shaping skills. Something she didn't end up finding – Zorian's shaping skills were better than hers; every spell she could cast, he could as well.

Not all of the spells she taught him were of the typical offensive sort he expected from her. Some of them, like the 'spider climb' spell that allowed him to cling to sheer walls and other stable surfaces, 'featherfall' that allowed him to survive high falls, or the various comfort spells that blunted temperature extremes and other environmental conditions, could be more properly classified as survival spells. Nonetheless, Taiven insisted that sometimes the environment itself was just as big of a danger to a mage as his living opponents, and that he needed to know these spells if he was going to waltz around the dungeon and similar places.

She was also fairly horrified by his lack of defensive spells. Not just a lack of any defensive barriers more substantive than the basic shield, though she wasn't happy about that either – no, she was talking about wards. Wards were fairly useless once the fight started, since they were slow to cast, and few opponents would give a mage the time needed to cast them during a battle, but Taiven claimed they were absolutely essential for a mage who expected to get into a fight. So long as you weren't ambushed or otherwise surprised, and actually knew you were going to be in a fight soon, you could at least cast some basic wards to improve your spell resistance and counter some of more common spells. And if you actually knew something about your opponent's spell repertoire and specialties? Then you could really ruin their day with a few choice wards. This was the reason why humanity had been steadily encroaching on monster-held territory with every passing year – most magical creatures only had a handful of inborn magical tricks and abilities on their side and once you knew what they were you could devise a perfect counter for them in advance.

Unfortunately, you could only stack so many wards on top of each other before they started to interfere with each other and the whole edifice collapsed, and some of them inherently interfered with each other's operation, so knowing how to combine them effectively was a bit of a specialist skill. Taiven was not very proficient with wards herself, being more offensively focused, so he would need to find somebody else for anything except the basics.

However, most of the spells she taught him were various offensive and defensive energy projections, largely ones revolving around fire and force, but also some spells based on cold and electricity. Among other things, Zorian could now cast the ever-famous fireball spell... exactly twice before he ran out of mana. So not very useful, honestly, but Taiven claimed that any mage worth their name should be able to cast a fireball, and that the utility of such spells would naturally increase along with his mana reserves.

"Actually, I'm curious... is there some way to speed up the growth of mana reserves?" asked Zorian. "I know that artificially increasing them has bad side-effects, but is there some kind of training method that would speed up natural growth?"

Taiven looked at him, looking apprehensive. "Technically, yes," admitted Taiven reluctantly. "It's as simple as using mana-intensive spells to constantly exhaust your reserves. It would kick the growth of your reserves into overdrive. However, that kind of unnatural growth would completely wreck your current shaping skills – your normal growth of reserves is so slow because your soul is making sure your control over mana doesn't slip. Wrecking your shaping skills just to speed up the growth of your reserves is really short-sighted, Roach. Please don't do it. I never would, and you know I'm not exactly the most responsible girl. Surely you can wait for a few years for them to grow on their own?"

Well he certainly wasn't pressed for time at the moment, Zorian had to admit. "I suppose that makes sense," he said. "I guess the reason why mana reserves plateau after a while is that there is only so much power a soul can safely handle. Increasing the cap artificially after that point messes up the mage's shaping skills with no hope of ever regaining them. No wonder everyone recommends against doing it – no matter how benign the enhancement process, the result is still more power and less control over it."

"There is always a trade-off between control and power," said Taiven. "It's just not apparent most of the time, since very few people try to develop their shaping skills to their limits. Many mages think that having more mana is always better, since you can always work harder on your shaping skills, but increasing your mana reserves without bad side effects is essentially impossible. It's not true, though. No matter how much time they spend honing their shaping skills, people with huge mana reserves are outright incapable of performing some particularly finesse-focused spells – things like advanced mind magic, detailed illusions and complex alteration constructs."

"Wait, you're saying that I'll lose the ability to cast finesse-based spells as my mana reserves increase?" asked Zorian in alarm.

"No, no, I'm talking about your *natural* mana reserves – your inborn capacity before you start to increase it through regular spellcasting. About magnitude. Most spells, even highly sophisticated ones, are designed for average mages – magnitude 8 to 12, in other words. You're 12, so still comfortably within the intended range. Hell, I've heard of a one particular 15 magnitude mage that became a damn good illusionist, so even if you tip over a little it will hardly matter."

Considering Zorian's real magnitude was 8, he apparently had nothing to worry about. Still, it did make him wonder about Zach, who seemed to have magnitude in the low 60s. How did that kind of monstrous power factor in Taiven's scheme?

"How about people with really high magnitude?" asked Zorian. "How high can you go before finesse-based spells become impossible?"

"I've never seen hard numbers, but I'd guess around magnitude 20 or so," Taiven shrugged.

"How about the really high numbers?" Zorian asked. "Something like magnitude 60?"

Taiven blinked, seemingly baffled by the question. "Well, that would be downright inhuman!" she said finally. "Is that even possible? Anyway, I'm not sure whether that would even be a good thing, even for a battlemage like me. Anyone with such mana reserves would have to spend years longer than their peers just to gain a basic level of proficiency expected of a certified mage. Maybe as much as a decade even, I don't know."

Zorian thought about what a relative failure Zach was before the time loop and frowned. He had thought that Zach had simply been a lazy slacker, but maybe there was more to it than that? Then again, he had a feeling Zach was a special case. Those inhuman mana reserves were just that – completely outside the human range. He found absolutely no records of people like that in any of the books, and most of the experts he asked flat out told him such people didn't exist outside of myths. Also, while Zach had been a crappy mage, he did succeed in getting certified so his huge mana reserves clearly weren't as crippling as they should have been.

Maybe it was a Noveda House bloodline? One that gave their family huge reserves without the crippling loss of control, perhaps. Of course, the Noveda publically claimed they had no bloodline, but it wouldn't be the first time a House had lied.

"I hesitate to even bring this up," Taiven said, breaking him out of his thoughts, "but if you're really desperate for a short term mana boost, you can always absorb ambient mana faster than you can assimilate it. I'm sure you're aware of the drawbacks, though..."

Zorian nodded. There were two main forms of mana available to the mage: his personal mana and the ambient one that emanated from the underworld. Personal mana was something that all things with a soul possessed in varying amounts, and it was attuned to the person producing it – it bent easily to its creator's will, and was innately more malleable and controllable than anything else they might use to power their magic, since it never resisted the caster's efforts to shape it. Ambient mana, on the other hand, was both harder to control and toxic to living beings. Not enough to kill a mage just for using it once, but any substantial, prolonged use resulted in sickness and insanity. The mages of old believed that ambient mana was tainted by the World Dragon's hate for humanity and shunned its use, but modern mages had discovered a few tricks to making use of it. One was by using it to power items, which had no minds to corrupt or bodies to sicken. The other was to assimilate the ambient mana into their personal reserves, negating its toxic properties. While the process of assimilation was too slow to power actual spells, being able to regenerate personal reserves faster was useful enough that the skill spread far and wide. These days, every student of magic was taught how to do it along with the other basics of spellcasting.

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"I'll get sick," Zorian said. "And possibly mad, if I keep using it constantly."

"Right," Taiven said. "Using raw mana on a regular basis is pretty stupid, but if you're in a real bind... well, it's better to spend a few days bedridden with a fever than end up dead."

"You've used it before," guessed Zorian.

Taiven gave him a surprised look, like it was unexpected he figured it out. "Uh, maybe once? Or twice?" She shifted her stance, looking uncomfortable. "But keep quiet about that, will you? Most combat mages have done it a couple of times in their life, but Guild inspectors don't accept 'everybody's doing it' as an excuse."

Zorian made a gesture over his mouth, indicating that his lips are sealed. It's not like she didn't know plenty of things to get him in trouble with, anyway.

"Let's just get back to the lesson, oh great teacher," Zorian said. "Since you're so intent on teaching me mana-intensive fire spells, how about that fire vortex I heard you can cast..."

- break -

When the time came, Taiven and her two friends let Zorian take point as he led them towards aranea territory. They had already tried and failed to divine the location of the watch, which wasn't terribly unusual if it really was taken by the aranea – the aranea had been engaged in a shadow war with the invaders for a while now, even before the time loop started, and their anti-divination wards were top-notch.

[We meet again, Zorian Kazinski.] the matriarch spoke telepathically to him. She was surrounded by 6 honor guards, though only 2 were actually visible while the other four hung from the ceiling while under some kind of invisibility spell. Zorian only knew they were there because he could sense their minds. [And once again you bring additional guests with you. Three of them this time. If this pattern continues, we'll have to find a more spacious area to house them all after a few more restarts.]

[Funny,] Zorian sent back. [But actually, this is the group I was a part of when I first met the aranea. We were looking for a watch supposedly in your possession then, same as we are now. Sounds familiar?]

“What’s going on?” asked Taiven. She and her two friends were hanging in the back, looking apprehensively at the three spiders in front of them. “Why are you just staring at them?”

Before Zorian could say anything, the matriarch started waving her front four legs in the air for a while and then spoke.

“What’s this about a watch I hear?” she asked, turning her two biggest, forward-facing eyes at Taiven.

It took a few minutes of explaining and clarifications, but in the end the matriarch finally seemed to remember the event in question.

“Oh, now I remember,” she said. “Though the man in question certainly wasn’t any kind of innocent passerby, and the ‘watch’ is no simple time-keeping device – he had assaulted our web with a couple of other thugs and ended up dropping his bauble when we chased them off.”

[He’s one of the invaders.] the matriarch told him telepathically, so only he could hear. [Or at least he works for them. You say you saw him? Excellent, we finally have an entry point into the organization. A face, a name and face-to-face contact should be enough to divine where he lives... you know his name, don’t you? Excellent. Hopefully he gave away his real one. Did you shake hands with him when you accepted the job? No? Try to shake hands with him when you give him the device. Maybe put a tracking spell on it if you know how...]

Somehow, the matriarch was able to participate in two separate conversations at once, speaking out loud to Taiven and her two friends as she spoke telepathically to Zorian. Zorian himself was not similarly blessed, and mostly tuned out her explanation to Taiven in order to absorb what she was telling him mentally. Finally, she seemed to realize this and cut her telepathic communication with him short, allowing him to pay attention to what she had been saying to Taiven.

“...so I’m not sure what the device is for, but it’s clearly a magical item of some sort,” the matriarch said out loud. “It’s useless for us aranea, but we are well familiar with the concept of trade. We were hoping to trade it to some of our human contacts for something we can actually use, but since it’s our dear friend Zorian that’s asking for it, I guess we’ll give it to you as a favor. I’m sure Zorian will make it up to us... eventually.”

“Uhh...” fumbled Taiven, looking at him uncertainly. “Is... that okay, Roach? Are you...?”

“Yeah, I’m fine with that,” Zorian shrugged. Although as far as he was concerned he didn’t really owe any favors to the matriarch for this.

[I only said that for appearances sake,] the matriarch told him telepathically. [It would be weird if we just gave it up for no reason. Besides, as far as I’m concerned, you will repay my generosity by helping me track down your employer so we can wring him for information.]

“Fang of Victory will go and retrieve the bauble,” the matriarch said out loud, causing one of the two visible honor guards to suddenly skitter off into the darkness. “I’d ask you to warn your employer against further aggression against us, but it’s probably best if you keep quiet about talking to us.”

“Why did he attack you anyway?” asked Taiven. “You seem nice enough to me.”

“Most places will kill sentient monsters as a matter of course, if they find them within their borders,” Grunt said. He and Mumble were both pretty quiet thus far, so it was a bit startling to hear him speak up all of the sudden. Taiven gave him a dirty look for his remark. “What? I’m just saying he didn’t need a reason. Their presence would be offense enough for some people.”

“It’s a little more complex than that,” the matriarch said. “Humans clash with other sentient races, that is true, but that’s because most of them are highly territorial, murderous, view humans as food, or all three. On occasions where that wasn’t the case, humans have shown themselves willing to make exceptions and take a more... nuanced approach. There are several dragons that deal with humans in a peaceful manner, the lizardmen of Blantyre have long been a trading partner for human nations, and many of the splinter states bordering the wilderness have made secret or not so secret pacts with various spirits and monster clans living within their nominal borders.”

“You’ve thought about this a lot,” Zorian remarked.

“Though not well known, we have been peacefully interacting with humanity for quite a long time now,” the matriarch said. “The aranea have been living in the deeper levels of the dungeon for as long as this city has existed. When the foundations were being laid, several campaigns were launched into the local sections of the dungeon to clear out the threats lurking inside it. However, this power vacuum also allowed weaker races like aranea to move into the place. The dungeon around the Hole is prime real estate for magical creatures of all breeds, as you probably know, and the competition was fierce. Fortunately, while we aranea lacked the brute strength or destructive magical abilities of some of our competitors, we were far more willing to cooperate with humans to our mutual benefit. We contacted some of the humans that were willing to cooperate with us and gave them information about our mutual enemies – their strengths and weaknesses, where they lived, the timing of their attacks and movements... everything they needed to wipe them out, or at least weaken them to the point where we could finish the job. Information gathering has always been our specialty.”

Zorian found himself fascinated by the story, and more than a little surprised that the matriarch was willing to say all this in front of Taiven and her friends. Then again, Zorian never told them that aranea were mind readers, so their minds were completely unshielded - the matriarch probably had a pretty good picture of how likely they were to cause trouble for her. And they weren’t going to remember anything about this when this loop ended, either.

“Although giving information to humans helped us as well as them, we rarely did it for free – in return for our secrets, we demanded some of your own. Our human allies used the information we provided to make a name for themselves and further their careers, and in return they taught us some of your magic and helped us adapt it for our own use. Armed with our very own system of structured magic, the aranea grew in strength and

versatility, solidifying their hold over this region and making the web that lived beneath Cyoria the most prestigious of aranean webs. The resulting prosperity caused their numbers to swell, and they sent a never-ending stream of colonists and breakaway webs to the surrounding region, where they proceeded to evict or subjugate every lesser aranean web they encountered. But although these aranea left Cyoria in search of their own destiny, no place had the prestige or opportunities that Cyoria offered, and thus viewed their mother web with envy and resentment. Soon, a number of these breakaways banded together and, armed with the experience of fighting the lesser webs for territory, drove the original web out of their homeland. It would not be the last time Cyoria changed hands. The conquerors were soon evicted by another group of invaders, and this group was evicted by another, and then they were evicted by us. We are the fifth web to hold this place and while our position is secure at the moment, any sort of weakness could cause the neighboring webs to get... restless."

"Huh," Zorian said. "So if you were, hypothetically speaking, absolutely decimated by someone and had your numbers severely reduced?"

"Our neighbors would launch a few probing raids at the very least," the matriarch said. "But anyway, my point is that humans and aranea are not, nor have they ever been enemies. Well, barring some... isolated incidents. On both sides. In fact, it has been my explicit policy to encourage closer links between this web and humans living in Cyoria. I hope the day will come when aranea will be able to walk the street above in open daylight, just like any other citizen."

"And I suppose you hope the humans will defend you from outside threats, like any other citizens," Grunt said. "Like, say, from those rival 'webs' that want to take your territory?"

"I confess that possibility does factor rather heavily into my thinking," the matriarch admitted. "The city authorities would be a lot less inclined to stand by and watch if we had an established, formal relationship with them."

"So is this your recruiting pitch?" asked Taiven. "Are you trying to turn us into your agents?"

"More contacts is always good," the matriarch said. "But no, I'm not trying to recruit you. I just sensed you were worried about Zorian's association with us and wanted to assuage your fears somewhat. Anyway, Fang of Victory is coming back with the bauble so we'll have to cut this short here. Talk to Zorian if you ever want to chat with us again."

Sure enough, the matriarch honor guard soon returned with the watch. Zorian half-expected her to return with the watch gripped in her fangs, but it actually came back carrying some kind of leather harness full of pouches across its body, one of which held the watch. For a moment Zorian wondered how they made that, what with them lacking hands and all, but then realized he was being a bit foolish. The matriarch had already said they traded with humans for a lot of things – this must be one of them.

They quickly said goodbye to the aranea and were on their way back to their employer, prize in hand.

"I don't know what to think," Taiven said when they put some distance between themselves and the aranea. "They seemed nice enough, but it's a bit disquieting to find out we have an entire colony of these things living beneath the city, pulling their strings over gods know how many people."

"Yeah," agreed Mumble quietly. Zorian could definitely see why Taiven called him the way she did – he tended to talk really softly, making his speech very hard to understand sometimes. "Did you know Cyoria is kind of famous for its spider silk? The merchants who sell it are really cagy about where they get it in such quantities and have declared their source a trade secret. Most people think they have managed to create a spider species that can be farmed effectively and have a giant farm hidden somewhere, but I think it's pretty obvious now where they get it..."

Zorian mostly kept out of the conversation, alternating between listening to their conversation (when they were saying something interesting) and studying the device they retrieved from the aranea (when they weren't). It was, as the matriarch said, a magical item of some sort – shaped like a pocket watch, but not one. The hands didn't move, and the screw that should have allowed a person to wind it was fused with the casing and seemed to be simply an ornamental bump put there to make the illusion superficially convincing. He tried to channel mana into it, but that didn't result in anything substantial – the device probably required the user to channel mana in a very specific manner. Many complex magical items did.

The lessons in divining the secrets of magical items that Haslugh gave him really paid off here. Considering its purpose, the device yielded its purpose surprisingly easily – to put it bluntly, it was equipment for burglary. More specifically, it was a ward scanner, designed to guide and enhance divination spells meant to seek out weaknesses in complicated warding schemes so they could be broken or bypassed more easily. Their employer had probably been trying to identify a hole in aranean defenses.

Still, while the purpose of the device was readily apparent to his divination spells, its method of operation stubbornly remained a mystery. After several unsuccessful attempts to pry the casing open without damaging the device, he finally decided to try something... experimental. He extruded a mana cloud from his hands, the way he did when picking locks, and directed it to trickle into the device's insides through the gaps and misaligned seams. The resulting information was fuzzy, but told him that the insides were filled with brass gears and crystals. They were probably not meant to be pried open. How then...

Ah, so that was the trick! The hands of the clock weren't just static – they were nothing more than an image painted over a glass cover. Zorian pressed his finger against the glass cover and pushed it into the casing. There was a soft click from the inside, and when Zorian released the pressure the cover immediately flew open, revealing a complicated interface full of dials and sigils. *Very* complicated interface... he wasn't going to figure this out in the hour or so they had until they reached the client.

He was so taking this thing apart to see how it worked in one of the future restarts.

Finishing the job was done without complications. Zorian opted not to put a tracking spell on the device, since he didn't know how sensitive the device was and didn't want to ruin it. That turned out to be a good choice, as the man immediately cast several diagnostic spells on the device once Zorian handed it over, one of which Zorian knew to be a spell designed to detect simple tracking spells. Once the transaction was done, Zorian insisted they shake hands, claiming it was traditional in his village to do so after a successful business deal. The man rolled his eyes and mumbled something about yokels, but humored him anyway. Mission accomplished.

After they all shared a drink in a nearby tavern (Taiven insisted and wouldn't hear no from anyone), the group separated. Zorian immediately descended to the sewers again and went back to the aranea.

[A ward reader, you say?] the matriarch asked. [It makes sense. He and his friends had been hanging out at the edge of our territory for a while, trying to stay hidden. I'm surprised he hired a bunch of students to get it, though.]

"Yeah, I'm not sure what he was thinking," Zorian said. "Seems like a stupid idea to me."

[We'll find out in a few days, if all goes well,] the matriarch said. [That said, there are other things we must discuss. I believe I told you in the previous restart that I happened upon some pretty important information.]

"You did," Zorian agreed. "I was wondering what that was about."

[It's about the invaders. First of all, your guess was right – they are indeed from Ulquaan Ibasa.]

"I knew it," Zorian scowled. "What was it? Are they out for revenge or is this just sheer opportunism?"

[A bit of both,] the matriarch said. [They resent you for their exile and they think you're weak, now that the Splinter Wars and The Weeping wiped out most of your battlemages. But that's not the important part. The important part concerns a question so basic I'm honestly not sure why neither of us thought of it. Namely, why exactly did the invasion think they could conquer Cyoria in the first place?]'

Zorian opened his mouth to answer 'with the aid of the time loop, duh', but then quickly closed it again. According to the matriarch, this invasion had been in the works far before the start of the time loop. Clearly, someone associated with the invasion got brought into the time loop eventually and started feeding information to them to make the whole endeavor scarcely effective, but what about before that? Without knowing exact locations of Cyoria's defenses, their initial bombardment would have been a lot less damaging than it was. Without knowing the Academy's exact ward scheme and how to bypass it, their assault at the place would be practically doomed from the start. And on top of all that, the matriarch claimed the aranea were successfully keeping the invaders out of Cyoria's underworld before the time loop. So really, the invasion never really had the chance to take control of the place.

"Perhaps they didn't," Zorian said. "Intend to conquer it, I mean. Cyoria is pretty important to Eldemar, but it's not the capital, nor its industrial heartland. It's the seat of Eldemar's Mage Guild and the home of the world's most prestigious mage academy, neither of which is likely to cooperate with the invaders. Most likely, they just intended to do as much damage as possible. Keep Eldemar's magical might busy while they invade with the bulk of their forces elsewhere."

[You're very close,] the matriarch said. [They were indeed trying to cause as much damage to the city as possible, but it was to be much more than a simple distraction. Apparently, the date of the summer festival is very magically significant. It is the day of the year when the barriers between planes of existence are the weakest. In fact, the weakening starts exactly one month before the date, gradually reaching its peak on the day of the festival. And this year's summer festival is even more special than usual. I'm afraid that us aranea don't know much about astronomy, seeing as we live largely underground, but apparently this year's summer festival includes some kind of... 'planetary alignment'?]

Zorian took a deep breath, a shiver running down his spine. Of course! How could he have missed it till now? This year's planar alignment, signified by several planets aligning with their own, an event that took place once every 400 years or so. The last time such an event happened, a city of mages took advantage of it to teleport their entire city all the way from Miasina to the southern coast of Altazia, performing the largest feat of trans-continental teleportation to ever be recorded. If someone wanted to mess around with space and time on a grand scale, this was *the* time to do it.

"Yeah, that *would* explain a lot," Zorian finally said. "Like why the time loop was initiated now, of all times. But wait, how does that help them to do more damage to the city? Did they intend to teleport the city into the sea or something?"

[No. First of all, they intended to summon a large amount of high-level demons to help with the invasion. This was why they were willing to go through with the attack, despite their lack of success against us and their inability to do much to the academy and its wards. Demons, especially high-level ones, are virtually immune to mental attacks and highly resistant to magic. The aranea would be massacred in no time at all, and the mages would be too busy fighting for their lives to help out the city's mundane defenders. Those same defenders would be up against trolls and fire elementals, who are immune to firearms, with winter wolves and iron beaks acting as support.]

"That... that's horrible," Zorian said after digesting that for a second. "Why aren't they doing that now?"

[They can't, remember? No summoning anything while in the time loop. The whole material plane has been cut off from the spiritual ones,] the matriarch reminded him.

"Oh yeah," Zorian said. "I guess that would throw a serious wrench in the works. I wonder if they actually went through with the invasion during the initial restart when they had no agent inside the time loop. They would have surely known their plan was doomed without demonic support."

[They probably would,] the matriarch said. [The demons were ultimately a distraction, same as the rest of their forces. The invasion leadership didn't actually think they were enough to do more than cripple Cyoria and they wanted it completely wiped off the map. No, the real target lies with the area around the Hole. While the defenders were busy fighting for their lives, a group of mages would secure the place and enact a grand summoning ritual.]

“Ugh,” Zorian grunted. “Let me guess: a really big demon.”

[No. They wanted to summon a primordial.]

Color instantly drained out of Zorian face. “What!? But… that would leave the whole city a lifeless crater! What about their own forces!?”

[Expendable,] the matriarch told him bluntly. [Everyone high enough to matter was ready to teleport away at the first hint that the summoning was successful, the rest were disposable pawns that were never actually expected to survive. Besides, you'll notice that the actual invasion force is really light on human mages. Only a minimum of Ibasan mages was necessary to maintain some control over the various demons and monsters. And you're actually rather optimistic in your damage predictions. The Ibasan leadership hoped that being summoned with the help of the biggest mana well on the continent would give the primordial enough power to linger on this plane for weeks. If so, it would rampage across large swathes of Altazia before finally running out of power or until the Altazians managed to organize a group of mages big enough to banish it back to its realm. Then Ulquaan Ibsa could just swoop in once it's gone and mop up the demoralized survivors.]

Zorian was honestly at a loss for words. On one hand, the plan was utterly crazy, and a large part of him wanted to say it would never work. Where did they even find a ritual to summon a goddamn primordial of all things? But still, he'd watched the invaders bulldoze through Cyoria's defenses far too many times to discount them like that. If they thought the plan could work, it probably could.

“Where did they find mages willing to do the summoning?” Zorian asked. “They must have known they'd be killed by the primordial's rampage before they can escape, being so close to it and all. And do you happen to know which primordial it was?”

[The summoning would be done by the Esoteric Order of the Celestial Dragon… probably known to you by the name ‘Cult of the World Dragon’. Apparently they are fully willing to die in order to summon one of the ‘Great Mother's children’. Those of their members not involved with the summoning are helping the invasion forces as regular mage support or simple saboteurs, in case of more mundane members. Actually, now that I think about it, they are probably acting as the invaders' inside agents in general; we'll have to infiltrate their group deeper for more information. Anyway, no, I don't know which primordial. Just that it was one of the land-bound ones – the Ibasans didn't want to risk it suddenly deciding it wanted to visit their little island and flying over.]

“I'll bet,” Zorian said. “Of course, all this means we have a problem on our hands. No matter how formidable the invasion is while we're trapped inside the time loop, it will be even more fearsome outside of it. They will have additional demon support on top of everything they already have, and we'll have to spend some of our time thwarting the primordial summoning. I want to say those cultists are just totally crazy and couldn't summon a crippled imp, much less a thrice-damned primordial, but the possibility is just so catastrophic we can't afford to risk it.”

[Yes, this indeed complicates the matter considerably,] the matriarch agreed. [My original plan was to keep thwarting the flow of the invasion until the third time traveler is forced to reveal themselves, either through sloppiness or frustration; lure them into an ambush and mindrape them into catatonia; find a perfect counter for an invasion over several restarts; and finally, find a way to break the time loop and deal with the invaders for real. The part about dealing with the third time traveler still seems workable, but finding a perfect counter will clearly be impossible with such a large variable missing while we're inside the time loop…]

Zorian was a tad queasy about how matter-of-factly the matriarch spoke of destroying a person's mind, but he had to admit he knew of no other way to deal with the third time traveler. The only other way involved destroying his soul, and that was arguably even more morally reprehensible. Plus, he didn't actually know how to destroy someone's soul. And hopefully never would.

“Right,” Zorian sighed tiredly. “What a day. Do you have any other bombshells to throw at me?”

[Well… not as such, no. However, these recent developments mean that I will not have much time to teach you this month. Fortunately, you are at the level where you don't really need a high-level user like me to guide you, so I have found you a suitable replacement. Zorian, say hello to Enthusiastic Seeker of Novelty.]

One of the aranea that had accompanied the matriarch, a rather small and twitchy individual that seemed to have trouble staying still, suddenly jumped down from the ceiling and landed in front of him.

[Hi! I am Enthusiastic Seeker of Novelty and I will totally be your teacher this month! I know you humans have trouble with our names so you can just call me Novelty. I don't mind!] She circled around him as she spoke to him telepathically, looking like some kind of weird puppy inviting him to play with her. [Anyway, when the matriarch asked for volunteers to teach you, I was like: ‘this is your chance, Novelty’. I was totally game! They won't let me help with defense because I'm supposedly too young, but they told me you're a baby at this psychic stuff and I can totally take care of babies! And hey, you can teach me stuff too! I was always curious about you humans, like how you can walk on your hind legs without tipping over all the time or…]

Zorian tuned out her chatter in favor of giving the matriarch a glare.

[Does she come with an off button?] he asked telepathically.

The matriarch simply projected a mixture of amusement and satisfaction in response.

23. Lighting the Fuse

Chapter 023

Lighting the Fuse

On the surface, getting saddled with Novelty seemed like a recipe for endless frustration and annoyance – she was an impatient, impulsive chatterbox that seemed to have no concept of personal space, always hovering uncomfortably near him and poking him with her front legs. Zorian was not afraid of spiders, but that kind of close physical contact was just too much.

Basically, she was a spider version of Kirielle. And he only tolerated Kirielle's antics as much as he did because she was his little sister.

Despite this, Zorian was actually glad to have met her. Her personality certainly left a lot to be desired, and he often had to keep her focused on their lessons instead of going off on weird tangents about various topics, but she was still a wealth of information on both psionics and aranea. And unlike the matriarch, whose every explanation sounded like a thinly-veiled manipulation attempt to Zorian, Novelty didn't have a single deceptive bone in her body. Most of the time she said what she meant, and it was painfully obvious when she tried to shift the subject or fudged the truth. It was a refreshing change of pace from his previous interactions with the aranea.

Novelty remained blissfully unaware of his thoughts, too engrossed in her inspection of Zorian's alchemy equipment. That was another difference between Novelty and the matriarch – Novelty couldn't read his surface thoughts unless he structured his thoughts very slowly and clearly aimed them at her. It made him much more relaxed about her presence than he would have otherwise been.

[Humans build so many strange things,] Novelty declared after inspecting the glass vials by sight and touch. Zorian didn't know whether aranea were usually this fond of touching things and Novelty was simply unrestrained in her interactions with him or if the spider in front of him was simply a physical sort of girl, but Novelty certainly liked to touch the things she was studying. Annoyingly, this included him as well as random inanimate objects, but at least she seemed to have finally internalized the idea he didn't like her climbing into his lap by now. [How did you even make this? It's the same kind of transparent rock you use for those 'window' things, but I have no idea how you managed to carve it out in this kind of shape. And it's so smooth, too... I know those branching upper limbs of yours are better at manipulating things than our legs, but this is crazy. You know, the aranea once tried to keep human thralls to create things for us, but it was a huge hassle and it turned out it's much easier to just trade with humans for what we need. You humans don't seem to fare too well underground, and kidnapping humans always seemed to anger the rest of the human communities a lot, even when they weren't of the same clan or anything. And... uh, that was a really long time ago and we totally don't do stuff like that anymore and you should forget everything I said about that, okay?]

"Uh-huh," said Zorian dubiously before deciding not to pursue the issue. "For what it's worth, the transparent rock is called glass, and it's not really carved. It's made from sand, which is heated until it turns molten and therefore malleable and then shaped by sticking long tubes into the resulting molten mass and blowing air into it."

Novelty turned around to focus all of her eyes on him. [How, in the name of grandmother's shriveled egg-sack, did it occur to one of you to do that? Do humans have some sort of magical stone sense or something?]

"Err, no," said Zorian patiently. Explaining stuff like this to Novelty was annoying, but it made her much more willing to share things with him in turn, so he would labor on. "Humans have always been mucking around with tools of various sorts. We're pretty fragile in our natural forms, so building things is a matter of survival. We use crude tools to fashion better tools, and then those better tools to fashion more precise tools, and so on. I don't really know how glassblowing came into existence, but it didn't just magically pop into someone's head all out of a sudden..."

[I don't really think you can be considered fragile,] Novelty said dubiously. [You wield incredible magic, and you pretty much conquered the surface world with it.]

"Not all humans wield magic," said Zorian. "Only a small number of people are mages, and the number was even smaller the more you go back in time."

[Most of your 'tools' sound a lot like magic to me, to be honest,] Novelty said. [You take rocks and stuff and perform complicated rituals on them to turn them into these wondrous creations that no amount of web-weaving can duplicate. It's the part that fascinates me most about you humans – this weird building magic of yours. I was kind of hoping I could learn some of your secrets while I teach you, but it looks like that will be pretty difficult because, you know,] she waved her front legs in the air for emphasis, [I haven't got these 'hands' you humans use for everything. Not that I'm giving up or anything! I'm definitely going to figure something out!]

"Well, you already told me you are learning to be a mage, so you could always resort to actual magic," said Zorian. "Fabrication spells are a thing, after all. Granted, you'd have to understand the properties of materials you're working with and the engineering principles of the things you're trying to create, but if you're serious about being a crafter that's pretty much a must anyway."

[I'll be honest and admit I have no idea what you just said,] Novelty said after a brief silence. [But I'm guessing you were trying to be encouraging so thanks!]

"Right," Zorian sighed. "We've gone on a tangent again. Let's focus on the lessons again."

[But those lessons are so boring!] Novelty complained. [You already know most of this stuff, it's just a matter of practicing, and you can't do that here, anyway. You are practicing, right?]

“Sure am,” Zorian agreed. “I spend most of my classes trying to sense my classmates and other students in the building. Not like I get anything else useful out of classes these days. It’s going pretty well, but I still have to concentrate pretty heavily to achieve any kind of range. I’ve also tried sensing their emotions, but that is still pretty hit and miss. Are you sure no one is going to detect me doing that? Because I’m going to land in pretty hot water if somebody detects me messing with people’s minds.”

[I keep telling you, no one is going to detect anything without invading your mind first,] Novelty assured him. [I totally went and asked other aranea about that, since you keep asking about it, and they confirmed it. Basically, sensing minds and basic empathy doesn’t involve any delving into other people’s minds. I know you don’t believe in the Great Web and all, but imagine a kind of mental plane that permeates everything. Minds create ripples on this mental plane, like stones thrown into a pool of stagnant water, and those who are Open can use these ripples to locate other minds around them and divine some basic facts about them. Stuff like species and their general mood.]

“Huh. That does make sense,” Zorian said. “So sensing minds and empathy are really two aspects of a single ability – that being an ability to perceive this mental plane of yours and interpret the ‘ripples’ propagating through it? Do you know if mental shielding spells have an effect on this?”

[Oh, definitively,] confirmed Novelty. [The basic shielding spells that mages like to use will pretty much ruin your ability to use empathy on them. Too much interference. Detecting them, on the other hand, becomes even easier. Any mind-affecting spells make a mind ‘noisier’ to a psychic, even defensive ones. *Especially* defensive ones, now that I think of it. Well, except for that one infamous spell called ‘Mind Blank’ that actually causes a mind to disconnect from the Great Web, making a person completely undetectable to mind sensing and utterly immune to mind-affecting magic. Pretty terrifying stuff, that.]

Zorian knew of the spell she was talking about. Mind Blank was well known as a kind of ‘ultimate defense’ against mind magic, but the spell was infamous for causing psychological problems if miscast or used too extensively. A number of mages paranoid about people invading their minds had gone insane after leaving it permanently on, giving it a somewhat poor reputation among mages. There were other, less drastic protections that were sufficient in most cases.

“That’s strange,” Zorian said innocently. “The matriarch told me that no flimsy human magic could shield me against her if she was determined to get me, but here you’re telling me there is a spell I could learn to make myself completely immune to psychic powers.”

[Ah, well, you see...] Novelty fumbled. [She was actually right because, because those are totally different things, yes? A shield is one thing – we can totally batter it down or bypass it. If you take yourself off the Great Web, though, it’s like you aren’t there at all! You first need to sense a mind to connect to it, and if you can’t connect to it-]

“I get it,” Zorian interrupted. “No telepathic link, no aranean mind magic. And you can’t connect to something you can’t sense telepathically. Hmm, clearly the creator of Mind Blank knew a thing or two about psychic powers – it sounds like the spell is designed specifically to defeat them.”

[The idea isn’t that revolutionary,] Novelty grumbled. [A sufficiently skilled psychic can disconnect from the Great Web with some effort. It’s called ‘going dark’. It’s a pretty shady skill, though, mostly used by assassins, thieves and saboteurs. Anyway, the problem isn’t just the Mind Blank – it’s the fact that any mage powerful enough to cast it is also powerful enough to take on the entire aranean Web all on their lonesome. We have ways of dealing with people like that, but I totally can’t tell you because the others would have me dismembered if I said anything about it – since, you know, secret defenses and stuff.]

“Right,” Zorian said. He had no intention of creating problems at home for Novelty, so he wouldn’t pursue that topic further. Their super-secret defense plans probably boiled down to ‘collapse the entire tunnel on top of them’, anyway. “So Mind Blank is a psychic skill translated into a spell. Not that surprising, I guess – mages love taking abilities of magical creatures and turning them into spells for their own use.”

[Really?] Novelty asked. [But I thought human magic is so good that there is nothing you can learn from others. The matriarch is always talking about how amazing your magic is and how no one can match it...]

“No, that’s completely wrong.” Zorian said. “Mages of Ikosian tradition – which is virtually every mage you’re going to encounter – are pretty much all about taking other people’s magic and making it your own. The entire system of structured magic is specifically designed to be expanded upon as needed. It’s true that we rarely find something worth learning among other magical traditions these days, but that’s mostly because we already stole and traded for everything that was worth taking.”

[That’s... not quite the story I was told,] Novelty admitted.

“Don’t feel too bad – most humans also think our entire magical tradition sprang fully-formed in the early days of the Ikosian Empire,” Zorian said. “But back to our conversation about mental defenses. You said an aranea could batter down or bypass defensive magic other than Mind Blank. Does that include you personally?”

[Of course! Who do you take me for?] Novelty protested. [If I couldn’t fight telepathically, I’d have been devoured while still at the hatchery!]

Zorian blinked. “What, seriously? As in, actually get eaten or...?”

[Err, no, not *literally* eaten. We haven’t let the hatchlings eat each other ever since... err, actually, let’s not talk about that. It was just a figure of speech, that’s the important bit. Anyway!] Novelty hastened to change the subject. [I don’t know how it works among humans, but newborn aranea are confined to the hatchery during the first few months of their existence. There are usually a lot of us, and we’re all cooped up in this tiny boring room with nothing to do but pester the caretakers for stories and pick fights amongst each other, and the caretakers don’t like it when the

hatchlings fight physically with each other. They are a lot more lenient about... *experimenting*... with our psychic powers, though. A bit of telepathic roughhousing is to be expected, so you pretty quickly learn the basics of defending your mind.]

Zorian tried to imagine the scenario Novelty just described and abandoned that train of thought with a shudder. He made a mental note to avoid being near aranean hatcheries at all costs, just in case the issue ever popped up in the future.

“That’s... interesting... but not quite what I was asking. I asked about countering defenses, not defending yourself,” he said finally.

[You can’t win a fight by only defending.] Novelty scoffed. [I don’t really understand this weird divide between mental attacks and defenses you insist on. Striking back is a crucial part of any worthwhile defense. Even a weak counter-attack forces your opponent to spend some time and focus on their defenses and weakens their own attack.]

“I guess I keep forgetting that psychic powers aren’t discrete spells, but more of a manifold manifestation of a single holistic ability,” Zorian admitted. “Still, retaliation doesn’t have to be mental – if I could stop your mental attacks long enough, I could just punch you or cast a spell on you to make you stop. Considering I know nothing about telepathic combat, that’s probably the smartest option for me anyway. And that brings me to my proposition – I want to see how my magical defenses fare against your capabilities. I’m going to cast a few mind shields and you’re going to do your best to take them apart. What do you say?”

[Honored matriarch gave me strict instructions about when I can progress with your lessons,] Novelty said hesitantly.

No doubt accompanied by strict instruction about what she wasn’t allowed to teach him *at all*. Zorian was under no illusion that the aranea intended to teach him anything but a small fraction of their psychic skills. While the aranea seemed to worship their ability in some sense, and sought to encourage its spread among humanity, they clearly regarded most of it as a personal secret. Hell, some of the things the matriarch told him heavily implied they kept some things secret even from each other, never mind from outsiders. Not to mention it would be rather foolish of the matriarch to teach Zorian how to do some things, since he could promptly use those skills against her interests. For instance, he was quite sure that Novelty got strongly worded instructions not to tell him anything about memory manipulation, since that would allow him to mess around with the matriarch’s memory packet and potentially feed her forged information.

Still, Zorian was fine with that. He already got more out of the aranea than he thought he would have, and in case he ever got greedy for more than the matriarch was willing to provide? Well, there were more aranea than the ones beneath Cyoria, and Novelty made it clear they didn’t really talk to each other much. If he traded for a single secret with ten different groups, he could easily amass far more knowledge than any one group would be comfortable with him having... for additional irony, he might even trade them a secret he got from one of the other groups he traded with. It was a classical trick that Ikosians used when dealing with tribal groups, and the time loop only made it easier.

But if he ever wanted to do such a thing, he needed to have some way of defending his mind. He got the impression that aranean tribes outside of Cyoria weren’t nearly as friendly as the matriarch and her tribe, and mind effects transferred across restarts. The matriarch promised to teach him ‘the basics of telepathic combat’, which he translated as ‘inadequate to threaten us, but good enough to ward off cephalic rats and random mind images’, so he needed to know how human mind magic fared against your average aranea.

“We aren’t ‘progressing my lessons’, because you’re not going to teach me anything,” Zorian insisted. “It’s just an experiment. I want to see how my spells fare against you.”

[Alright, I’m totally game, then!] Novelty agreed, suddenly enthusiastic. [But, uh, you’re not allowed to attack me physically in response, okay?]

“That would kind of defeat the purpose of the experiment,” agreed Zorian.

[Right. So are we assuming I’m attacking from an ambush or that I’m pressed for time?] Novelty asked.

“The difference being?”

[Well, if I was attacking from an ambush, I would try to simply bypass your shield entirely through superior skill. It’s very effective when it works, but slow to set up, so it doesn’t work if the target isn’t either too busy with something to deal with me or unaware of the attempt. On the other hand, if time is of the essence I’d just batter down the shields with brute force. It’s faster but more mana expensive. Oh, and it’s kind of hard to judge the exact amount of force needed to break through a defense without also damaging the mind it was defending so, uh... let’s just assume I’m attacking from ambush, okay?]

“Yes, let’s,” Zorian deadpanned.

The next hour was as frustrating as it was instructive. Novelty took the whole thing as a game, improving as time went on, despite Zorian’s futile attempts to refine his defenses through repeated castings and spell combinations. It was rather embarrassing to see the over-excitable, scatterbrained aranea go through his spells like they didn’t exist in 30 seconds flat. Granted, those 30 seconds would be enough for him to incinerate her in real life, but that presumed he was in a position to do so, and that might be an unwarranted assumption. What if she was hidden from him? What if she was behind some kind of wards? What if she wasn’t the only attacker?

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But a little embarrassment was worth it. He now knew that his best defense against aranea (and other psychics, he supposed) was actually the basic mind shield spell. Other, more sophisticated spells couldn’t seem to cope against Novelty’s telepathic attacks.

[Most of the spells you used were really easy to trick and bypass with a few feints and a bit of careful timing.] Novelty explained. [They were all based on simple defense patterns and always reacted the same to my attacks. That magic shell you used to surround your mind with, though... it's such a crude thing, but I have to admit it gave me trouble. No patterns or anything fancy, just a solid, unyielding mental barrier. I don't think I'd be able to bypass it at all if you hadn't kept messing up the spell every time you cast it.]

"I was messing it up?" asked Zorian in surprise.

[Yeah. The shell had these minute imperfections in it that I used to slip past it. I don't think those were supposed to be there,] Novelty said.

Hmm, minute imperfections, she said? Sounded like a normal result of a usual spell boundary. Very few mages could cast a spell flawlessly, and they rarely needed to – minute imperfections rarely mattered unless you were dealing with very special circumstances.

Apparently this was one of those special circumstances. Zorian suppressed a sigh – he could already hear the ghostly voice of Xvim in his head lecturing him about the failures of today's mages and the need to practice until you could do the spells *right* instead of good enough.

In retrospect, he was just asking for trouble with that line of thought.

- break -

When Zorian arrived at his weekly session with Xvim, he fully expected to get an hour of his usual crap from Xvim... which in this particular restart meant taking a bundle of thin sticks and trying to incinerate one of the sticks without singeing the rest of them or burning his hand in the process. Admittedly, Xvim was staring at him pretty hard when he came in, but Xvim did a lot of really weird things during their sessions.

Zorian hadn't even taken a seat before Xvim decided to speak to him.

"I have heard you have been casting fireballs," Xvim said. "Is that true?"

Zorian forcibly stopped himself from scowling at the man. Him making a comment like that was never a good sign – Xvim was never impressed with anything Zorian did, so no doubt he found something objectionable in his combat practice with Taiven. How the hell did the man even find out about that?

Xvim's face told him nothing, and Zorian had already tried to use his rudimentary empathy on him to no avail, trying to see what made the annoying man tick. Xvim had an incredible control over his emotions, and virtually nothing fazed him or truly set him off.

"I can cast the spell, yes," Zorian said carefully, as if talking slower would help him evade whatever minefield Xvim set up for him with his question. "Admittedly only at minimum power, but..."

"So that's a no, then," Xvim deadpanned. He stared at him, as if challenging Zorian to contradict him. Fortunately, Zorian was far too wise to get worked up over Xvim's proclamations at this point, so they simply stared at each other in silence for a few moments. Eventually, Xvim broke the stare-down with an overdramatic sigh. "Mages these days, always rushing into things half-baked. I expected better from you. There is nothing wrong with being interested in combat magic, but immediately going for the flashiest, highest rated spell in your reach is unwise. A half-powered fireball is no fireball at all. You should have concentrated on building a solid base until you could do it *properly*."

"Well," Zorian said calmly, "why not show me how it's done, then?"

In response, Xvim wordlessly drew a stack of cards from his drawer and threw them at him. Zorian instinctively caught them before they could collide with his head, too used to his antics to be surprised at the move.

"Cards?" he asked, turning them over in his hands. They looked like regular playing cards, except their faces were replaced with squares, lines, circles and other geometrical shapes.

"Cards," Xvim confirmed. "Specifically, cards made out of mana absorbing material. The seemingly ornamental sigils on the corners expel any mana the cards gather, radiating it away into the surroundings. It takes a lot of mana to affect them in any way."

"And I'll be affecting them?" Zorian guessed.

"You'll try, I'm sure," Xvim said airily, pointedly rearranging the pens on his table instead of looking at Zorian. "They're very hard to affect for mages of such meager skills as yours are. To make the story short, you'll be trying to burn the shapes painted on the cards – and only the shapes. You may begin when you feel ready."

Zorian stared at the cards for a moment. He suspected he knew what the point of this exercise was - he had to use a lot of mana, and he had to use it instantly or the corner glyphs would simply radiate his mana away. That was pretty much the basic challenge of all combat magic: shape a lot of mana quickly without messing up the spell boundary too much.

So he took a deep breath, picked a card that looked easiest to him (it was just a circle in the middle, how hard could that be?) and poured a sizeable chunk of mana into his first attempt.

Other than the corner glyphs glowing a little, nothing happened.

Damn it. This just might be a little harder than he thought it would be.

- break -

After failing to affect the cards a few times and then overdoing it and burning down a few cards to cinders, singeing his fingers in the process, Zorian finally managed to burn some blurry shapes that were clearly inspired by what was drawn on them instead of being an irregular hole burned through the center of the card. Predictably, Xvim had some very disparaging things to say about that.

Eventually, Zorian ran out of mana and had to stop. What kind of shaping exercise was so mana intensive you can actually run out as you practice? The Xvim kind, apparently. Instead of simply sending him away, though, Xvim then proceeded to lecture him about the proper way of gathering ambient mana. Apparently there was a way to assimilate ambient mana faster if you sat completely still and focused on doing absolutely nothing else. So not very useful, all things considered, but probably crucial if he intended to complete Xvim's newest exercise in any sort of reasonable time-frame.

Then, as a parting remark, Xvim casually remarked that they were going to continue their lesson tomorrow. That tomorrow wasn't even a school day didn't bother Xvim in the slightest.

"Good," Xvim concluded. "We have a whole day, then. We will need the time from what I saw today."

It wasn't an isolated occurrence. From that day on, Xvim insisted on practice sessions every single day, monopolizing every bit of free time Zorian had. Why did Xvim suddenly decide to do that, when he usually never interacted with him outside their assigned meeting times? Hell if Zorian knew. It was certainly annoying, though.

The aranea, on the other hand, had their own frustrations. Trying to track down the ward-breaker that hired Taiven's group to recover the watch turned out to be fairly easy, but getting access to him was anything but. In addition to being good at breaking and analyzing wards, the man was also good at building them, and he was a very capable mage to boot. The aranea lost two of their members trying to corner him and eventually gave up on him for that particular restart, focusing on other leads for the moment.

They still did their best to counter the invaders during the summer festival, of course.

The next two restarts were much the same – the aranea gathered information about the invaders, sometimes asking Zorian to speak for them if they had to interact with someone openly, and started a limited assassination campaign among the cultists and other invasion collaborators that they managed to identify. Zorian learned combat magic, aranea mind arts, and tried to survive Xvim's lessons without punching the man in the face. Their efforts were steadily bearing fruit, with the invasion going more and more haywire with each subsequent restart, and the matriarch hoped their mysterious third time traveler was going to show up soon.

The biggest surprise, to Zorian, was that Novelty actually remembered their interactions in previous restarts. Apparently the matriarch wasn't monopolizing the memory transfer like Zorian thought she would, and was instead giving him memories of 6 different araneas in that memory packet of hers. Novelty, being something of Zorian's personal trainer by now, was deemed important enough to be included in that elite company, something the young spider was very smug about.

Now, though, Zorian was feeling it was time for a change of pace. Two restarts full of Xvim were enough for him, and Taiven had taught him most of what she knew about combat magic anyway.

He knocked on the door to Ilsa's office and waited for her to invite him in.

- break -

"Good morning, mister Kazinski," Ilsa said with a hint of amusement. "I haven't been expecting you until Friday. I suppose you've heard some stories about your mentor, then?"

"No, I already know what kind of person Xvim is. It's not why I'm here," Zorian said. "No, I'm here because I want to learn how to teleport."

Ilsa blinked in surprise. "That's... quite ambitious. Leaving aside the question as to why I should spend my time teaching you that, what makes you think you're even capable of casting such a spell? Even the simplest of teleport spells are very difficult."

"A fair question," Zorian admitted. "How about a demonstration?"

"By all means," Ilsa laughed, motioning him to go ahead. Zorian didn't need empathy to see she didn't think he was capable of impressing her.

Well then – challenge accepted.

Every difficult shaping exercise, every complicated spell he learned over the past two years in the time loop – he showcased all of them. Every written test or theoretical question she fielded against him he countered with a perfect answer – sometimes because he honestly knew the topic, and sometimes because she tended to ask the same questions each time he tried to impress her. And then, when she was still reeling from the realization that he was skilled enough to graduate from the academy right at that moment if he wanted, he pulled out several magic objects from his backpack and started explaining his spell formula experiments to her. While not an official spell formula teacher, Zorian knew from previous restarts that she had very good knowledge of the field, and could appreciate the difficulty of feats he was showing her.

"I'm surprised you haven't applied for a transfer to a tier 1 group with these kinds of skills," Ilsa remarked when he was finally done.

Ah yes, the tier 1 groups – the academy's answer to students too advanced for the normal curriculum. Sadly, the prestige of belonging to one of those groups meant that many people did everything in their power to place their child into one of them, and that meant the actual lessons couldn't be *that* much more advanced from normal ones, else all the people who bought or otherwise arranged for their presence there couldn't keep up. Zorian had heard all sorts of things about those groups, good or bad, but the general picture seemed to be of a bunch of social climbers looking down on everyone else. Nothing that Zorian wanted to be a part of.

"I believe I can get more things done through independent study," Zorian said. "If I truly thought my classes had nothing to offer me I would just test out."

"Don't be too hasty," Ilsa warned. "I'm sure you can find the academy resources useful for another year or so. You aren't *that* advanced."

The academy didn't like it when people tested out. They publically prided themselves on being able to help even adult mages, never mind gifted children. Graduating early implied that the student had nothing left to learn from the academy, and was considered a bit of a slap to the face on behalf of the student. You didn't get any money back for finishing early, either.

All in all, Zorian didn't really intend to test out – that wouldn't get him anything except create bad blood between him and the academy. Still, he always found that sprinkling some light threats into negotiations helped the other side take him more seriously.

Ilsa continued to think in silence for a while, rhythmically tapping her pencil on top of a folder full of written tests that Zorian had speedily filled out earlier in the meeting. Zorian didn't interrupt her, although he considered the long silence a bad sign. In all likelihood this attempt was a waste and he would have to try another approach in the next resta-

"Alright, here is my offer," Ilsa said suddenly. "I will transfer your mentorship from Xvim to myself. I will give you instruction in advanced aspects of illusionism, alteration, animation, and conjuration. If you impress me with your dedication, I will then include lesser dimensionalism spells in that list, and if you prove yourself adept at those... *then* I will teach you the basic teleport spell."

Zorian blinked. What? That was way more than he asked for! Not that he was complaining, but...

"That sounded better than I hoped for," Zorian said. "What's the catch?"

"Well, first of all, I'm expecting you to be my personal assistant," Ilsa said. "I've been trying to get one for the past two years, but the headmaster refuses to pay for their salary and finding a skilled person willing to work for free is surprisingly difficult. Anyway, you'll mostly be dealing with the large number of tests and homework I get every single day, and I may also ask you to take over some of my teaching duties to first year classes. Or any other random task I think of that I consider below me, really."

Annoying, but a fair price for what she was offering. In fact, this whole thing sounded remarkably like-

"And you'll officially become my apprentice," Ilsa continued. "If I am going to teach you advanced magic and trust you with my work, I want to have some kind of legal hold over you."

...like that. Normally Zorian would be very leery of signing an apprentice contract with someone he barely knew, considering their main purpose was to screw the apprentice over if they went against their agreement with their mentor, but this contract was only going to last until the end of the restart so what the hell.

"Oh, and you'll be taking over the position of class representative for your group," Ilsa suddenly said.

Zorian winced. Not only was that a thankless, horrible job, it was also already taken.

"Akoja is going to be devastated," Zorian mumbled. He felt kind of bad at stealing her position, especially since he didn't actually want it in the first place, but there was no way he was missing this chance.

Ilsa laughed. "Zorian, the reason I'm giving you the position is that Akoja doesn't want it anymore. She says she hates the position – that everyone shuns her because of it and that I should give it to someone else. Unfortunately, I haven't received any offers to switch with her. Not from anyone I trust, anyway." She gave Zorian a knowing look. "You were one of the people she recommended for the position, but I didn't even bother asking you about it. Everything I heard about you suggested you wouldn't accept the position."

"And you were absolutely right," Zorian agreed, still in a little shock. Akoja didn't want to be the class representative? But the girl lived for that stuff! And anyway, if she didn't want to do it then why did she perform it with such dedication? If Zorian was stuck in a job he hated, he would do as little as possible, or even mess up deliberately so Ilsa would feel pressured to replace him as soon as possible. Why couldn't Akoja do the same? "The only reason I'm accepting this now is because your offer is so good."

"So we have a deal, then?" Ilsa asked for confirmation.

"Yes, but I have a question and a demand," said Zorian. "First, why do you want to teach me those particular subjects? And second, I want to learn the teleport spell before the summer festival."

"I somehow doubt you'll manage to master the prerequisites for the teleportation spell in little less than a month," Ilsa said. "But in the *highly theoretical* case you actually do so, I have no problem fulfilling your demand. Why are you so dead-set about that spell?"

"It's a bit of a dream of mine to be able to do that," Zorian shrugged. "In my mind, teleportation has always been one of the ur-examples of what a proper mage can do, should be capable of."

"Interesting. Out of curiosity, what are the rest of the things a proper mage can do?" asked Ilsa.

"Make a force field, create a magic item, produce a fireball, repair broken objects and turn invisible," Zorian said. "I can already do the first four, and the fifth one is illegal without special permits."

He was already working on acquiring an invisibility spell anyway, but she didn't have to know that.

Ilsa gave him a knowing look and Zorian would have been afraid she was reading his thoughts if he weren't sure he could detect any casual intrusion into his own mind.

"To answer your first question, I chose those disciplines because they're my own specialty," Ilsa said. "It's only proper for an apprentice to learn his master's specialty, is it not?"

"Sure," Zorian agreed. "I'm not sure what all of those things have in common though. Aren't specialties supposed to be more focused?"

"Well, when I was a young mage, I too had a bit of a dream," Ilsa said. "Specifically, I wanted to master true conjuration."

Zorian blinked. "As in, creation of real matter out of thin air? Isn't that a myth?"

"That's the current Academy stance, yes," Ilsa agreed. "Pre-Cataclysm sources claimed that powerful mages could manage the feat, but all the spells to do so have been lost and no one has been able to recreate them in modern times. Many mages think they never existed and the old records are making things up or describing something other than actual matter creation. Anyway, as a young mage, it had been my dream to recreate those spells, so I studied anything I thought could be a path towards that goal. Modern conjuration basically involves making solid illusions, so it was somewhat natural to start with illusionism and then progress to conjuration. And then, since true conjuration involves working with real matter, I moved onto alteration spells dealing with fabrication of items."

"And... did you have any success?" asked Zorian curiously.

"Depends on your definition of success," Ilsa shrugged. "My ultimate goal was to design a spell that would summon material from somewhere else, without the caster having to know exactly where the materials are coming from. That was how I imagined ancient Ikosians could 'fake' matter creation. I sort of succeeded, but the spell I made only works in a specially prepared room and the mana cost of the spell varies wildly from casting to casting, depending on what I'm trying to conjure. And there was that embarrassing incident with the gold creation part of the experiment swiping these ancient coins from a nearby museum..."

She shook her head. "A story for another time. I have to get to class soon, anyway. I'll prepare an apprentice contract for you to sign tomorrow so be sure to drop by when you get the time."

- break -

The next five restarts were both hectic and boring. Hectic in that there was always something that needed to be done, and boring in the sense that little of it was truly novel. He steadily improved his various skills, the aranea were getting highly adept at countering the invaders in various ways, and Zach seemed to have finally accepted that something highly unusual was going on in the background, and it wasn't caused by him.

There was little chance of Zach identifying Zorian as the cause of the changes, since the sheer magnitude of them tended to drown out everything Zorian personally did. The aranea always started each restart very aggressively, giving anonymous tips to Cyoria's police department, assassinating a few people, and even spreading a few rumors around. The result was that by the time Zorian entered his first class, the changes had already propagated throughout the whole city, academy teachers and students included. Zach didn't appear to suspect Zorian as the ultimate cause, or any other classmate for that matter.

Zorian was starting to agree with Zach in that regard – whoever the third time traveler was, he certainly wasn't in their class. Zorian had, through various excuses, talked to all of them – it helped that he spent the past five restarts as the new class representative, so he had plenty of excuses for such – using his slowly improving empathy to see whether they reacted with shock or surprise when he dropped some of the more suggestive sentences that would only make sense to a time-looping person. He found nothing to implicate any of them.

All in all, things were going pretty well in Zorian's opinion. The last restart was especially good as far as Zorian was concerned – he had finally managed to learn the teleport spell from Ilsa, Zach was actually starting to get smart about countering the invaders instead of simply trying to take them all on through his combat skills, and the last invasion attempt failed to conquer the main academy building or the student shelters because the aranea somehow managed to influence academy leadership into adjusting their warding scheme.

But the matriarch was getting impatient. Something was making her more and more nervous with each passing restart, and she refused to tell him what, giving flimsy excuses every time he asked. She seemed to be focusing most of her energies on some kind of personal project, which she described as 'information gathering' and 'following a hunch', and whatever results she was getting were clearly disturbing her. Zorian strongly suspected she had discovered some kind of vital information about the nature of the time loop, and she refused to share it with him for whatever reason. He was honestly kind of bitter about that. What could possibly be more disturbing than what they already knew about the phenomenon?

Regardless, the matriarch was insistent that the third time traveler had to be found, and the sooner the better. Once Zorian confirmed that they

weren't in his class, she became convinced they, like Zach, weren't even present in the city most of the time. In all likelihood they simply gave critical information to the invaders at the start of the restart and then went to do their own thing. If they wanted to get their attention, the invasion would probably have to be a *spectacular* flop.

Accordingly, the matriarch laid out her plan for the next restart, one that would definitely be impossible to ignore...

24. Smoke and Mirrors

Chapter 024 Smoke and Mirrors

Zorian would be the first to admit he wasn't the easiest person to get along with. He was unsociable, irritable, and tended to assume the worst of people. He had always known that, even before he had died and gotten stuck in a mysterious time loop, but he had also always felt he was justified in his behavior. Indeed, if anyone had been foolish enough to criticize him about it before the time loop, he would have reacted with all the subtlety and grace of a disturbed rattlesnake.

Now... well, he still felt he had good reasons to behave the way he did, and he wasn't going to win any friendliness contests any time soon, but the time loop had changed him. Made him calmer, and perhaps a tad bit more considerate to people around him. He hadn't had an argument with his family in years, his financial independence was all but ensured once the time loop was over, his growing magical prowess had done wonders for his confidence, and the sheer scale of his current problem made all his previous frustrations seem rather petty in comparison.

Thus, when Kirielle kicked him in the knee for the third time in as many minutes, he pointedly didn't snap at her. He didn't even sigh in exasperation. He just continued staring out of the window, watching the fields fly by as the train sped ever closer towards Korsa.

"I'm bored," Kirielle complained.

Zorian gave her a curious look. While the wards protecting the train disrupted mana shaping, they had only a rudimentary effect on his empathy, and what he was detecting from Kirielle wasn't boredom – it was a mix of excitement, anticipation and apprehension. As far as Zorian could tell, such complex mixtures of emotions appeared to be the most common 'emotion' that people experienced, and they were almost entirely indecipherable at Zorian's current level of skill.

"What's really bothering you?" he tried. Her mind immediately burst into a flurry of activity, and she opened her mouth to say something before losing her courage and lamely disguising her attempt to speak as a particularly deep breath. Huh, so she wasn't just being restless...

"Nothin'," she muttered, averting her gaze and despondently picking at the hem of her blouse.

Zorian rolled his eyes and kicked her lightly in the knee. Despite doing the exact same thing to him only few moments ago, she proceeded to send him a nasty glare. Unsurprisingly, her attempt at intimidation failed utterly – she was about as frightening as an angry kitten.

"Tell me," he insisted.

She gave him a long, suspicious look before relenting.

"Will you teach me some magic when we get to Cyoria?" she asked hopefully.

How troublesome. The smart, reasonable response would be 'no' – there was no way she would get anywhere in a mere month, this particular restart was going to be extremely busy as it was, and she was going to forget everything she learned at the end of the month anyway.

"...I'll see what I can do," Zorian said after a few seconds of tense silence. Well, tense for Kirielle – he was pretty sure she literally stopped breathing while she was waiting for an answer.

"Yessss!" she crowed, pumping her fists in the air in triumph.

"But in exchange, I'll want your help with something," he added.

"Fine," she immediately agreed, not even asking what exactly he had in mind. "Hey, can you--"

"No," Zorian immediately said. "The train is warded to disrupt mana shaping. No one can cast spells in here."

"Oh," Kirielle deflated.

Truthfully, Zorian was bending the truth a little. The ward on the train that disrupted mana shaping was very weak and rudimentary, meant to deter overeager students and casual vandalism, and was little more than an annoyance to a proper mage like Zorian was. He could overpower the ward with ease, but he had analyzed it in detail during the previous restart and knew it reported any significant spellcasting to some remote location. He'd rather not get chuck out of the train before reaching Cyoria just because Kirielle wanted a free show.

Kirielle opened her mouth to say something else but was promptly interrupted by a sharp crackling sound that heralded the voice of the station announcer.

"Now stopping in Korsa," a disembodied voice echoed. "I repeat, now stopping in Korsa. Thank you."

Well, at least Kirielle would soon get someone else to bother in their compartment.

"So many people," Kiri remarked, watching the throng at the train station through the window. "I didn't know there were so many people going to that school of yours."

Zorian, who was amusing himself by trying to count the number of people on the train station using his mind sense, made an absent-minded sound of agreement. While he was no longer totally oblivious to the world while using his mind sense, it still took most of his attention to get anything useful out of it. After half a minute of trying to separate the tightly-packed mass of people into discrete individuals that could be counted, however, he decided the task was beyond him at his current level of skill and refocused back of Kirielle.

“Why are mages so rare if there are so many people studying to become one?” she asked.

“They aren’t terribly rare,” Zorian said. “It’s just that most mages coming from rural areas don’t stay there once they finish their studies. I totally understand them too – I know I have no intention of coming back to Cirin when I graduate.”

“What!? Why!?” Kirielle protested.

Zorian raised his eyebrow at her. “Do I really have to answer that question?”

Kirielle huffed and crossed her arms over her chest in obvious annoyance. “I guess not. But that means I’ll be all alone with mother and father then. That sucks.”

“Just pester mother to let you visit me often,” Zorian shrugged. “She’ll cave in eventually, especially since you’ll be the only means through which they can maintain contact with me. Father doesn’t care about either of us, so he’ll follow mother’s lead on this.”

Kirielle gave him a weird look. “I can come and visit you?”

“Any time you want,” Zorian confirmed.

“You don’t think I’m annoying?” she asked.

“Oh no, you’re definitely annoying,” Zorian said, smiling at her mutinous expression. “But you’re still the only part of our family I actually like. And I bet you find me annoying too.”

“Damn right,” Kirielle huffed, kicking him in the knee again for good measure.

They watched in silence as people boarded the train and sought out empty compartments for themselves and their groups. But soon enough such empty compartments dwindled in number and their compartment soon got additional passengers: Ibery, Byrn, and two other girls he never met up until this restart. That was a bit unexpected – he really only expected Ibery to be there. But no matter, maybe it was better this way. The more audience he had for this, the better. Now all he needed was an opening.

He didn’t have to wait long.

“Well, your brother is far better than mine,” one of the new girls said to Kirielle after his sister was done explaining who she was and why she was going to Cyoria. “I’m pretty sure mine would have done just about anything in order to avoid taking his little sister along with him.”

“I almost decided not to bring her, what with the whole Cult of the World Dragon incident,” Zorian interjected. “But then I figured they’re probably just a bunch of crazy idiots anyway. I mean, if it was so easy to summon an army of demons, all of Altazia would have been a burning wreck by now, wouldn’t it?”

All conversation stopped as everyone turns to stare at him like he had grown another head. Zorian feigned confusion and gave them all a blank look.

“What?” he asked finally.

“What... exactly are you talking about?” Byrn asked carefully.

“You didn’t hear?” Zorian frowned, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. “The Cult of the World Dragon issued a threat... well, technically a proclamation of intent but whatever... that they intend to summon an army of demons on the day of the summer festival. The planar convergence scheduled to occur on that day will be the most powerful one in centuries, so this is apparently a once in a lifetime opportunity for them.”

“You’re serious,” Ibery half asked, half stated.

“It’s what they said,” Zorian shrugged. “And Cyoria has a lot of those crazies running around, so I think I’m justified in being a little concerned.”

“Cyoria has a lot of Dragon Cultists?” Byrn asked incredulously.

“It’s the Hole,” Ibery said with a sigh. “It’s something of a holy location for them, being a huge gaping hole in the ground of uncertain depth that continually spews mana into the air. They think it’s a direct conduit to the Heart of the World.”

Wow, good thing Ibery was here – Zorian didn’t know that and would have had to make something up. He should probably read up on the Cult’s actual beliefs one of these days instead of simply thinking of them as a bunch of crazies. Know your enemy and all that.

The conversation didn’t linger on the cultists and their goals for long, and soon shifted to other topics. Zorian allowed it, not interested in pushing the issue. He had no idea if this exchange was going to have any sort of meaningful effect on the restart, but it cost him nothing to try and start the

rumor mill a little early.

The first domino was set.

- break -

Much like the last time Zorian had taken Kirielle to Cyoria, Byrn and Kirielle decided to tour the train station for a while before they moved on to the city proper. By that time, of course, it was heavily raining. Unlike last time, Zorian was now in possession of a warding necklace that he had made while waiting for the departure time in Cirin, so keeping the rain barrier up around the group didn't strain his mana reserves in the slightest. Consequently, he decided to be nice and didn't argue at all when Kirielle insisted they accompany Byrn to the academy.

That's probably why Byrn asked about keeping in touch when they reached his destination and were about to separate. Zorian gave him directions to Imaya's place and told him to drop by when he had the time. He was pretty sure Imaya wouldn't mind in the slightest and, while Zorian himself didn't care much for the boy, he could see that Kirielle got along pretty well with the first year.

And speaking of Imaya, their initial meeting went a lot better than it did last time. The fact they hadn't introduced themselves by frantically banging on the door and dragging water into the house probably helped with first impressions. Hell, she didn't even protest much when Zorian insisted he had something important to take care of and went out into the rain again.

The important thing he had to do was speaking to the aranea to give them back their memories, but this time he bore additional gifts – five stone discs that acted as telepathic relays, drastically improving the ability of aranea to coordinate their actions across large distances. Naturally, the 6th disc remained in Zorian's possession, so he didn't have to descend into the sewers every time he wanted to speak with the matriarch.

[You know, when I told you to contact me as soon as possible, I didn't really mean you should call me in the middle of the freaking night,] Zorian sent to the matriarch, putting as much of his annoyance and crankiness as he could manage into the message. He still wasn't very good at attaching emotions and images to his communication, but he was confident she would get the general picture of what he was trying to convey. [I'm not sure about aranea, but we humans actually have to sleep during the night to function properly.]

[My apologies,] the matriarch sent back. She didn't sound sorry at all. [It's a fascinating device you've gifted me with. Most impressive.]

[Not really. It's pretty shoddy as far as magic items go. I took a lot of shortcuts in order to make so many and it shows. It's a fairly large, heavy disc made out of solid stone, so not very inconspicuous or portable, and it has a lifespan of only 2 and a half months.]

[That's still a month and a half longer than needed,] the matriarch remarked.

[True,] Zorian agreed.

[I assume you can make long-lasting versions?]

[Yes, of course,] Zorian said.

[Could other artificers duplicate your work?] she asked. [Or is this something you came up with yourself?]

Zorian frowned. Why would she need other artificers when she had him? Did she plan to ditch him after they left the time loop or something?

[It's something I came up with,] Zorian said. [Other artificers would have to design a blueprint first. That could take a while.]

True, but misleading. He did design the relays on his own, basically from scratch, but it honestly hadn't been that difficult. He suspected any good magic item maker could design one within a month or two... provided they were either psychic themselves or had a psychic on hand for testing purposes. She could figure out that little detail on her own as far as he was concerned.

[I see,] she said. [Well, I guess I shouldn't keep you awake any longer. I just wanted to tell you I've reviewed the memory packet and am convinced it is genuine.]

Zorian rolled his eyes. As if there was any doubt. Apparently having gotten what she contacted him for, the matriarch cut the connection and left him alone in his bed again. Well, alone in his head at least – Kirielle was very much in the room with him, a fact she immediately reminded him of by taking advantage of his momentary distraction to appropriate the last bit of bed covering he had managed to keep away from her thus far. He gave her a nasty look for that, but she just snuggled deeper into her cocoon of stolen blankets, blissfully unaware of his ire in her realm of dreams.

He sighed. There was no way he was going to be able to go back to sleep now. He quickly cast a silencing ward on the room and then slowly extricated himself from the bed, taking care not to wake up Kirielle. She was annoying, yes, but it wasn't her fault his sleep was ruined.

'Note to self the next generation relay needs an off button.'

- break -

After surprising Imaya by already being awake when she woke up, Zorian went out into the city to hit the stores. The plan he and the matriarch hashed out last restart involved creation of a lot of magic items on his part, and that meant buying material components and specialist tools. Not to mention that there were a few things he had to buy if he wanted to seriously start teaching Kirielle how to be a mage.

He really hoped Kirielle charmed Kana in this restart like she had the last time around – while Zorian himself was decently skilled in alchemy and could manage on his own if he had to, Kael’s help would be invaluable in some of the projects he had planned for this restart...

“Zorian! Over here!”

Zorian snapped out of his thoughts and quickly made way towards the person calling him. Benisek was exactly the person he was looking for. He quickly sat down next to the chubby boy and exchanged a bunch of pleasantries before getting to the reason he had tracked the boy down today.

“Ben, my friend, you won’t believe what I found out during our school break,” Zorian said. “I still don’t understand what they were thinking when they came up with that stuff. It’s like something out of a bad adventure novel.”

“Do tell,” Benisek leaned forward.

“Well...” Zorian began, suddenly feigning reluctance. “It’s kind of confidential, you know. I’m telling you this in strict confidence because we’re friends, so don’t go spreading this around, okay?”

Noting that he was about to tell him something confidential and warning him to keep it to himself was crucial – it meant Benisek was going to spread the story around twice as fast as he normally would.

“Of course,” Benisek said pleasantly. “You know me, Zorian. I would never betray your trust like that.”

Zorian couldn’t help but smile. “Thanks, Ben. I knew I could count on you.”

- break -

Having told Benisek all about the nasty terrorist plot to bomb Cyoria during the summer festival, Zorian went back to Imaya’s place to wait for Taiven and her offer of joining the sewer run. He amused himself by creating one of those practice cards that Xvim had him hone his shaping skills on. He had planned to simply buy a stack of them from one of the stores he visited this morning, but they were a lot more expensive than he had figured they would be – his respect for Xvim rose slightly when he realized how much money Xvim effectively spent on his training during that restart. Zorian’s list of complaints about the man was several pages long, but it seemed that being cheap wasn’t among them.

He was still impressing Ilsa into taking him on as her apprentice, of course. Cheap or not cheap, the man was incredibly frustrating and only tolerable in small doses.

He finished painting the glyphs on the corners of the card he was making and started binding the necessary spell combination. Kirielle, who was in the process of drawing a nearby vase of flowers, briefly looked up from her sheet of paper when she noticed him casting spells, but quickly went back to her work when she saw the lack of lightshows or other impressive visual effects.

He hoped that Benisek would keep silent about the source of the ‘rumor’ Zorian had told him. He probably would – Ben never revealed his sources if he could help it, since he liked to pretend he had some super-secret sources to draw information from rather than just spreading rumors from his fellow students – but Zorian had a contingency plan to follow even if someone with official authority came to confront him about the story. The fact that the aranea were currently spreading the same story in several different places should also help mask where exactly the whole thing had originated in the first place.

He was just putting the finishing touches on the card when Taiven burst into the kitchen and locked onto his position.

“Hey, Roach, nice place you got here,” she said, plopping down to a seat next to him and peering closer to look at his work. “Ooh, I know what that is. I’ve been meaning to get some, one of these days, but I always end up spending my money elsewhere. How many did you buy?”

“None,” Zorian said. “They were too expensive for my taste so I decided to make my own. This is the only one I made so far.”

Taiven raised her eyebrow at him, looking amused at his claim. Zorian frowned, not liking the expression – she didn’t believe he could make a card like this? This was nothing! He thrust the finished card into her face with a scowl.

“Try it out,” he told her.

Sighing dramatically, Taiven took a deep breath and... frowned. Zorian felt a mixture of surprise and frustration burst from her and realized she had tried to burn the circle he drew onto the card and failed.

If you spot this story on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

“You couldn’t do it, could you?” Zorian grinned.

“You made it wrong!” she huffed.

“Did not!” Zorian protested. “You just suck!”

“Do not!” she shot back. “Why don’t you do it if you’re so special, huh?”

"Hmph," Zorian scoffed, snatching the card back. He positioned the card so that she could see the results of what he was about to do (and in the back of his mind he noted that Kirielle had decided to see what the fuss was all about and was studying the card as well) and then flashed his mana into the card in a practiced manner.

The circle – and *only* the circle – momentarily shone red from the heat before collapsing into ash. Zorian blew a gust of air into the hole to scatter the remains across the table and then smugly handed the spent card to Taiven. He crossed his arms and waited for her reply.

"Ahem," a mature female voice interrupted the scene from behind him. "You will, of course, clean up this mess you've made on my table, won't you, mister Kazinski? Oh, and I would like to warn you that I will bill you for any property damage you inflict on my material possessions with your... experiments."

Zorian turned and gave Imaya a big, friendly smile. She rolled her eyes at him and gestured towards the ashes on the table. Hanging his head in defeat, Zorian went to get a rag from the bathroom, ignoring Taiven's soft laughter behind him. Just for that he was tempted to blow her off when she asked him to accompany her to the sewers.

Briefly. The fact was, he definitely needed to go with her this time.

"So what was it that you needed from me anyway?" Zorian asked, sitting down next to Taiven again.

"Ah, well, I was wondering if you'd join me on a little expedition..."

Zorian patiently listened to her explanation before revealing he had contacts with the aranea and requesting that they try talking to them first before barging in, spells blazing. Much like in previous restarts where he had brought the issue up, Taiven accepted him hanging out with giant sewer-dwelling spiders easily enough, but this time she also had an additional request.

"Since you apparently think you're good enough to walk around the Dungeon all by your lonesome, meeting sentient monsters and gods know what else, I would like to test your skills a little," Taiven told him. "Plus, it doesn't hurt to know what your actual combat skills are if you're going to accompany me and my team into a potentially dangerous situation. You do know some combat skills, don't you?"

"Plenty," Zorian assured her.

"Good, so come to my place tomorrow at noon so I can test you," Taiven said. "You're sure they're going to hand us the clock if we ask nicely?"

"If they have it," said Zorian. "That guy who gave you the job doesn't sound all that reliable to me. I don't believe for a second that he didn't know what the aranea are, yet he still sent you go get a pocket watch from them. Either he's trying to get you all killed or... hell, I don't know what his game is there."

"If the watch is something very valuable or very illegal he might not want to send someone who could recognize what they are holding," Taiven frowned. "Just how dangerous are these spiders of yours? I mean, even if sentient, they're still bound to be vulnerable to burning and such. Maybe he thought we would just bulldoze through them without talking?"

"Aranea are all mages," Zorian said. It wasn't strictly true, as only a small minority of aranea was armed with a true spellcasting system, but psychic powers were versatile enough to count as a sort of specialized spellcasting system. "They are especially fond of mind magic, illusions and stealth. And they have a telepathic link to one another so they will know and remember you if you massacre some of their outposts. And then you'd have a bunch of magical spiders with a grudge looking to ambush you or lure you into a trap the next time you descend into the dungeon."

"Shit," Taiven said. He felt a spike of anger from her before she reined it in and forced herself to calm down. "That asshole better have been ignorant of the danger or I'm reporting him to the nearest police station I find. That's practically a murder attempt!"

"Let's talk to the aranea first and see what they have to say," Zorian quickly said. He didn't want Taiven to confront the man and then cancel the whole thing. "I guarantee they won't attack you so long as you have me with you."

Taiven gave him a long, unreadable look.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," Taiven said. "It's just that... I thought I knew you, but now it turns out you have this whole secret life I've never known about until now. It's a bit unreal."

"Yeah!" Kirielle suddenly piped in. She had been silent throughout their discussion, but apparently she had been listening to everything with rapt attention. "How come you never told your own sister any of this!?"

"Oh, that one is easy," Zorian replied smoothly. "I didn't want mother and father to find out, so telling you would have been foolish. Do you have any idea how many times you've gotten me in trouble by spilling my secrets in front of our parents?"

"Oh, come on!" Kirielle whined. "I was a little baby! I didn't know anything! You can't possibly still be angry about that?"

"No, of course not," Zorian mumbled uncomfortably. "I did just tell Taiven about the aranea right in front of you, didn't I?"

Taiven shook her head sadly, rising from her seat. "You keep too many secrets, Roach. I feel a little hurt that you felt you couldn't confide in me

but I was never one to hold a grudge so I'll let it go. Just don't expect this to be the end of it – I'm going to pester you endlessly until I get the whole story. See you tomorrow."

"Wait," Zorian said. "Actually... yeah, there is something I need to tell you. All of you. Miss Kuroshka, I know you've been eavesdropping on us for a while now so you might as well sit down for this."

Imaya whirled around from where she was fiddling with the cutlery and placed her hands on her hips, giving him an angry look.

"I was not doing any such thing," she told him, "I was simply minding my own business, and in my own kitchen no less. If you didn't want me overhearing your conversation you should have taken it elsewhere."

"My mistake," Zorian agreed easily. He was pretty sure she had finished whatever she had come into the kitchen to do for a while now and was simply hanging around to hear them talk, but whatever. "Kiri, do you remember how I promised to teach you spellcasting in exchange for a favor back in the train?"

"Yeah?" Kirielle confirmed hesitantly.

"Right, a little background first. I am what is commonly known as an empath – a person who can sense other people's emotions. Unfortunately, up until recently, my powers have been kind of running amok. There was nobody I could turn to for help... at least not on the human side of things."

"The spiders," Imaya surmised.

"Yes," Zorian agreed. "Aranea are all empathic as part of their innate nature. Thanks to them, I now have more or less gained control over my empathic abilities, though it will take years of practice to truly refine them into something reliable. Follow me so far?"

"What am I feeling right now?" Kirielle asked.

"I actually don't know," Zorian admitted. "People's feelings are rarely very simple, and unless they are feeling one emotion very strongly I'm reduced to educated guesses based on my previous interactions with the person. The more time I spend around someone the easier I can read them."

"But isn't she your sister?" Imaya asked. "You'd think that if anyone was familiar enough for your ability to work it would be family."

"Our family is..." Zorian hesitated, searching for a proper word. "Slightly dysfunctional, I guess. I try to stay away from them most of the time, so I haven't interacted with Kirielle all that often. And I'm not the only one keeping secrets around here – Kirielle is also keeping a lot of things close to her chest. I guess we don't really know each other all that well, sibling bonds notwithstanding."

There was a brief silence as everyone involved digested that admission, but the awkward atmosphere was quickly broken by Imaya clearing her throat.

"Well," she said. "I guess it's a good thing you're both here now to reconnect."

"Yeah!" Kirielle immediately agreed. "Hey, do you think I could be an empath too?"

"Sorry, Kiri, but I'm pretty sure you aren't," Zorian said. "I would have been able to sense it if you were."

"You can sense other empaths?" Taiven asked.

"I can sense all minds around me, empath or otherwise," Zorian said. "I also get some basic information about each mind – how complex their thoughts are, their species, their gender, stuff like that. Empaths light up like little suns on my mind sense, so... sorry, Kiri."

"It's fine," she said dejectedly.

"You can sense people all around you, regardless of obstacles?" Taiven asked. Zorian nodded. "And the range on that ability is...?"

"If I'm busy with something else and just running my mind sense in the background? About ten meters," said Zorian. "If I'm specifically concentrating on scanning the environment? Easily ten times that. However, if there are a lot of minds around me I have trouble processing the information and they all sort of start to blend together in a confusing, headache-inducing mass. I mostly just shut my empathy off when I'm around big crowds."

"Roach, I am so recruiting you for my team," Taiven said. "I've been trying to find a tracker for my team for a while now! Now all we need is to teach you some divination spells and..."

"Already done, thank you," Zorian said. "I am quite proficient in divination."

"Even better!" Taiven said. "You're hired."

"We'll see," Zorian sighed.

"Fascinating," Imaya said. "I've never heard of that aspect of empathy, though I guess it makes sense that someone who can sense emotions can

locate other people through it. But that's not what you wanted to talk about, is it?"

"No it's not," Zorian nodded. "It's not common knowledge, but empathy is just an initial expression of a much more... dangerous ability. A sufficiently skilled empath can bridge the gap between minds and connect with any person in range in order to talk to them telepathically, read their thoughts, fool their senses or mess with their memories. And aranea have been teaching me how to do that."

He paused to gauge their reactions. Well, none of them were quietly panicking or burning with outrage, so that was encouraging.

"I have no intention of doing that to any of you without permission," Zorian said. "But at the same time I need someone to practice on. The aranea aren't very suitable for this – their minds are too alien for a beginner like me to understand. I need a human volunteer, and I'm hoping for you to help me out, oh sister of mine."

"You want to read my mind?" Kirielle asked.

"To put it bluntly, yes," Zorian said.

"And if I say no, will you still teach me magic?"

"Absolutely," Zorian said. "It's a request, not blackmail. I'll just have to find someone else to help me if you refuse."

"Well, okay," she said. "I guess I'll help you. But you can't talk to anyone... about the stuff in my head. And you have to tell me all about your secrets in exchange!"

"Sure," Zorian smiled. "Sounds like a fair deal to me."

- break -

The whole confrontation went off surprisingly well, Zorian reflected. Sure, Imaya had been avoiding him ever since and Kirielle was giving him these weird looks, but none of them were terrified of him or anything – just mildly uncomfortable. They were taking the revelation much better than he had predicted they would.

And then, of course, was Taiven, who was apparently not bothered at all by his admission that he was learning how to read people's thoughts.

"You ready, Roach?" she asked, twirling her combat staff in her hand.

"I'm ready, yeah," Zorian said, gripping his spell rod tighter.

If he knew anything about how Taiven thought – and he did – she would immediately go on the offensive. Her battle philosophy basically boiled down to 'attack hard and you won't have to defend to begin with'... though she could defend too, if pressed. He had no way to win a protracted fight with her, even if he was technically a better mage than she was, so he would have to resort to trickery if he wanted to prevail here.

It would be nice if he could eke out a win against her – her face when she lost against little old 'Roach' was bound to be absolutely glorious to behold.

A blink and suddenly there were 5 magic missiles homing in on him. He let them crash uselessly against his shield and responded with a somewhat exotic electrical spell. A beam of electricity shot towards Taiven, who erected a basic shield of her own to tank it.

Half-way towards its target, the beam split into three smaller beams – one pivoted to the left of Taiven, the other to the right, and the third one straight above it. And then they all changed their paths again and crashed against her from three different directions, completely bypassing the shield in front of her.

It wasn't enough. Somehow, Taiven managed to smoothly transition from a single-direction shield to a full aegis before the beams managed to reach her. Zorian threw a couple of smoke bombs around the training hall to blind her, relying on his mind sense to tell him where she was, and started casting a complicated spell that wasn't etched into his spell rod the moment his location got obscured by the smoke.

Taiven responded by casting several gusts of wind to disperse the smoke and hopefully catch him in the area of effect as well. She had just about stripped him of his smokescreen when he finished the spell and felt his mana reserves drain almost completely dry.

'If this doesn't work, then that's it for this fight,' he thought.

A bright beam of concentrated force shot out from his hand and slammed into Taiven's shield. The shield flared at the point of impact, shattering almost instantly, and Taiven was lifted off her feet by the impact and thrown violently against the floor. She didn't get up, rendered unconscious by the impact.

"Oops," Zorian said quietly. "I think I overdid it just a little – that could have easily killed her if the wards hadn't worked properly."

After casting a few divinations to make sure she was mostly okay and not bleeding internally or something like that, Zorian allowed himself to smile. He would have to work on his restraint, but it was a victory. And she hadn't been any gentler towards him in their previous fights, so she hardly had any right to complain about excessive force. He couldn't wait to see Taiven's face when she woke up.

“Come on, Roach,” Taiven growled. “Find those spiders of yours so we can be done with this mission. I’m getting sick of this place already.”

Zorian sighed and refocused on scanning his surroundings. This would be going faster if Taiven stopped snapping at him every so often – talk about being a sore loser.

“Hey,” a male voice whispered into Zorian’s ear, breaking him out of thoughts. “What happened between you and Taiven to get her so bothered, anyway?”

Zorian glanced at Grunt and considered how to answer for a second. He decided to be blunt and truthful.

“I beat her in a spar,” he said. “She thinks I cheated.”

Grunt gave him a considering look. “You beat Taiven in a spar? Aren’t you a third year?”

“Sure am,” Zorian agreed, before he noticed a familiar presence on his mental map. “Oh hey, there they are.”

After the initial introductions were done, Taiven immediately moved onto the reason they were down in the tunnels in the first place, only to get disappointed.

“So you don’t have the watch?” Taiven asked.

“Alas, I’m afraid the next group of attackers managed to break into our treasury and escaped with a great many of our artifacts... the watch we claimed from the thief being among them,” the matriarch said regretfully. “I do know where their base is, however.”

This was all a bunch of bullshit, Zorian knew. The watch was indeed somewhere else – specifically in one of the forward outposts that the invaders used to launch attacks on the aranea – but it was there because the aranea had put it there. The idea was for Taiven and her group to stumble onto the outpost, realize they’re stumbled onto something big – bigger than they could handle – and then report it to the authorities.

It was Zorian’s job to make sure Taiven and her group survived the encounter with the invaders.

“How convenient,” Zorian scoffed, “that getting the watch involves taking out one of your enemies in the process.”

“A happy coincidence,” the matriarch said easily. “We both get something out of it, after all – you get the location of the watch for free, and I get to deal with one of my problems without risking my Web. Now... do you want the location of the base or not?”

“Just who are these enemies of yours, anyway?” Taiven asked.

“I don’t know exactly,” the matriarch said. “The attackers consisted of a mage controlling two war trolls, but the base is guaranteed to have more forces than that.”

“War trolls!?” Taiven blanched. “Hell, that is way more than we signed up for!”

“The guy is definitely not paying us enough to confront a couple of war trolls with mage support,” Mumble said quietly.

“Maybe check it out anyway?” Zorian tried. “Like, from a distance? I may be able to tell how many forces there are in the place.”

“Yeah,” Taiven said after considering things for a few moments. “Yeah, we should check it out at least. No offense to the matriarch here, but a bunch of guys running around the sewers with tamed war trolls sounds a bit... implausible. Maybe she saw something else.”

“I suppose it’s possible,” the matriarch allowed. “I haven’t actually seen trolls before, and wasn’t personally present when the incident occurred, but they sounded very much like the trolls humans speak of.”

“Right,” Taiven nodded. “Where did you say this base was again?”

The base wasn’t actually in the city sewers. That part of the Dungeon was somewhat patrolled and monitored, and it would have been impossible to hide a large mass of soldiers there for an appreciable length of time. For that matter, the aranea didn’t actually live in the sewers either, although they considered them part of their territory. Instead, both the aranean home base and the various invader outposts were situated in what was known to Cyoria authorities as the ‘intermediary layer’.

It was not particularly rare for mages to descend into the intermediary layer, but it was not a common occurrence either. The intermediary layer was too dangerous for a casual stroll by an unarmed civilian, but mostly devoid of anything valuable that would attract dungeon delvers and other adventurers. The city hired mercenaries to sweep through the place every few years and get rid of any obvious threats that had set up residence, and they usually also picked the place clean of anything valuable, leaving a great expanse of little value. For those who wanted to challenge themselves against the denizens of the Underworld and search the place for riches, there was the Hole and its direct access to deeper levels that hadn’t been picked clean over the decades. Most of the visitors from the city consisted of an occasional thrill-seeking student and an occasional patrol to keep an eye on things.

The invaders chose the timing of their invasion well. The city was so focused on the summer festival and its associated problems that it didn't pay attention to what was happening in the dungeon at all. This would normally not be such a problem, as very few problems could spring out of nothing in a couple of measly months – especially with little to no indication that something big was happening – but now...

"Holy shit," Taiven whispered, peering from behind their cover to look at the camp again. "They've got a freaking army there!"

"Get down, you idiot," Grunt growled at her, pulling her down behind the rock they were using as cover. "Do you *want* them to see you? If they notice us, we're dead. There must be at least a hundred trolls down there and at least 20 handlers."

"Sorry," Taiven said. "It's just... so unreal."

Zorian had to agree. He was expecting it, and he was still surprised at the scale of what they were seeing. Then again, this was why the matriarch had chosen this particular base out of the 12 or so she knew of. The others were smaller and much better hidden, but this particular base was situated in a large open cavern and had enough artificial illumination that a human observer could see the whole camp easily from a sufficiently high vantage... like the one they were using, for example. In fact, the vantage point they were using was pretty much *perfect* for observing the camp.

'Hmm, I wonder...'

He silently ran his fingers against the walls of the tunnel that brought them here. It was bumpy but smooth. *Far* too smooth to be natural. The rock they were hiding behind was the same.

'Apparently this was even more of a set up than I thought it was,' Zorian thought. 'I bet one of the aranean mages made this tunnel specifically so we could find it. It would explain why no one seemed to be paying any attention to this particular entrance, even though the other two are both guarded – they don't even know it exists.'

Well, whatever – time to do his part in this charade. He pulled out a mirror from his backpack and silently cast a scrying spell on it. The base had a divination ward, of course, but it was based on the idea of stopping people from realizing that the base was there to begin with. Since Zorian knew that the camp existed and where it was, and was in fact right next to it, the entire ward was pretty much useless against him.

After 5 minutes of watching the camp through the mirror, Taiven decided she had seen enough and motioned him to cancel the spell.

"Let's go," she said. "I want to get out of here before our luck runs out."

They almost made it out without complications. Almost.

As the four of them approached one of the seals between the sewers and the deeper layers of the dungeon, they suddenly came face to face with a duo of hooded mages flanked by 4 trolls. For a moment, both groups halted and tried to make sense of what they were seeing, neither group really expecting to stumble upon each other. Zorian noted with annoyance that their mental presence was somehow muted – no doubt a countermeasure against the aranea – and cursed himself for thinking that his opponents wouldn't have some way of dealing with mind sense.

The impasse was broken when one of the mages ordered the trolls to charge.

Neither Taiven nor her two teammates hesitated when faced with four war trolls charging at them, raising their staffs to blast the attackers before they could overrun them. Zorian decided to keep the mages busy instead and fired a small missile swarm of four piercers, two for each mage.

Several things happened simultaneously. One of the mages dropped whatever spell he was casting and raised a shield to successfully tank the missiles coming towards him. The other was less skilled and fumbled his shield – both piercers hit him straight in the chest and he went down in a shower of blood. Grunt and Mumble used quick flamethrowers to halt the charge of the trolls, but while three of the trolls did flinch away from the flames, the largest, best-armored troll lurched forward, a little dazed but unharmed.

Taiven hit them all with a battering ram of force, intending to knock the whole group down and give them some space, and for the most part succeeded – the three recovering trolls and the surviving mage were hurled deeper into the tunnel and away from them, but that one troll at the front kept its ground.

It raised its huge iron mace for an overhead strike and screamed out a challenge, its shout staggering them like a physical blow, acting almost like a lesser version of the battering ram that Taiven just cast. Strange, Zorian had always thought trolls had no magic other than their absurd regenerative capabilities.

He had no time to consider this, however, as the troll immediately capitalized on the distraction it caused and surged forward.

Frantically, Zorian erected a large shield in front of the group, trying to buy time. Sadly, unlike the other trolls Zorian had battled in the previous restarts, this one was too smart to just crash into the shield. It smashed its mace into the shield with great force – once, twice, three times. The shield broke and the troll kicked him in the chest, catapulting him backwards where he collided with Grunt and Mumble and interrupted whatever they were about to cast.

Taiven, on the other hand, managed to finish hers. A vortex of fire surged forward, finishing off the surviving mage and the three other trolls that were moving to aid their comrade but leaving the lead troll merely singed.

And very, very angry.

“Shit,” Taiven said quietly, as the troll raised its mace for a killing strike.

Even though he knew her death wouldn’t be permanent, even though he had known there was a chance for this to happen when he had agreed to participate in this plan, Zorian found himself completely horrified at the idea of watching Taiven get crushed to death. Killed because of him and his plots and schemes...

He reached out to the troll’s mind and noticed it was no longer being muted – while Taiven’s spell failed to incinerate the troll, it seemed to have burned out whatever protected it from mind magic. Rather than try any sort of sophisticated attack, he simply flooded it with meaningless drivel, blasting its mind with random telepathy.

The troll flinched in shock and spasmed, halting its attack and dropping the mace it was holding. Zorian immediately threw two explosive cubes at its feet.

“Taiven, get back!”

She didn’t have to be told twice, immediately snapping out of her daze and scrambling backwards out of the troll’s reach. Zorian activated the bombs as soon as he judged her out of reach and the troll was enveloped in a deafening explosion.

Somehow, it still survived. It was kneeling and clutching its leg in pain, and bleeding all over, but Zorian could already see its flesh knitting together.

Damn it, what was it with this one troll!? Was it a super-troll or something?

And then two ice blue beams impacted directly into the troll’s chest, courtesy of Grunt and Mumble, and the creature immediately froze over and went still.

“Is it finally dead?” he asked.

“I don’t know and don’t care,” Taiven said. “Let’s get lost before we meet another one.”

Zorian took a deep, shuddering breath and nodded in assent. Then he tried to take a step and winced at the pain in his leg. He could walk, but he just knew he was going to be hurting for the rest of the week.

‘This better be worth it, you damn manipulative spider,’ he inwardly thought.

- break -

[So it’s all done?] the matriarch asked.

Zorian gripped the stone disk in his hand tighter. [Yes. I just said so, didn’t I? Thankfully, there were no actual casualties, though it was close. In many ways our close brush with death works in favor of your plan, since Taiven is really pissed about these people now and determined to bring them to justice. She is going to report the whole thing tomorrow to the city authorities. I sincerely hope it wasn’t you who arranged for us to stumble onto that group, miss Spear of Resolve, or I’ll be very angry at you.]

[Don’t worry, I had nothing to do with it,] the matriarch assured him.

[Right,] Zorian sighed. Maybe he was being paranoid, but the matriarch’s behavior had grown ever more secretive over the past few restarts and he wouldn’t put it past her to pull something like that. [How about you? Is your task done?]

[Yes,] the matriarch confirmed. [I have contacted Zach and told him that the aranea are aware of the time loop.]

25. The Unexpected

Chapter 025 The Unexpected

Zorian stared at the stone disc in his hand in silent contemplation. It was done. Zach finally knew he wasn't alone in the time loop. True, the other boy didn't know about Zorian being one of the time travelers – the matriarch had presented herself as the time traveler and made no mention of Zorian – but it was only a matter of time now. There was no way that Zorian could fool the other boy for more than a couple of restarts now that the idea of there being other time travelers was no longer totally ridiculous in Zach's mind. Assuming he even wanted to. After all, if this plan of theirs worked and the third time traveler was neutralized, there would be no reason not to introduce himself to Zach immediately afterwards.

[So,] Zorian said. [How did Zach react to your... introduction?]

[Confusion, surprise and outrage,] the matriarch responded. [He had pretty much figured out that there was someone else looping beside him – it was the only way to explain all the wide-scale changes that had been happening in the last handful of restarts. He was very confused about how they came to be and why they didn't come to talk to him, though, and was considering doing something eye catching to get our attention. The idea that the other time traveler is a giant talking spider caught him off guard but I don't think it will be a problem in the long term – he didn't seem to be arachnophobic or a human supremacist. Anyway, he was pretty angry when I told him there was a *third* time traveler and that he had been mind-wiped by them, so I cut our meeting short so he can cool off a little.]

[Understandable,] Zorian said. [I know that aranea consider memory editing to be business as usual, but humans tend to flip out over such things. Do you think he bought your story about you being the other time traveler?]

[Actually, I said there are *several* aranea time travelers. That I had a way to bring other people into the time loop. Technically true, and makes us look like a bigger threat.]

[Not sure if that was really necessary,] Zorian mused. [Or even wise. What we have planned already should be sufficient to annoy the third time traveler into confronting you. Making yourself look more dangerous than you already are is just going to make him more cautious and dangerous.]

[You're overthinking things,] the matriarch said. [We're trying to set a trap, not engage the enemy in battle. Given that our enemy hasn't responded to our provocations so far, I think that getting him to take the bait is a bigger priority than worrying what happens once he does. As you have yourself stated, and as Zach has learned so painfully over the course of this time loop, there is only so much a single mage can tackle on his own. However capable our opponent is, he's not walking off from a well-prepared ambush.]

[Right,] Zorian said dubiously. He was far less certain than she was about that plan, but it wasn't like he had a better idea. And besides, maybe having one of her plans blow up in her face would make her more forthcoming with information in the next restart. [So do we have Zach's support on this?]

[He will help, yes,] the matriarch confirmed. [I didn't really have to offer anything to make him cooperate. He even asked for a list of targets so he can help us soften up the invading forces before the actual invasion date. Very earnest and straightforward, that boy. Quite unlike you and your rampant paranoia, I might add.]

Zorian narrowed his eyes, gripping the stone disc in his hand a little tighter. Was that it? Was the matriarch trying to replace him with Zach? Someone more trusting and easier to manipulate?

Was Zorian going to be next on the chopping block once the threat of the third time traveler was gone?

That settled it – he was going to reveal himself to Zach sometime soon, regardless of how this ambush turned out. There was an advantage to anonymity, yes, but it was massively outweighed by the danger of allowing the aranean matriarch exclusive access to Zach. That could end up *very* badly for Zorian.

[You've been silent for a while,] the matriarch noted. [You do know I was just teasing you, right?]

[I was just thinking,] Zorian said, thinking about how glad he was they were communicating through the relays at the moment – it made it next to impossible for the matriarch to read his thoughts unless he specifically sent them to her. It wasn't really a safeguard he consciously installed, more like a consequence of their shoddy construction, but Zorian was pleased with the end result all the same. [What about the money? I'll be running out of savings soon, you know.]

[I'll be able to get you about 20.000 pieces by the end of the week. Will that be enough?]

[For the ingredients? Sure,] confirmed Zorian. [If we have to hire experts, though? I'm not so sure. Good experts are expensive, especially if you're hiring them on a tight schedule or expect them to be discreet. Hopefully Kael will agree to help us, or else I'll probably have to hire an alchemist.]

[I'll leave that to you,] the matriarch said. [You understand the problem far better than I do.]

There was a brief silence as both Zorian and the matriarch considered what to say next, if anything.

[Listen,] the matriarch suddenly said. [Did you know that the aranea sometimes scatter small memory packets into the minds of their males?]

Zorian blinked. What? What did *that* have to do with anything?

[No,] said Zorian hesitantly. [I can't say that I did.]

[Well they do,] the matriarch said. [It's a pretty good way to leave secret messages if you know what you're doing. If you break the message into sufficiently small chunks and embed it carefully enough into the targets, it's virtually impossible for anyone without a key to even find them, let alone piece them together into a coherent whole.]

[Why are you telling me this?] Zorian asked.

[Just in case,] the matriarch responded. [Aranea males are far smaller than female ones and very, very cowardly. They're frightened by fire and loud noises just like any other animal, and most divination spells designed to track aranea do not register them as the same type of creature. Most of the time when an aranean settlement is destroyed, a lot of males will survive the destruction. Leaving messages encoded in their minds is a good way to leave messages from beyond the grave.]

Zorian frowned. So the matriarch *did* acknowledge that the ambush could go wrong... but why would she leave a message for him in such a roundabout, complicated way?

[Why not just tell me?] he asked.

[It's probably nothing,] the matriarch said. [And you worry too much as it is. This is really just a precaution in case of the worst outcome. Novelty will give you the key when you see each other next time.]

Before Zorian could continue the discussion, the matriarch cut the connection.

"Very mature," Zorian mumbled, throwing the disc on the bed beside him. Still, as annoying as the matriarch was right now, she had been nothing but helpful so far, so he would give her the benefit of the doubt. Maybe she really did have good reasons for her secrecy.

Still, after this restart maybe he should start making his own precautions. Just in case.

- break -

At Cyoria's train station, Zorian waited. It would be a while until Kael and his daughter arrived, and in the meantime Zorian amused himself by messing with the pigeons milling about on the platforms.

Animal minds were paradoxically both harder and easier to affect with psychic powers than human minds. Harder because simpler minds were harder to sense and pin-point, easier because their thoughts were easier to discern and subvert once a psychic finally managed to connect to them.

The pigeons weren't that hard to sense – not if he had a direct line of sight on one and could devote all his attention on the task – so there was little the birds could do to defend themselves against Zorian's experimentation. He simply sat on his bench and systematically targeted pigeon after pigeon, practicing his skills. Sometimes he simply tried to make sense of their rudimentary minds without alerting them to his intrusion, other times he tried to flat out hijack their senses or puppeteer their body. Neither task was going terribly well, but it was something to pass the time with and he did have *some* success. After the 50th pigeon or so, he could distinguish a pigeon that was hungry, sick or in pain from those that weren't. He could make a pigeon stumble or freeze up for a second, or frighten them until they fled as far away from him as possible.

Actually, that last one was extremely easy. Considering the effect was almost identical to the 'Spook Animal' cantrip he had learned back in their second year, he shouldn't have been surprised. Though that did give him an idea... mind spells that affected animals weren't restricted as heavily as spells that targeted humans. Hell, some of them were freely available in the academy library! It might be a good idea to try some in one of the future restarts and compare the results with what he could achieve with psychic powers.

For now though, he concentrated on another idea – rather than flat out puppeteer the pigeon, he was trying to simply dampen its fear and influence it into approaching him on its own. It was a lot harder than scaring the bird away. The pigeons were already inclined to bolt at the slightest provocation, so it didn't take much to send them running, but having them approach a strange man with no food that kept staring at them went against their instincts.

It took him over twenty tries, but he gradually learned how to steer the pigeons towards him. Finally, on his 24th attempt, he found a pigeon fearless enough to play along with his game. It slowly meandered close and then briefly took flight in order to land on the same bench Zorian was occupying.

It cooed and stared at him, and when Zorian reached out with his hand and scooped it up it did not resist in the slightest.

Success! Zorian reached into his pocket and offered the docile pigeon in his hand some bread. It was only proper to reward such a cooperative experiment subject.

And his achievement was just in time too, since Kael's train was arriving at the station. He put the pigeon down on the bench and left to help Kael disembark.

"Kael Tverinov? I'm Zorian Kazinski, one of your classmates. Miss Zileti sent me to help you settle down and show you around the city. Don't worry about your daughter, I know the value of being discreet."

Kael gave him a searching look before nodding. "I appreciate the help, mister Kazinski. As well as your silence. Lead the way, if you will."

"It's no problem at all," Zorian said, creating a floating disc of force and loading the other boy's luggage on the platform. "We live at the same place, after all."

"We do?" Kael asked curiously.

"Well, yes. Or at least we will if you have rented a room at the place Miss Zileti had recommended to you. She recommended the same place to me when I told her I'm bringing my little sister with me this year and sought alternatives to academy housing."

"Your little sister?" asked Kael, shifting Kana in his hands. The little girl studied everything around them with her bright blue eyes but remained resolutely quiet. "How come you brought her with you, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Our parents went on a trip to Koth and someone has to take care of her. And, well, that someone has always been me in cases like this. I don't mind all that much, really, and the owner of the place seems to be good with kids."

"Well, that's a relief," Kael said. "To be honest I had great reservations about coming here, and I was kind of worried Miss Zileti overstated her friend's fondness for children in order to get me on board with the enrollment."

"I don't think you have a lot to worry about. Imaya, the owner of the place, seems honest and friendly enough. And I'm an empath, so I can usually tell."

Kael gave him a sharp, questioning look.

"Too sudden?" Zorian asked. "Sorry, but I wanted to get it out of the way first. I know some people can't stand the idea of someone knowing their private emotions, but I don't think I can keep it a secret from someone that I'm going to share a roof with on a permanent basis."

"If you aren't worried about living with a morlock, I don't think I have rights to complain about you being an empath," Kael said, shaking his head. He gave his daughter a sad look. "Truthfully, I am sort of jealous. Kana is so quiet most days, I sometimes wish I could peer into her head and see what she's thinking about."

Kana immediately wrapped her little hands around Kael's head and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. Kael snorted derisively and ruffled her hair, a smile dancing on his lips.

'Kana 1, Kael 0,' Zorian thought to himself. Quiet she might be, but Kana clearly knew how to deal with her father effectively.

A few moments later, when the moment had passed, the two boys resumed their conversation in a much less reserved fashion, the ice having been successfully broken.

- break -

Imaya's kitchen was crowded. Crowded and loud. Between Zorian and Kirielle, Kael and his daughter, visiting Ilsa and Taiven, and finally Imaya herself, the room was as full as it could comfortably be and there were constantly at least two simultaneous conversations going on at any particular moment. Strangely enough, Zorian felt comfortable being there. In the past, these kinds of gatherings had annoyed him terribly, and he would find some reason to excuse himself and leave as soon as possible. The difference, he realized, was that he was no longer in a gathering of strangers. This was the first time he actually felt he belonged in one of these things, instead of being a barely-tolerated intruder constantly scrutinized for weakness and misbehavior.

He still remained mostly quiet, of course. But it was a comfortable silence.

"...and then Grunt and Mumble hit it with polar beams and froze it solid," spoke Taiven animatedly. "I don't know whether that really killed it, but it put it out of the fight long enough for us to run for it. Most harrowing experience of my life, let me tell you. I'm really glad Zorian was there – if I had chosen any other third year student as filler, I don't think I'd have survived that encounter."

Zorian fidgeted in his seat, a little uncomfortable at the praise. If it weren't for him, Taiven wouldn't have encountered that troll in the first place, so he didn't feel like he had done her any favors.

"While it's indeed impressive that Zorian can contribute in such a fight, I'm going to have to insist you refrain from bringing him along to your dungeon delving in the future," Ilsa said with an amused smile. "He's my apprentice now, and it would look absolutely terrible on my record if I let my apprentice be killed by a rampaging troll or some other monsters immediately after signing the contract."

"Err, yeah..." Taiven fumbled. "Well, I have no intention of going down there for a while. I reported the incident to the police, but the cleanup will probably take months, and the place is too dangerous for me and my group at the moment."

"A wise decision," Ilsa nodded. She then shifted her attention to Zorian. "And the same principle holds for you. I don't want you taking such risks in the future. I will ignore the issue this once, since you were helping a friend and the situation escalated beyond anything that could reasonably be

expected, but from now on consider all excursions into the Dungeon forbidden until further notice.”

“Of course,” Zorian immediately agreed, having no intention of actually honoring the restriction.

“And I want you to consult me before doing anything similarly dangerous in the future,” Ilsa warned. “Is there anything else I should know about?”

“Not really,” Zorian said. Ilsa gave him a hard stare. Hmm, maybe he should throw her a bone to distract her with before she starts actually monitoring him. “Well, I’ll be meeting my aranea tutor on a regular basis, but she’s totally harmless. Wouldn’t hurt a fly, despite being a giant spider.”

“Ah yes, the spiders,” Ilsa said with obvious distaste. “Don’t worry, Imaya has already told me about your... condition. I wanted to speak to you about that, but I’ll wait until we can meet in a more private setting.”

Zorian nodded, appreciating Ilsa’s discretion. Kael still didn’t know about the full extent of his mental abilities and Zorian didn’t believe this was the time to reveal them. He was kind of disappointed that Imaya had told Ilsa about his ‘condition’ without asking for his permission. It was by no means unexpected, but still disappointing.

“I’m curious,” Kael said. “If your teacher wouldn’t hurt a fly, what does she eat? I’m pretty sure all spiders are strict carnivores.”

“Mostly rats and stray dogs,” Zorian said.

“Rats?” Kirielle asked in disgust.

“I’m told rats can get pretty big in Cyoria,” Zorian said.

“Ho boy, can they ever,” Taiven confirmed. “I swear I once saw one of them stalking a cat instead of the other way around...”

“She’s just telling fisherman’s tales,” Imaya quickly assured the disturbed-looking Kirielle. “I’ve lived here my whole life and have never seen anything like it.”

“How do you know that stray humans aren’t also on their diet?” asked Ilsa.

“According to Novelty, the idea is about as likely as a group of humans hunting an occasional dragon in order to put some meat on the table – that is to say, not very. There is almost always easier prey around,” answered Zorian. “Not that aranea are harmless, far from it, but if they kill me it’s not going to be because they want to eat me.”

“Novelty?” Kael asked.

“That’s the name of the aranea tutoring me,” Zorian shrugged. “Well, technically her name is Enthusiastic Seeker of Novelty, but that’s unwieldy and she doesn’t mind if I shorten it.”

“That name sounds stupid,” Kirielle said.

Zorian opened his mouth to tell her that ‘Kirielle’ was also a stupid name when he thought better of it. For one thing, it was best to reserve immature bickering with her when they were alone. For another he had just thought up a much more amusing and diabolical idea.

“Want to meet her?” Zorian asked.

“What?” Kirielle asked.

“Novelty. Want to meet her?”

Kirielle stayed silent, mulling it over. “I don’t know. I don’t like spiders. They’re disgusting.”

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“Well okay,” Zorian shrugged. “I just figured you’d jump at the chance to meet with a member of a reclusive race of magical creatures that very few humans can boast speaking to. Once in a lifetime opportunity and all that. But I guess I understand-”

“Umm, well...” Kirielle fumbled. “Actually, I changed my mind. She’s not going to try to touch me, is she?”

Of course she was going to try and touch her. Novelty wanted to touch *everything*. By her own admission she once stuck one of her legs into an open flame in order to see what would happen.

“I’m sure she’ll keep her distance if you ask politely,” Zorian told her.

How he kept a straight face after telling her that he’d never know. Sometimes he surprised even himself.

The conversation continued for a while after that, but eventually began to peter out. Ilsa and Taiven excused themselves and left, while Kirielle amused herself with trying to teach Kana how to draw. Of course, unlike Kirielle, Kana was a typical child with age-appropriate (that is to say,

appalling) drawing aptitude, but neither Kirielle nor Kana seemed discouraged by that. Zorian excused himself and went to his room to see if he could get some work done before Kirielle came looking for him.

It was not to be, though – barely a minute after he had sat on his bed Kael showed up and knocked on the doorframe to get his attention.

“Am I interrupting something?” he asked.

“No, I was just considering what to do with myself. Did you need something?” asked Zorian.

“Sort of,” said Kael. “I just came to tell you that you don’t have to dance around the issue of your mind magic any more. I already figured out you’re not *just* an empath.”

“Kirielle told you, didn’t she?” Zorian sighed.

“Not so much told me as gave me enough clues to figure it out. She’s a chatty kid. But there is no need to be angry at her, it’s not like I’m going to turn on you just because you’re learning how to read people’s thoughts.”

“Thanks,” Zorian said. “Although quite frankly, it would be kind of hypocritical of you to shun me for dabbling in forbidden magics, mister junior necromancer.”

Kael immediately flinched back in shock and gave him a wide-eyed look. “W- What!? There is no way...”

Zorian gestured him to quiet down and Kael immediately shut up and peered down the corridor to make sure no one had been listening. Zorian knew they hadn’t been, he could feel that all of the other residents were still back in the kitchen. His scrutiny done, Kael quickly stepped into the room and closed the door, leaning heavily on it.

“How?” he asked. He sounded more panicked than menacing at the moment, but Zorian knew that could change at any moment if he didn’t get a satisfactory answer.

“Do you know the ‘arcane lock’ spell?” Zorian asked.

“I... yes,” Kael said, still sounding rather dazed.

“Lock the door, then, and I’ll make sure we’re safe from any stray divinations,” Zorian said, and immediately started casting a temporary divination ward at the room. It wasn’t anything fancy, but it would ward off simple scrying attempts and hopefully notify him if anything more complex targeted them. Not that he really thought they would need it, but it was good practice and you could never be careful enough.

5 minutes later the room was as secure as Zorian could make it on such quick notice and Kael looked increasingly impatient. Zorian decided to get on with it. He opened his mouth and began to speak.

“Let me tell you a story of lost time and a month that refuses to end...”

- break -

Unpaid teenage labor was an age-old tradition among mages. While the ancient apprentice system had largely been replaced with specialized magical academies, and the quality of young mages had improved drastically as a consequence, there were some things that simply couldn’t be learned in the classroom. For things like that, a mage needed a mentor – someone to show them the tricks of the trade, teach them unique skills and spells they had developed and did not share lightly with others, or just plain connect them with the right people. Said mentors usually had plenty of work they considered beneath them, ideally of a sort that took advantage of their student’s magical ability and prepared them for their future vocation.

Ideally.

As Zorian trudged towards his classroom, half an hour before any of his fellow classmates, he reflected on the fact that life was rarely ideal. In practice, a lot of work given to apprentices consisted of chores that their mentor thought beneath them or various busywork. The duties of the class representative, for instance, were largely one giant waste of time. In the previous restarts, this fact didn’t bother him all that much – the job was fairly easy so long as you didn’t take it as seriously as Akoja did – but this time he had so many things vying for his attention that he resented this additional duty being piled up on top of it all. Maybe he shouldn’t have talked Ilsa into taking him as her apprentice this restart but, well, what’s done is done.

He yawned. He supposed he was just cranky today since he had gotten very little sleep last night. His conversation with Kael literally took hours since the other boy wanted to know absolutely everything and kept asking for details. While Zorian didn’t begrudge the other boy for wanting answers and considered the time well spent, he kind of planned to use that time to read through the research assignments he had collected from his classmates on behalf of Ilsa. Assignments he had to give to Ilsa today, complete with corrections and grade recommendations. He had thought his knowledge from previous restarts would make the task a child’s game, but apparently something about their massive changes to this restart caused Ilsa to give out completely different topics for research and he had to actually read everything from scratch. He ended up spending most of the night dealing with those stupid things and then had to get up half an hour earlier than usual too because he was class representative to boot.

Peering into the classroom, he saw that Akoja was already inside. He rolled his eyes at her excessive punctuality and marked her down as present

on his little attendance sheet. The blackboard was full of horrible drawings, love confessions and other garbage, but he knew better than to wipe it clean right now – a clean blackboard was utterly irresistible to some of the idiots in his class, and they would no doubt make a mess again by the time the teacher finally showed up. Who knew, maybe if he left it alone long enough Akoja would take care of it on her own initiative, as she was sometimes wont to do.

The first to arrive were, surprisingly since they weren't normally early birds, Aneka and Armie – the (in)famous Ashirai twins. The Ashirai family consistently produced soul-bonded twins as their descendants, and the two sisters he shared his class with were no different. Zorian had considered asking them for help back when he thought he was soul-bonded to Zach, or at least questioning them about the mechanics of soul bonds, but eventually decided it would be a bad idea. For one thing, mage families tended to jealously guard their family magics, and it was obvious that the Ashirai family was trying to become an official House with their own magical specialty centered around their soul bonds. Asking too closely about their family style could have ended up blowing up in his face spectacularly, and Zorian hadn't been willing to risk it, time loop or not. A second concern was that the twins were unreliable. Benisek-level unreliable. They were giggly little twits who took nothing seriously and wouldn't keep quiet even if he paid them.

No, it had definitely been smart of him to stay away from them.

Next to arrive was Kael, who apparently couldn't sleep very well after yesterday's revelations, and eventually decided to just come early. They didn't talk much before the morlock boy decided to retire to his seat, but Zorian could already see there would be more questioning in the near future. Lovely. He had forgotten how inquisitive and interested in the time loop Kael had been the last time he had been aware of it.

Briam, Naim and Edwin were marked down as present next. Briam gave him a wave as he passed by him, his other hand holding his fire drake familiar close to him, while Naim and Edwin were too absorbed into their conversation to take notice of him. Zorian didn't really mind, it wasn't like he knew either of them all that well. Naim was a first generation mage, much like Zorian and Akoja – a child of some soldier that rose to the rank of general in the wake of the disruptions caused by the Splinter Wars. Edwin had golem makers as his parents, and they clearly passed on their enthusiasm for the craft to Edwin – he was always tinkering with various mechanisms and making blueprints, even during lectures or other times during which he should have been concentrating on something else.

The next to come was Raynie – the red-headed mystery that transferred into their class in the previous year. She was reserved, polite, extremely attractive, a good student and absolutely refused to tell anyone about her family or origins. The only one who knew anything concrete about Raynie was Kiana, another of his female classmates, and she was resolute in her silence.

And so it went, student after student, until the list was complete and he could finally slip inside and try to rest for a bit before class started. He absent-mindedly erased the blackboard with a single alteration spell, causing the chalk to simply peel off the surface and fall to the floor, and sat down to wait.

- break -

"No, Ben, you cannot turn in your assignment a week from now," Zorian growled. "The deadline was yesterday. I have to hand them over to Ilsa today. Don't you see the problem here?"

"Come on, Zorian, this is what friends are for," Benisek complained. "What good is having your best bud as the class rep if you can't ask him to cut you some slack?"

"You're not asking for a favor, you're asking for the moon," Zorian told him, giving him a flat stare. "I *cannot* help you in this regard."

"But I really, *really* can't get another demerit," Benisek said, giving him a hopeful smile.

"Tough," Zorian said. "I guess you should have thought about that before you decided to completely blow off another assignment from Ilsa. You already know she can't stand students boycotting her homework."

"She's completely ridiculous!" Benisek said. "What kind of teacher gives out 3 assignments during the first week of the year?"

"Umm," a new voice cut in. Zorian silently offered a prayer to whosoever was still listening on the spirit planes for the interruption. He was seriously ready to strangle Benisek to get him to shut up. This wasn't the first time he was suffering through this conversation, but he usually wasn't so tired when dealing with his... sort-of friend. He was honestly rethinking his connection with the boy at this point.

As it turned out, the interruption was by Neolu, though Kiana and Jade were also hanging behind her. All three were holding a sheet of paper.

"I know the deadline for the assignment was yesterday, but I was sort of wondering..."

"If you could turn it in now?" Zorian finished.

She nodded furiously and extended the paper towards him.

"No," Zorian deadpanned.

"Seriously?" Jade piped in. "You're going to make a big deal out of this?"

"Yes?" Zorian asked rhetorically.

"Why don't we just leave this here," Kiana said, placing her assignment on his desk, "and you can decide whether you want to bother with them when Benisek is done annoying you and you cool down a little."

"Hey!" Benisek protested.

"Sure," Zorian shrugged. "You do that."

Zorian patiently watched as the three of them left their assignments on his table and filed out of the classroom, waited until Benisek finally gave up on convincing him to... write Benisek's assignment for him, he supposed? And then he calmly fished out a pen from his backpack and wrote 'did not turn in assignment within the deadline' at the top of each sheet of paper before unceremoniously shoving them into his backpack along with the other assignments. There, let Ilsa decide what to do with them.

"Why are you still here, Ako?" Zorian sighed, turning to the last person remaining in the room. "Your assignment was flawless, if that's what's worrying you."

"I'm glad you decided to take the position from me," she said. "I don't think I could have gone through another year of it. When I accepted the position back in our first year, the teachers said it was a privilege. That there were benefits for the class representative. That it commands respect. But it was all a sham and by the time I realized that nobody was stupid enough to take the position from me."

"Hey..." protested Zorian lightly.

"I'm not saying you're stupid for taking it," she immediately clarified. "You accepted it because it was bundled along with the apprenticeship with Ilsa. You were far smarter about it than I had been."

"More like less naïve," Zorian said. She flinched at his remark; apparently he hit too close for comfort. "Why did you sink so much effort into it if you hated it? Why not just boycott the whole thing?"

"Because it would be wrong," she said vehemently. "You shouldn't shirk your responsibilities. And I had accepted the class representative duties as my responsibility."

Zorian gave her an incredulous look.

"What?" she challenged. Defiant. Daring him to tell her she was wrong.

"Nothing," Zorian said. He didn't want to argue with her. Ever since he had started to develop his empathy, he became increasingly sure she had a crush on him. A small one, but it was there. And while he didn't return her feelings at all, he also didn't want to hurt her emotionally. And he would have hurt her if he started talking to her honestly – they were two very different people, with different worldviews and ideals, for all that Akoja seemed to think they were alike.

"Listen, Ako," he said, rising from his seat. "I spent most of last night reading through the assignments and I'm not the best person to hold a philosophical discussion with right now. Can we table this for another day?"

"You shouldn't have procrastinated until the very last day," Akoja said. "That's almost as bad as what those three did."

"No it isn't," Zorian disagreed. He hefted his backpack in one arm and rose from his seat. "And it's impolite to preach like that. See you around, Ako."

"Wait!" she said. Zorian could suddenly feel a wave of nervousness emanating from her, and the fact she was wringing her hands under her desk and looking anywhere but in his direction completed the impression. "I... can we talk? Not now, but... I'd like your opinion with something."

Crap. This had never happened before in any of the restarts. What set her off? He really hoped this wasn't a love confession, he couldn't afford that kind of drama right now.

"Can it wait until next week?" he asked. "I will be really busy the next few days."

"Yes," she immediately agreed. "That's perfect. I need to gather my thoughts on the subject anyway. I'll... I'll tell you when I'm ready."

- break -

"You wanted to see me?" Zorian asked as he peered into Ilsa's office.

Ilsa gestured him to come inside, too busy sipping on her tea to give a verbal response. Zorian sank into the visitor's chair and promptly handed her all of the assignments he had collected from the students. She took a glance at them before setting them aside and taking another sip from her cup.

For a minute or so, she just kept silently scrutinizing him. Finally, she put down her cup and sighed.

"I wanted to talk to you about your experimentation with mind magic," she said, drumming her fingers on the table. "I'm sure you're aware of the rather illegal nature of most mind-affecting magic, but since it's the product of an inborn ability rather than access to restricted spells and literature, some allowances can be made. The Empath Association goes to great pains to make a distinction between empathy and mind reading, and to

claim one is just a logical extension of the other is... novel. And more than a little controversial. Nonetheless, my discreet inquiries into the subject have discovered there is indeed a known link between the two abilities so your story holds water."

"Technically, empathy and mind reading are indeed different. Empathy is a passive skill with no mental intrusion involved, while mind reading requires one to actively invade the mind of another," explained Zorian. "It's just that every empath is capable of mind reading with the right training."

"Oh? Interesting," said Ilsa. "I'm surprised more mages haven't stumbled upon the fact, then."

"I thought about that, actually," Zorian said. "The aranea are born with the ability. They speak to each other telepathically as their normal mode of communication, they have telepathic scuffles as kids, they use it to hunt their prey, for just about anything. It's natural that they would refine and build upon the ability, exploiting it to its logical extreme. Human empaths, on the other hand, are rare and isolated, so most of them have to rediscover the wheel alone, so to speak. It doesn't help that few people are willing to let someone read their mind, so any 'training' is almost certainly illegal. So most people who discover their latent telepathic abilities are either going to keep mum about it or become outright criminals. There probably is a fair number of empaths who have discovered the fact, but they certainly aren't going to admit it to anyone."

"Excellent reasoning," Ilsa praised. "And actually, it is the issue of training partners in particular that I wanted to talk to you about. I understand your sister has already agreed to help you with your training, but I am given to understand that having a wide variety of targets to practice on would be preferable, yes?"

"Yes," agreed Zorian.

"Believe it or not, one of the students has issued a request for someone to help them train their mind magic expertise. Understandably, none of the teachers are eager to have a student mess around with their heads. But simply refusing it is... politically unfeasible."

"You want me to step in and take a teacher's place," Zorian surmised.

"It would benefit both of you," Ilsa said. "You both want a target to practice on, and you're both more qualified to help one another when it comes to mind magic than any of the teachers the academy has at its disposal."

"And if the other student protests this?" asked Zorian. "I mean, they may have wanted someone to practice on, but that doesn't mean they're willing to let someone else practice on them in turn."

"Then it wasn't a simple case of the academy refusing a request out of hand, now was it?" Ilsa said, giving him a conspiratorial grin. "But I very much doubt the student in question would make a fuss about that. What do you say?"

Zorian hummed thoughtfully. While there was a risk that the other side might find out about the time loop from his thoughts, he did possess some rudimentary mental defenses and was familiar with limitations of mind reading. So long as he didn't let the other student trawl through his long-term memories, he should be fine. And he was curious about this other student dabbling in mind magic.

"Alright, I'll give it a try. Who am I going to be working with?"

"One of your classmates. Tinami Aope," Ilsa said.

Zorian blinked. Tinami was... wait, of course it would be her. Aope were rumored to dabble in mind magic, among other things. Not all rumors were malicious nonsense. And it would explain why Ilsa knew about the request in the first place, come to think of it.

Besides, didn't he promise to himself to introduce her to the aranea at some point to see what would happen? Yeah, he was totally fine with this.

- break -

"Hello, Tinami," Zorian said, walking into the empty classroom Ilsa had reserved for their 'lessons'. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"Umm," she fidgeted. "I'm actually waiting to meet someone..."

"For mind magic practice, right?" he asked. Her eyes widened in response. "That would be me. I will be your partner today, if you would have me."

"Umm, ah, I was... I don't want to be rude but I was kind of hoping for an expert..."

Huh, so Ilsa didn't tell her who was going to teach her? Strange.

"I'm a natural mind mage," Zorian said. "I'm the closest thing the academy has to an expert on the topic. Why don't we try this and you can leave in a huff if I can't satisfy you, okay?"

She immediately flushed scarlet and looked away, her feelings cycling between embarrassment and outrage. Uh, maybe he should have worded that better...

"Bad choice of words, let's pretend I said something else," Zorian said quickly. "Anyway, I'm surprised you didn't know who would be teaching you. How much did Ilsa tell you about me?"

"Just that you need someone to practice on, too," Tinami said quietly. "I don't really mind. I have enough mental discipline to keep sensitive things from my surface thoughts most of the time."

"Likewise," Zorian said. "And I won't allow you to look into my memories."

"R-Right," she agreed. "I mostly just wanted to practice telepathy and mind reading. The spells are not hard to cast, but actually using them takes a lot of practice."

"Well, feel free to go first," offered Zorian.

Just for the occasion, Zorian had memorized portions of a biology book describing various forms of wild plants, and simply recited them in his head while Tinami tried to read his thoughts. Not only did this ensure he wouldn't reveal any sensitive details to Tinami, it actually made her job easier. It was a lot simpler to read someone's thoughts when they thought in concrete words and sentences, as opposed to a confusing stream of consciousness that composed the vast majority of people's thoughts. In fact, the matriarch explained to Zorian that it was simply not possible to read people like a book, unless they were literally reciting text in their heads like he was doing at the moment – there was always a large amount of guessing and extrapolation involved, and no mind reader could completely understand another sentient being.

But they could get pretty damn close.

"Why are your thoughts full of information on plants?" Tinami asked with a frown.

Apparently, Tinami didn't know that. Aope style of mind magic training was very crude, and boiled down to throwing a kid into the swimming pool and hoping they didn't drown. A bit disappointing, really. He eventually shifted to reciting sequences of numbers and imagining simple geometric shapes.

"I guess I owe you an apology for doubting you," Tinami said. "You really do know your stuff. Do you want to try now?"

Zorian nodded and then focused on her, homing in on the glittering star he saw in front of him through his mind sense and connecting with her mind.

[Are you sure you're ready?]

She yelped and jumped in her seat. "W-What?"

[Telepathic communication,] he explained.

"But... you didn't cast a spell," she frowned.

[I don't have to. As I said, I'm a natural mind mage. I can sense all minds in my vicinity and I can connect to them if I want to. Right now I am talking to you telepathically, but if you're ready I will expand my awareness to your surface thoughts.]

She closed her eyes for a second but then frowned and opened them again.

"Wait," she said. "I don't understand. If you made a telepathic link between us, why can't I use it to talk to you telepathically?"

[I suppose that's how it works if you use a structured spell for it?]

"Well yes. I mean, there are various 'sending' spells that simply send a mental message to someone, but you need to cast them again and again every time you want to send something to the target. If you want a proper mental conversation with someone, you create a telepathic link between them and yourself. The main issue being that people often don't know how to filter their thoughts well and end up sending inappropriate things over the link."

[Hmm, I guess you could say I continually 'send' messages over the link I established between us. I don't know how to establish a two-way link yet, I'm afraid,] Zorian said contemplatively. The aranea never mentioned anything about two-way telepathic links, and in retrospect it was obvious why – a psychic could use an established link to reply telepathically regardless of who the maker of the link was. Every aranea was psychic, so why would they bother with two-way links? It was something he would have to figure out on his own, probably. [Anyway. Are you ready?]

"Yes," she nodded. "Feel free to start."

Unlike him, Tinami didn't resort to text or numbers, and instead did her best to imagine a random scene out of her life in as much detail as she could make it. The scenes were wholly unexceptional – one of Ilsa's lectures, an inconsequential conversation between Jade and Neolu as they talked next to Tinami, a walk down the street... it was all very visual, but still very challenging. His little sister was still much harder to read, ironically because she wasn't trying to hide anything from him – her disjointed, stream-of-consciousness succession of thoughts was next to impossible to figure out unless he engaged her in conversation and made her focus on one particular issue.

"Okay, I'm officially jealous," Tinami huffed. "I've been practicing this for three years with my mother and her friends, and I'm nowhere near this good."

"Don't feel too bad," Zorian said. "I have... an unfair advantage."

"So do I," Tinami said. "My family has been dabbling in mind magic for generations, and I have their advice. It's frustrating to realize just how

much raw talent can mean in a field like this.”

“Ah, it’s not just raw talent,” Zorian said. “I too have a teacher with generations of mind magic practice.”

She raised her eyebrow at him. “There aren’t very many of those,” she remarked. “I’m pretty sure my mother would know if any of our rivals adopted a new student.”

“Not many human ones you mean,” Zorian smiled. “Your mother definitely wouldn’t know, not unless she keeps tabs on the many colonies of telepathic spiders scattered throughout Altazia.”

Tinami stared at him in silence for a few seconds, before leaning towards him excitedly.

“Telepathic spiders? You mean... you have actually met one of the legendary aranea?”

Legendary? Zorian almost scoffed, but he supposed that the spiders were very good at hiding themselves. While there were humans who knew about them, very few seemed to be willing to advertise their connections to the aranea colonies. Zorian didn’t think it was because of intimidation on behalf of the aranea (or at least not *just* because of that) – in all likelihood the mages that were ‘in the know’ simply wanted to preserve their monopoly on the business with the aranea and didn’t want rival mages butting in and demanding their piece of the pie.

“Her name is Enthusiastic Seeker of Novelty,” Zorian said. “Would you like to meet her?”

26. Soulkill

Chapter 026

Soulkill

The temple was just as imposing as it had been the last time Zorian had visited it – the same guardian angels glaring down at him, the same deserted feel to the building and the same creation story carved into the heavy wooden doors. This time he studied the carvings on the door with more interest than he had done the last time, however, since some of the images were rather interesting in light of things he had discovered after his first visit. Specifically, some of the bottom carvings depicted monsters that sprang up from the World Dragon's flaking heart and these monsters were clearly primordials. They had the whole 'impossible patchwork creature' look that seemed to be the primordial's one defining feature, and they matched the descriptions of well-known primordials he had read about in the books.

The unholy cross between scorpion, dragonfly and a centipede was clearly Hynth, the Locust Lord, whose bronze carapace was impervious to just about everything but divinely-forged weaponry and whose four pincers could tear steel like paper. The ability to release clouds of biting, devouring insects from pores on his body that devastated the countryside for kilometers around the thing, all while the primordial tackled anyone strong enough to stop them completed the image of a living natural disaster. The cluster of wings hanging above Hynth was probably Ghatess, who was allegedly a ball made out of multicolored bird wings – and *only* bird wings – and created storms and tornadoes wherever it went, funneling matter into the center of its sphere where it seemed to just disappear without a trace. The boar/crocodile/porcupine thing was Ushkechko, a beast made out of indestructible black glass that poisoned anyone who so much as scratched themselves on one of its numerous bladed protrusions and could fire said protrusions like arrows at opponents. The slug-like entity covered in eyes and mouths was–

"Can I help you with something, young man?"

Zorian wrenched himself from his scrutiny of the door to look at Batak. The last time he had been here he had asked to speak with Kylae, but this time the man in front of him would suffice. He might even be preferable, considering Kylae was supposed to be a master diviner. He gave the man a nervous smile and spoke.

"I... wanted to have a talk with you, if it's not too much of a problem"

"Of course!" the man said happily, quickly ushering Zorian inside. Zorian recalled from last time that the temple didn't receive many visitors. It must be a pretty lonely existence to serve as custodian of this place. Before long they were both seated in front of a small table in the kitchen-like room that Batak used to receive visitors, a prepared tea pot steaming in front of them.

"So... What did you want to talk to me about?" Batak said after some small talk, raising his cup to his mouth and taking a long sip.

"I wanted to ask about primordials," Zorian said.

Batak promptly choked on his tea and spent the next few seconds coughing.

"Why *cough* would you want to know about *them*?" Batak asked incredulously.

"I'm... not sure I should tell you. I don't want any trouble."

Batak gave him a curious, impassive look, but Zorian sensed a note of worry in his mind.

"Well, I'm not sure whether you know or not but there is a rumor spreading around that some people are going to try to disrupt the summer festival," Zorian began.

"I've heard about that, yes," Batak sighed.

"Well, a few days ago I went with some friends into the upper levels of the Dungeon to do a job for a client. A simple find and retrieve job, but we ended up running into an underground base full of war trolls and nearly died in the process. The police are keeping it very hush at the moment but I understand their investigation revealed it wasn't the only base down there. Somebody had spent months preparing a beachhead for this attack and they have a lot of assets to burn..."

After more than an hour of explanations and clarifications, Batak seemed to accept that the attack was something a lot more serious than he had thought and (more importantly) that it was just a distraction for an attempt at primordial summoning. Thankfully, everything Zorian was telling him was totally true so whatever method of truth detection the man was using returned his explanations as genuine. The fact that Kylae had a prediction blackout around that time probably did a lot to legitimize the claim in the priest's eyes, since the successful summoning of a primordial could be the reason for her divinations failing. Which was actually why Zorian came to this temple in particular, rather than, say, the main temple of the city.

"I'll notify the church hierarchy, they should be able to spare a squad or two of investigators to check it out," Batak said. "Especially if they have solid proof rather than just an anonymous tip. Do you have anything in writing, perhaps?"

"Here," Zorian said, retrieving a stack of documents and notebooks from his bag and handing them over to Batak. "This is everything I have about the invasion. I tried to be as thorough and methodical as possible. I'd really prefer if my name was not mentioned anywhere, though."

Batak eyed the stack speculatively. "I cannot guarantee that. If your name comes up during the investigation–"

“It won’t,” Zorian interrupted.

“Well, then I don’t foresee any problems,” Batak shrugged. “A bit odd of you to have so much information on this group if you’re not a defector from their ranks.”

Zorian said nothing.

“Alright,” Batak said, perking up and shaking his head slightly as if to clear it. “Are you still interested in hearing about the primordials or was that just a ploy to get my attention?”

“I’m still interested, yeah,” Zorian said. “I’m really curious why they felt the need to organize all this just to summon one.”

“To be fair, I don’t think knowing more about the primordials will satiate your curiosity in that regard,” Batak said. “Anyone who wants to summon one of these things is clearly insane. But no matter – tell me, what do you know about the primordials in the first place?”

“They’re some kind of powerful spirit hailing from ancient times,” Zorian tried. “Like fey or elementals, only older, weirder and far more dangerous.”

Batak sighed. “I knew you were going to say that. In the future, when you’re interested in some aspect of the spiritual world, please consult religious texts first before delving into mage-written works. I know the church can be a little biased about a lot of things, but we really do know our stuff when it comes to the spirits and everything related to them. Ever since the gods fell silent, spirits are the only thing we have left, so we have done some extensive work on them. And we don’t hide it much either.”

Zorian nodded sheepishly. It never even occurred to him to look at religious texts on the topic. He blamed his town priest back in Cirin, who was a bigoted old hypocrite that kept making problems for Zorian whenever they crossed paths and consequently soured the Church as a whole for him.

Batak drummed his fingers on the table for a few seconds, gathering his thoughts.

“Alright. First, let me tell you something about actual spirits. I’m sorry if this is already familiar to you, but I need to get it out there to explain why primordials absolutely cannot be spirits.”

Zorian motioned for him to continue.

“Spirits are, from a practical standpoint, divided into two main groups: outsider spirits and native ones. Outsiders spend most of their time in their own spiritual worlds and can only ever enter ours if summoned by someone from this side. Demons and angels are the most famous of outsider spirits, though lumping all demons into a single group is mostly done by humans for human convenience – there is no demonic equivalent to the angelic hierarchy and two demons are as likely to fight each other as they are to cooperate on a common goal. Native spirits are a multitude of spirits that exist on the material plane by default – you already mentioned elementals and fey, which are the two most common types of native spirits. It is likely that native spirits were once outsider spirits that gradually adapted to life on the material world, as they share the key feature that all spirits have. Namely, that they don’t really have bodies the way humans and animals do: they are disembodied souls that need some type of vessel to contain them and allow them to interact with the world around them.”

“So spirits are soul entities,” Zorian mused. “Like liches or body snatchers.”

“Yes, very much like that,” Batak agreed. “In fact, some spirits are very much body snatchers and prefer inhabiting bodies of humans and animals. And it’s likely that the process of transformation into a lich has been developed by studying spirits and the way they interact with their vessels. Anyway, primordials. Primordials have bodies. Actual, flesh and blood bodies. Most people, even mages, assume they’re spirits because of their strange forms and great resistance to damage, but they really have more in common with dragons and other magical creatures than with spiritual entities. Spirits tend to be weird because their bodies are usually just ectoplasmic shells, which they can twist into whatever unnatural form they feel like taking. Primordials are creatures of the material world, just like you and me.”

“But wait,” Zorian said. “If primordials are not spirits, but some kind of strange magical creature, how are the attackers planning to summon one?” asked Zorian.

“They don’t,” Batak said. “I didn’t want to interrupt you while you were talking, but you almost certainly misunderstood something there. Primordials can’t be summoned, since they’re down here with us already. Bound, forced into sleep and locked away, but still with us. What they can be is *set loose*.”

Zorian felt a shiver run down his spine. The primordial wouldn’t disappear, he realized. The Ibasan invaders thought they were summoning a fancy demon to go romp over their enemies, but that thing was never going back to its home plane on its own. It didn’t have one.

“Why were they sealed away?” Zorian asked. “Why not just kill them?”

“Primordials don’t die the way most things do,” Batak said. “They are a remnant, a relic of the age when the world was still fresh and the World Dragon had only just been bound at the center of our world. They are her original children, the purest expression of her rage and hate, and they have found ways to strike out at humanity and the gods even in their death. They spawn smaller, weaker primordials in their death throes, and often inflict corrupting effects on the area in which they died. Even the gods found the aftermath of one of them dying to be difficult to deal with, so they eventually just contained the lot of them and trapped them in far corners of the earth.”

“And the attackers believe one of them is in Cyoria,” Zorian stated.

“Apparently,” Batak said. “I wouldn’t know personally – no one has ever seen one of these prisons within living memory and written records are deliberately vague about their locations. Still, historically speaking, Cyoria had effectively *been* ‘a far corner of the world’ up until recently. So I suppose it’s possible. Strange that no one had ever found any indication of it in all this time, though, considering how many mages delve into the depths of the Hole on a regular basis...”

“I see,” Zorian said. He excused himself soon afterwards. While interesting, this truthfully didn’t change much and his task had already been done.

- break -

Zorian was feeling pretty pleased with himself for organizing this little event. While setting up Kirielle for a meeting with Novelty was done purely for amusement and sheer curiosity at how Kirielle would react to Novelty’s antics, introducing Tinami to Novelty was... well okay, it was also mostly done for the sake of his curiosity and amusement. But that didn’t mean he didn’t take advantage of it to gain something from little miss ‘forbidden magics’ Aope. Like, say, getting her to teach him the invisibility spell. He knew, just *knew* that Tinami had been taught how to cast that spell, restricted magic or not, and he was totally right! So now he had finally completed his ‘list of spells every proper mage should be able to cast’, and all it took was promising to do something he had intended to do for free, anyway.

And the cherry on top? Novelty loved him for promising to bring her two new humans to meet. He didn’t need to make it up to her in any way, because she thought he was doing her a *favor*!

Yes, Zorian was feeling very pleased with himself. Now all he had to do was wait with Kirielle until their two guests showed up and then stand back and watch the fireworks. Novelty would come first and meet with Kirielle to start with, since that meeting was bound to be shorter and more casual, and would then remain to greet Tinami when his classmate eventually showed up at Imaya’s place. There shouldn’t be any problems, but just in case there were problems and they somehow degenerated beyond his ability to handle, Zorian had arranged for a bit of insurance...

“So aranea are about the size of a dog?” Kirielle asked.

“A big dog,” Zorian said. “But Novelty’s not scary at all, and I’m sure you’ll get along splendidly. She reminds me of you, actually.”

“A giant spider reminds you of me?” Kirielle asked him, sounding surprisingly threatening for a 9-year-old.

“You’ll find out why soon enough,” Zorian said, more amused than anything. “She’s coming over as we speak.”

He had been devoting only half of his attention to his conversation with Kirielle, trying to train himself to pay attention to his mind sense and talk at the same time, and had thus immediately noticed Novelty when she came in range, despite the fact that she had tried to dim her mental presence to surprise him. He immediately launched a telepathic attack on her and she promptly dropped her attempt at stealth in favor of a short mental wrangle that resulted in Zorian being quickly booted out of her mind. Despite his poor showing, Zorian was pleased. He had been doing such ‘greetings’ for a few days, ever since he realized that Novelty didn’t consider such telepathic ‘play-fights’ hostile, and compared to his initial results, this was absolutely amazing.

It was kind of amusing how Novelty refused to actually teach him telepathic combat due to the matriarch’s orders, but had no problems helping him practice in such a fashion. In fact, after his first few attempts, she sometimes even initiated such impromptu telepathic combat herself, or tried to stalk and surprise him like she did today. He supposed she didn’t think of it as teaching – it was just a game as far as she was concerned. She would be rather cross with him if she ever caught him thinking it, but she really was still a child in many respects.

[That was barely any better than yesterday.] Novelty complained, apparently not sharing his optimistic self-assessment. [This is why I think we should have gone with my idea for teaching you. It would have been a million times faster than our lessons so far.]

[You are not locking me in one of your hatcheries,] Zorian told her.

[But you’d have left a master of telepathic combat within a week!] Novelty protested. [Well, master by human standards, anyway.]

[No,] Zorian responded. He suddenly became aware that Kirielle was tugging on his shirt. “What is it, Kiri?”

“You drifted off,” she said.

“I was just talking to Novelty,” he said. She looked at him oddly. “Telepathically, I mean.”

“Oh,” Kirielle said, her eyes widening in realization. “I’m so jealous you can do that. I wish I could talk to people without being overheard. It would have been *so* helpful around mom.”

“Don’t I know it,” Zorian sighed. “So many things would have been easier if I could have done that earlier. Though maybe it was a blessing in disguise – a lot of people back in Cirin would have freaked out if they started hearing voices in their head and mind magic abuse is punished very harshly by the mage guild. Anyway, let’s go introduce you to Novelty.”

To her credit, Novelty hadn’t immediately rushed in towards Kirielle and started to crawl all over her. To *Kirielle’s* credit, she didn’t immediately scream in fear and try to hide behind him upon seeing a huge black spider hop into the room. Instead, the two of them faced each other square on, standing a good deal of distance from each other, and carefully scrutinized one another.

[A mini human!] yelled Novelty telepathically, breaking the stand-off. [Great Web, she's so much smaller than you! Can she even talk yet?]

“W-What!?” Kirielle protested. “Of course I can talk! I even learned how to read and count last year! What do you think I am, a baby!?”

[Oh, you *can* talk, that's excellent! Excellent! I actually *was* afraid you were a baby,] Novelty admitted, skittering left and right to take in Kirielle from different angles. [Not that there is anything wrong with being a baby, but I got assigned as a babysitter for *soooo* long and it gets *soooo* boring after a while, you know? They're all so needy and grabby and they never know anything interesting...]

“Um, yeah,” Kirielle said. She shot Zorian a suspicious look, but he was maintaining his impassive facade through superhuman will. His lips only twitched into a smirk once she returned her attention back to Novelty. “I guess I can understand that. But I'm definitely not a baby anymore! I'm nine years old, and that's a lot!”

[Wow, that *is* a lot!] agreed Novelty. [You're only a year younger than me! How come your brother is so much bigger than you, then?]

“He's... older than me?” Kirielle tried. “Wait, if you're ten, aren't you just a kid like me?”

[No way!] Novelty protested. [I went through the maturation ceremony last year, so I'm totally an adult of the tribe and no one can say otherwise!]

Zorian watched as Novelty and Kirielle went through a clash of cultures in miniature, gradually coming to an understanding of sorts. They both complained about not being taken seriously by people around them (it was a mystery as to why; no, really) and exchanged some information about their respective species. Zorian actually learned a few new things about the aranea that he had never really thought to ask about. Apparently aranea had a lot shorter lifespan than humans did, with 55 years being considered positively ancient. He knew they could spin webs from before, but apparently the webs weren't at all involved with hunting prey and were instead used exclusively as construction material to make walls, bridges, etc. He had also thought they were fully subterranean in nature, with only Cyoria's colony interacting with the surface so heavily, but it turned out they all preferred to hunt on the surface and only used the Dungeon to build their settlements in.

Eventually, Novelty decided to try her luck and approached Kirielle, which resulted in his brave little sister immediately backpedaling and cutting the meeting short. Not that Zorian was very surprised by this turn of events at all – if anything, this went a lot better than he thought it would. Hell, Kirielle even indicated she might not be averse to the idea of another meeting in the future.

[Aww,] Novelty wilted, drooping pitifully over the couch she was currently occupying. [I scared her away.]

“She did say you could meet her again in a few days,” Zorian pointed out.

[But I wanted to talk some more,] Novelty telepathically pouted.

“Just give her some time to digest the whole thing. And don't try to hug her next time.”

[But humans love hugs! I totally read so in one of your books!] Novelty protested.

Zorian thought about explaining to her that that wasn't universally true among humans – his parents were never really big on physical contact, with any of their children, really, and Zorian didn't remember the last time he was hugged by anyone other than Kirielle. Not that he was particularly crazy for hugs himself, mind you. He decided against it.

“I'm afraid that aranea just don't have what it takes to give a proper hug,” Zorian nodded sagely. “Sad but true.”

[Do we really look so ugly to you humans?]

“Scary,” Zorian corrected. “The word you're looking for is 'scary'. You probably shouldn't have spent so much time lovingly describing how your fangs can easily punch through bone and hardened leather or how you kill your prey by driving said fangs into your victim's neck and severing the spine.”

[But cats do the same thing, and cats are cute! You explained so yourself!]

“And then you butted in to note that cats are 'yummy', thus completely invalidating my attempt to make you seem less threatening,” Zorian noted.

Novelty sent him an unintelligible telepathic message accompanied by a note of annoyance. Zorian just shrugged and went back to his book while they waited for Tinami to show up.

- break -

“Oh. My. Goddess,” Tinami said, staring at Novelty like she was the best thing ever. “She's *beautiful!*”

[Well yes, I don't want to sound arrogant but I have been told I'm quite a looker,] Novelty preened, standing a little straighter and trying to look more dignified.

“And she really does talk telepathically, just like the stories say!” Tinami exclaimed. She turned towards Zorian. “Wherever did you meet one of them? How did you befriend her? Can I touch her? Do you think she'd teach me her ways if I ask? Do you-“

"I don't think I'm capable of pulling off the 'yes, yes, no, yes' routine so one question at a time, please," Zorian said. "Also, most of those questions you should be asking Novelty here instead of me."

"Oh! I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be disrespectful and ignore you," Tinami said, turning back to Novelty. "I was just excited and it felt natural to talk to the guy who brought me here. To be honest, I was half-convinced this was his idea of a prank and already had a little curse prepared."

"Hey!" Zorian protested. "That's totally illegal!"

"-but I guess it won't be necessary now, and that's probably for the best," Tinami continued blithely, like she was not interrupted at all. She took a deep breath. 'I'm Tinami Aope, by the way.'

30 minutes later, Zorian found himself unceremoniously booted out of the room so they could have some privacy. Ungrateful scum, the both of them. He considered spying on them with a scrying spell but considering their conversation mostly consisted of Tinami fawning over Novelty and the young aranea feeling very smug about the attention, he really wasn't losing much. He remained close by for another half an hour, in case of possible problems springing about, but after a while it became obvious he wasn't needed (nor much wanted) and entered the room to tell them he was going for a walk.

The moment he was far enough from Tinami that he could no longer feel her on the very edge of his mind sense he found a quiet corner and shrouded it in some basic anti-divination wards.

"You can come out now," he said to no one in particular. The matriarch promptly stepped out of the nearby shadowed corner, fading into visibility. The trick was somehow less impressive now that he could duplicate the feat and become invisible himself. 'So?'

[She is neither a time traveler nor is she connected to the invasion in any way,] the matriarch said. [And as far as she knows, neither is her family.]

Zorian nodded. He had expected that – the Aope were part of Eldemar's ruling elite and tied far too tightly into its power-structure to participate in a wild stunt like this invasion, and Tinami was too genuine to his senses to be constantly pretending - but it was nice to have a confirmation. "You had no problems with her mental defenses?"

[She had them, but they were of the wrong sort, much like the 'advanced' ones you demonstrated to Novelty,] the matriarch said. [I'm certain she hadn't noticed my intrusion, and I've done nothing except look so there should be no traces left for anyone to find.]

"There is no way for her to have fooled you?" Zorian asked. "I've read plenty of stories where people are pretending to be dominated by a spell cast by the villain, and then surprise him by a stab in the back once they let their guard down."

[Must be a human mind magic thing. I can't see that sort of thing happening to a psychic. Well, unless the target has constructed a fake mind on top of their real one and fooled the attacker into thinking it was the target's actual mind. But that almost never happens. Constructing a fake mind that is actually convincing is really, really hard.]

Zorian blinked. He hadn't even known that constructing 'fake minds' was possible.

"Well, sorry I bothered you with this, I guess," Zorian said.

[Nonsense, it was a reasonable suspicion and I actually found a number of useful details by trawling through her mind. Not only is her family not at all friendly towards the invaders, they are likely to be quite annoyed about their plans. Cyoria is their powerbase and they don't want it ruined. And since Novelty is back there, charming the young Aope heir, we will have an easy way to get in contact with the Head of House. Getting such a prominent Noble House on our side will guarantee that the evidence of an invasion plot is taken seriously. Have you spoken to the priest?]

"Yes," Zorian confirmed. "He said the church would send someone to look into it."

[Yet another proof of our legitimacy,] the matriarch stated with satisfaction.

"Hopefully I won't get pulled in for questioning," Zorian said. "I don't think my half-truths and understatements could stand up to professional investigators."

[My web is trying to divert any ongoing investigations away from you, so it shouldn't be much of a problem,] the matriarch said. [We've already ambushed and killed three different investigation groups by the Cult of the World Dragon, and we've been subtly redirecting official Cyorian investigations towards us.]

"You?" asked Zorian in surprise.

[It has been decided to turn this restart into something of a testing run,] the matriarch explained. [As I've told you before, my web's goal is to eventually reveal ourselves to the city at large and join the population as rightful citizens. While full disclosure would be too disruptive for what we're currently trying to achieve in this restart, we've decided to reveal ourselves to a number of prominent people in Cyoria during this restart – both to coordinate the response to the invasion better and to sound out their reaction.]

"And?" asked Zorian, honestly curious.

[It's a mixed reaction, and the fact we're bringing news of an impending invasion doesn't help calm people down. We've overheard several

‘secret’ meetings that discussed how to deal with us in a hostile manner, thankfully with the conclusion that they should wait until after the summer festival before doing anything, but also a couple of meetings that discuss how to profit from our presence.]

“Which you have no problems with,” Zorian surmised.

[Nobody wants to kill the goose that laid golden eggs,] the matriarch said. [No offense to your kind, but I trust your greed more than I trust your compassion. I talked to Zach about that issue you wanted to talk about, by the way. You were right. He doesn’t remember any restarts being cut short for any reason whatsoever – you dying doesn’t seem to reset the time loop.]

“I knew it,” Zorian said. “Even Zach would have realized something was wrong if he kept restarting every time I was killed before he was. This is more proof that Zach is the anchor of the loop.”

Zorian had at one point toyed with the idea that there was an actual mind behind the time loop – a god that decided to break the Silence, perhaps, or some kind of very powerful spirit. However, there were a lot of little ways in which the situation matched better with the idea of the time loop being a spell of some sort and none was so clear as the way the spell was treating time traveler detection. Clearly, on some level, the spell knew it was Zach who was the anchor of the time loop and that everyone else was a tagalong. However, at the same time, it could get easily confused (via a little soul blending) into including multiple people into the awareness of the loop. That sounded more like a dumb spell function trying to reconcile incompatible directives with each other than a willful, intelligent mind making a judgment call.

The trouble was, a spell implied a human caster. And a human caster shouldn’t be able to roll back time *once*, much less repeatedly.

[If we managed to provoke the third time traveler into revealing themselves, most of the questions about the time loop should be answered easily enough,] the matriarch noted. [I suspect they know what the time loop is and how it functions.]

“Yeah,” agreed Zorian. “Let’s hope so.”

- break -

Days passed. When Zorian was not attending to one of his numerous obligations (he’d never try to do so many things at once in the future!) he alternated between creating the various traps and items needed for the ambush of the third time traveler and helping the aranea root out the cephalic rats from the city.

Picking the ambush site and preparing it had fallen mostly on Zorian’s shoulders in the end. The aranea knew how to make traps and ambushes, of course, but most of them were based around lethal force or mind magic assaults. Considering that the third time traveler almost certainly knew how to counter aranean mind magic and that they wanted him alive, little of it was useful for their purposes. Thus it fell to Zorian to design something that would contain and disable their target, or at least distract them until the aranea could strip them of their mental defenses and do their thing. Kael contributed by helping Zorian make a mixture of powerful alchemical sedatives for disabling purposes and the matriarch served as his assistant since she was the most capable aranea when it came to structured magic and knew a lot about the local mana flow of the settlement. She would also be the one to lead the execution of the actual ambush with her fellow aranea, so she had to be extremely familiar with how the trap was going to work.

In the end, Zorian decided upon a three-part trap, set in the middle of the aranea settlement. The first part was a fairly exotic effect on the floor that turned stone temporarily liquid. The effect would only activate for a moment, immediately shutting off and turning the stone back into a normal solid state once the target sunk to their knees into the rock floor. As far as Zorian could tell, there was no easy way for a mage to get themselves out of the rock once the effect ended. The spell couldn’t be dispelled any more than the ashes of a fireball-destroyed book could be dispelled back into a pristine state, and trying to blast the rock off was liable to blow the caster’s legs along with it. The only convenient way of getting out was to phase or teleport out, which is why the second part of the trap was a dimensional lock that would shut down most dimensional shenanigans. Finally, the last part involved dousing the combat area with smoke infused with the powerful sedatives Zorian made with Kael’s help.

It was a bit simple, but Zorian had read that the best plans are always simple. Just in case, though, he had built backup traps in several other aranean caverns. These were a lot less sophisticated ones, though, and boiled down to ‘explosions’. A whole lot of explosions.

Aside from that, Zorian had made a great deal of combat equipment for the aranea participating in the ambush: shielding discs that they could strap on to their body to shrug off some of the weaker attack spells, stone cubes and alchemical vials that produced a variety of effects when set off, and some equipment for himself and a handful of mercenary mages that the matriarch discreetly hired as additional muscle during the ambush. Of course, in an ideal scenario Zorian wouldn’t have to fight anyone at all and the equipment he made for himself would be a useless waste of time... but really, what are the chances of an ideal scenario? Things had been going a little too well for him as it was.

As for the hunt for the cephalic rats, that had actually been his own idea, and he had been pleased that he had thought of something the aranea, with all their connections and psychic might, hadn’t. The basic idea was to capture one of the rats and then use that specimen as a connection for divining the location of the rest of the rats. Not quite a novel idea to the aranea, but they thought heavily in terms of mind magic and tried to follow the telepathic links connecting the captured rat to the rest of the hive mind – something that quickly failed, since the main collective promptly cut the connection with any captured rats. Zorian, on the other hand, used good old locator spells – divinations meant to find and keep track of all sorts of things, so long as the caster had something connected with what you’re trying to find. A cephalic rat, even if disconnected from the collective, was sufficient for those divinations to work. Zorian ended up following the connections until he located the main bodies of the cephalic rat swarms (there had been 4 of them, as it turned out) and then, with a handful of aranea acting as support and psychic powers suppressant, herded them into tight formations that could be wiped out with a single fireball spell. By the end of the month, the cephalic rats had been effectively wiped out.

When he was finished torching the fourth rat swarm, one of the aranea assigned as his body guard during the operation told him she finally understood why humans were supposed to be so scary and dangerous.

Zorian wasn't the only one who was busy. Kirielle persisted in trying to learn magic, more stubbornly and diligently than Zorian had ever seen her. She was doing very well for a complete beginner, but the sad fact was that she was closer to him in talent than, say, Daimen or some other child prodigy. Novelty had become something of an unofficial liaison between the aranea and House Aope, and was as a consequence subjected to a crash course in diplomacy and proper conduct by the matriarch – something she constantly complained about to Zorian whenever they met. Tinami, for her part, was much more interested in her lessons with Zorian once she found out some details about what being psychic means, and appeared to be working on some kind of personal project that consumed most of her free time. Zorian suspected, from the snippets of thoughts that briefly bubbled into her consciousness during their lessons, that she was trying to somehow artificially make herself psychic. Which struck him as crazy dangerous, since it meant messing with your own mind and all, but that was House Aope for you. Kael was also pursuing some kind of personal project that he refused to elaborate to Zorian – though it apparently had something to do with spell formula because he kept borrowing Zorian's books on the topic. Zorian left him to his work – Kael had been incredibly helpful throughout the month, taking it upon himself to help Zorian as much as he could for some reason. Zorian didn't think it was just generosity and hadn't forgotten just how fascinated with the time loop the other boy was last time, so he wondered when the other boy would approach him about what he *really* wanted from Zorian.

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Apparently, the answer was 'just before the summer festival'.

"Hello, Zorian," Kael said. "Are you doing something?"

"Not really. I'm just waiting for Akoja to show up so that I can go to the dance," Zorian said. "There is no point in starting anything since she's bound to show up absurdly early. What is it?"

Ah, Akoja. He still wasn't sure why he had asked her to be his date for the evening. Probably because she gave every indication she wanted him to and he didn't want to make her sad for no reason. Not that she had actually come out and said it, though – hell, she even chickened out on the meeting she had arranged with him and made it look like she wanted some school advice instead of... well, whatever it was she had really wanted to talk about. Hopefully she would be a little less pushy this time around and the evening wouldn't end in as big of a catastrophe as it had the last time they went out for the evening.

"I have... a gift and a request," Kael said. Zorian mentally translated it as 'a bribe and a demand'. "First, I have been thinking about your stories of previous restarts and couldn't help but notice the presence of a powerful lich on the side of the invaders. Those are... very hard to deal with, especially with classical magics."

"But not with soul magic?" surmised Zorian.

"Well, sort of. It's not easy, even with soul magic, but there are some tricks you could pull on a lich if you knew how to mess with souls. The thing you need to remember is that a lich's soul is automatically pulled back into their phylactery when their physical form is destroyed. This is because destroying their body severs the link between their soul and their body... obviously, since there is no body to speak of anymore. Still, if you could sever the link between the soul and the body – something that is a lot easier to do with creatures whose soul is artificially connected to the body through magic – then their souls would immediately be wrenched back to their phylactery, even if their body is technically intact."

"They'd be effectively banished," Zorian concluded. "It wouldn't kill them, but..."

"The process of possessing a new body is not that fast for a lich – they need a whole day at the minimum, and that's assuming they already have a new body ready to go. Banishing the lich back to its phylactery is as good as killing it, at least for your needs."

"You're telling me you can teach me a spell to do that?" asked Zorian excitedly.

"Well no," said Kael, promptly popping Zorian's bubble. "And it would be of dubious value even if I could. The spell requires you to touch the target."

Zorian winced. "Yeah, I don't see myself getting within touching range of the lich."

"So I got you this, instead," Kael said, handing him a small silver disc, reminiscent of a particularly large silver coin. Closer scrutiny, however, quickly made it clear it was some kind of a spell tool, being covered in spell formula instead of typical imagery common to currency.

"I don't have to touch the lich!" Zorian realized after thinking about the 'coin' for a few moments. "I just have to make sure the coin touches him!"

"Yes," Kael said. "I noticed your fighting style seems to be based around items, so I've imbued the spell into that disc... it should work but I make no guarantees so use it at your own risk. I tried to make it as small and non-threatening as possible, but..."

"But there is no way to be sure the lich will let it touch him," Zorian finished for him. "Trying to keep a strange item thrown by your enemy from touching you is common sense. I don't suppose that hitting the target's shields is sufficient, is it?"

"I'm afraid not."

“Yeah, that’s what I was afraid of. Thanks anyway. What about your... request?”

“Well... the truth is I want a favor in exchange for helping you. I know you’re almost certainly going to make further use of me in future restarts, and I have no problems with it... except I want to get something out of it too.”

“I’m not sure what I can do for you that won’t be rendered hollow by the restart, but okay,” shrugged Zorian. “What is your wish, oh great Kael?”

“I want the same thing you’re already doing – to use the time loop to improve my skills,” said Kael. “In case of magics that require shaping skills and the like, this is clearly next to impossible without being brought into the time loop, but there is a magical discipline that is far less dependent on shaping skills. One that I happen to be quite good in.”

“Alchemy,” said Zorian.

“Exactly. Now, practicing alchemy on my level involves a lot of experimentation – testing the effects of your brews, improving them and designing original concoctions. These things take a lot of funds and a lot of *time*, but once you have a recipe for a potion...”

“You want me to help you design finished potion recipes and then give you the result in subsequent restarts, thus allowing you to refine your recipes further and then take *those* results and...”

“Exactly!” Kael said. “And then, when the time loop ends, you’re going to give me the fruits of this labor and I will have saved myself months, possibly years of my work! It will require you to delve more deeply into the intricacies of alchemy than you did currently, but I don’t see that as being a big problem for you – you’re clearly going to need it if you intend to rely on items so much.”

As it turned out, Kael had spent most of the month running various experiments and promptly brought him a notebook with the results. There was a lot of text there, but Kael explained he only really needed him to memorize the last two pages, which listed which avenues of research were dead ends and outlined a partially finished recipe for some kind of anti-fever potion. Kael explained that giving him those results in the following restarts wouldn’t just help Kael improve his craft, but would also allow Zorian to convince the other boy he was really a time traveler far faster than would otherwise be possible. And would also make Kael more willing to help, sooner (wink, wink, nudge, nudge, do you get it yet?). Not seeing the harm, Zorian spent the rest of the wait memorizing the results and then leafing through the rest of Kael’s research notebook. It wasn’t every day that a mage got to scrutinize another mage’s research methodology, after all, and Zorian could use some pointers for the future.

“Zorian, your *girlfriend* is here!” Kirielle called, trying to sound teasing but just ending up mocking and annoying in the process.

“Coming,” said Zorian, closing the notebook and going out to greet Akoja, who was trying not to look too awkward in front of Imaya and Kirielle. And failing miserably, as she seemed completely at a loss how to deal with his sister’s light-hearted teasing and Imaya’s advice on what to do if Zorian got too grabby during the evening (‘kick him in the crotch’ seemed to be the gist of it). After a few minutes, he decided to have mercy on her and drag her away from those two so they could be on their way.

It was time to get this show on the road.

- break -

The evening had been going splendidly. Akoja was still rather frustrating, but with the date not being a mission from Ilsa this time around she wasn’t nearly as insistent on dragging him along to pointless introductions and the like and instead settled for criticizing him every 5 minutes and in general being far too self-conscious and high-strung for what was ostensibly a casual dance. As for the invaders, they were doing incredibly poorly. Zorian kept monitoring the situation through the telepathic relays he had left with the aranea and it was obvious that the whole invasion had unraveled at the seams. While the city didn’t believe the invasion was of the scale described by the aranea and vastly understaffed their response forces (though as far as Zorian understood the city’s reaction was considered a huge overreaction by a large portion of the leadership), they were prepared to respond to some kind of invasion... and the attackers were a mere shell of their usual strength, due to the lack of forward bases and a whole lot of assassinated leadership. There was no initial bombardment because the artillery mages had been ambushed before they could do their thing, the academy had opted to change their warding scheme so the attackers couldn’t just teleport wherever they wanted to go, and their invasion routes were being actively contested by defending forces that continually swelled as the city realized the scope of the invasion and drew on all the combat assets available to it.

So saying that Zorian was surprised when the door to the dancing hall was suddenly and violently blown into bits, showering the unfortunate guests who stood too close to the entrance with a rain of splinters and concussive force, would be a vast understatement. A few moments later, before the dust had a chance to settle and screams died down, three people strode into the hall.

At the center of the three-man formation was the lich. It was just like Zorian remembered it: an imposing skeletal figure, its bones black and vaguely metallic-looking, wearing a crown and a suit of metal armor. In its skeletal hands it held a scepter, completing the royal-like appearance. To the left of the lich strode forth a woman clad in black clothing reminiscent of a military uniform – simple pants, a plain jacket with some kind of crest sewn in on it (it was too far for Zorian to see clearly, but it seemed to feature a skull as a prominent motif, who the hell actually puts a damn skull on their crest?), and heavy leather boots. All very bland and utilitarian, if somewhat sinister-looking due to its black color. She strode purposefully forward, gripping a sword strapped to her belt, her expression stony and severe, and Zorian couldn’t help but notice that her pale skin and coal-black hair (currently tied into a tight pony tail) made her seem somewhat vampire-like.

...she was a vampire, wasn’t she? Gods, every time he thought the Ibasan force couldn’t possibly look any more sinister they pulled something out of their closet to show him that they totally could.

The final part of the triumvirate was a person in a blood red robe which covered him from head to toe. His face was invisible behind a patch of darkness that seemed to fill every open portion of the robe, obscuring the wearer's features. Unlike the lich and the vampire girl, who did their best to look dignified and imposing, Red Robe (which is how Zorian promptly named him in his head) walked carefully and scanned the shocked crowd with interest, his cowled head swinging left and right in search of something. Or someone, as it turned out: the moment his eyes locked onto Zach he immediately stopped and spoke.

"Him," Red Robe intoned, his voice magically distorted and resonant, pointing his staff at Zach.

As if to punctuate the statement, a small stream of war trolls and (brown) robed mages suddenly poured into the dance hall through the broken door, and everyone snapped out of their daze and realized they were under attack.

All chaos broke loose.

- break -

The plan Zorian and the aranea matriarch had made assumed that the third time traveler would attack Zach, overpower him and then pull the information about the aranea out of his mind. Zorian was not sure about a lot of these steps, but a big one was the idea that Zach could lose against the third time traveler so easily. For all his flaws, the other time traveler seemed to be a capable combatant.

It did not take long for Zorian to understand that Red Robe was the third time traveler, and the way he intended to beat Zach was immediately obvious – by not coming alone. Zach seemed to have problems tackling the lich on its own, and with Red Robe and the vampire girl joining the undead mage the outcome was never in question.

Admittedly, Zach was in a room full of mages who also fought against the three attackers, but the other forces they had brought with them served their purpose as distractions and tied down most of them. Kyron tried to help, as did a couple of others, but they just weren't on the level of their opponents.

But they certainly tried. Kyron summoned some kind of glowing whip of force that severed the arm of the vampire girl at the shoulder and then used the same whip to fling her sword (which was clearly magical, burning with strange purple fire that ate through forcefields) out of her reach. It was this that finally confirmed his suspicions that she was some kind of undead, as her severed stump didn't bleed at all and the sudden loss of an arm only seemed to inconvenience her – she promptly pulled out a knife with the other arm and returned to attacking people again. Red Robe was actually bloodied by one of the students when they managed to overpower his aegis with a coordinated barrage of magic missiles, but sadly enough that stunt just about wiped them all out and he was sufficiently well after it ceased to take them down in response. As for the lich, he was utterly unfair – nothing seemed to scratch those bones of his in the slightest. Zach actually managed to blow his shiny armor to bits with some kind of black bolts and even knocked the thing's crown off its skull, but nothing ever made a mark on the bones. What the hell was that thing made of?

Zorian reluctantly didn't involve himself. The plan didn't call for it, and quite frankly he was likely to end up dead if he tried. He did help put down a couple of war trolls and disposable mages that ventured too close to his position, but other than that he just watched uneasily as Zach was slowly taken apart by his three opponents.

But things never go as planned. Eventually Kyron finally got tired of the one-armed vampire girl butting in on his fight with the lich and blasted her away. She landed next to Akoja.

He had gotten separated from Akoja earlier in the attack and decided not to go after her, since she was clearly terrified and would want him to stay away from any danger while he personally didn't intend to completely stand on the sidelines while people died. Now, however, the vampire girl suddenly decided to go after Akoja instead of rushing back into her original fight. Why? Hell if Zorian knew – maybe she wanted a hostage? In any case, Zorian immediately threw a low-yield explosive cube under her feet to halt her in her tracks and then poured most of his mana into an incineration beam aimed straight at her chest.

Beam spells weren't Zorian's ideal form of combat magic: they dealt a lot of damage, but they were also very mana intensive and it was easy to waste most of the beam's power on the surroundings if you couldn't keep the beam constantly on target. And in a room packed this tightly with panicky civilians, 'surroundings' often meant 'innocent bystanders'. Zorian knew that he needed to kill the vampire girl quickly, however, as she was extremely fast and her blades could cut through force fields with ease, meaning he'd get his throat slit the moment she got close to him, so he had to use the most damaging spell in his repertoire. Thankfully, she was sufficiently dazed by the explosion that Zorian didn't have any problems keeping the beam on target and he knew from watching her fight against Zach and Kyron that she was vulnerable enough to fire.

He kept the beam on her for a full five seconds, reducing her to a little more than a heavily charred skeleton and a pile of ash.

Akoja seemed to be in shock, both at the sudden lunge towards her by a crazed undead woman and the brutal method of her destruction. The other students around him were watching him with a mixture of fear and awe, and Red Robe continued his fight against Zach without reacting. The lich, though...

Oh crap, the lich was staring at him.

Indeed, the lich took one look at the smoking corpse of the vampire girl and then locked its hollow eye sockets with Zorian, its gaze seeming to look right through him. Kyron used the moment of distraction to launch another one of those glowing whip-things that severed the arm of the vampire girl like it was paper, but instead of moving out of the way the lich simply snatched the whip out of the air with one of its skeletal hands, its finger bones closing around the thread of severing light with no ill effects that Zorian could see, and pulled. Kyron let the whip dissipate almost

immediately, but not enough to maintain balance. The lich promptly fired an angry red beam of jagged light and drew a line between Kyron and Zach. They both went down in a spray of blood.

“Watch it!” Red Robe yelled. “That could have killed him! I told you I need him alive!”

“I grow tired of this,” the lich responded. “He is alive enough for your purposes, and this way he’ll struggle less. And you should watch your tone, little whelp – you’re not in charge here and I could kill you whenever I want without anyone batting an eye. Enough of your ‘information’ has turned out to be incorrect that your value is being questioned.”

“I told you, we have a leak,” Red Robe said. “That’s why I need Zach intact.”

“You don’t need him intact to rip the information from his mind,” the lich said. “Do your thing and be quick. There are already reinforcements from the city on the way here.”

Red Robe seemed to want to say something, but the lich had already returned to scrutinizing Zorian some more and eventually simply bent down to Zach’s motionless form and started casting some complicated spell before placing a hand on Zach’s head.

Zach’s motionless form suddenly blurred into action, as Zach revealed himself to have just been pretending to be unconscious and tried to punch Red Robe in the face. Sadly, while Zach wasn’t totally unconscious he wasn’t in top form either, and Red Robe deflected the attack before slamming Zach’s head into the floor several times until he went limp and then repeating the spell.

The lich chuckled hollowly. “Now who’s being too rough? You could’ve cracked his skull with that stunt, you know? Living beings are such fragile things...”

“The aranea?” Red Robe said after a while. “I can’t believe it, I’d never have thought those thrice-damned bugs would be... no matter, I have to go. Time to go tie some loose ends.”

“The aranea were never part of the-“ began the lich, but Red Robe already teleported away. “Hmph. I am killing that fool when I meet him later. He’s more trouble than he’s worth.”

He turned back to Zorian after a few moments, and people around him edged away from him

“I hated her, you know?” the lich said conversationally, pointing at the smoking remains of the vampire girl. “She thought she was so much better than little old Quatach-Ichl. I was a relic, she said, while she was the next generation of undead or some bilge like that. Now look at her, killed by a precocious student with a simple fire spell. Still, while I find the situation amusing, I can’t exactly let you get away with it, you know? She was kind of important, much as it rankles me, and I can’t just go back home and say: ‘Remember that Zoltan House heir you told me to take care of? I kind of lost her!’ The head of house will at the very least want your head for this, if not your soul.”

Crap, crap, crap. So he ended up killing some kind of House heir now? On the other hand, it was nice to have confirmation that the lich was Quatach-Ichl. Quatach-Ichl was male, wasn’t he? He could stop referring to the lich as an ‘it’ now. Now if only he could get out of this with his soul intact...

“I don’t suppose you would accept a bribe to pretend you couldn’t catch me?” asked Zorian with as much calm as he could muster, taking out the silver disc Kael gave him and flinging it towards the lich.

Thankfully, amazingly, the lich reacted just as Zorian expected him to: he extended his hand and snatched the coin out of the air. Zorian had figured the lich would do that instead of knocking it aside with a shield or something, as he seemed to consider himself invulnerable – not an unwarranted assumption considering those weird bones of his. In any case, the moment the lich’s skeletal hand closed around the silver disc he froze in place for a moment before collapsing to the floor like a puppet with its strings cut.

“What?” one of the students behind him asked. “What happened? What the hell did you do to him?”

Zorian ignored him. Instead he rushed towards Kyron and Zach and started examining their injuries. A few seconds later he was pulled away by a girl who looked a few years older than him and who claimed to be a trained medical professional so he let her do her thing.

Instead he pulled a telepathic relay out of his pocket and closed his eyes in order to contact the aranea and see what was happening on their front.

- break -

It had started so well. The red robed intruder, presumably the third time traveler, walked blithely into the trap, his confidence buoyed by the familiar layout of aranean defenses near the entrance, as well as several victories against the sentries that the matriarch had purposely sacrificed in order to lull the enemy into a false sense of security. The moment he was near the center of the room, the floor turned to liquid and he sank into it before it froze solid again.

The aranea and the human mercenaries the matriarch had hired for the evening attacked immediately, dousing the area in sedatives and disabling spells.

But something was wrong, the sedatives didn’t seem to have any effect on the robed man and many spells also failed to have any effect. Even stricken immobile, the man somehow managed to defend himself effectively, exploiting any openings to fire off strange purple beams that slew

anyone they hit instantly. They were slow to cast and only targeted single opponents, so their losses were light, but it was still frustrating. Finally, one of the purple beams hit one of the human mercenaries and his companions lost their nerve, responding with a barrage of glowing lances that tore straight through the robed man's shield and impacted his chest.

For a moment, the matriarch was afraid that they had killed the man, making all her preparations and plotting meaningless... but the reality turned out to be far worse than that. Instead of erupting into a shower of blood and gore, the robed man simply... turned into smoke.

The opponent they had been fighting hadn't been the third time traveler in person. It had been merely an ectoplasmic shell infused with some of his skill and magic. A simulacrum, meant to test the waters and distract them.

A cone of purple light washed over the room, instantly slaying all of the human mercenaries and scores of her loyal aranea. Damnation – their opponent had taken advantage of the distraction their simulacrum had provided and set up an ambush of his own. She turned to sound a retreat to-

- break -

Zorian jolted awake from his trance as his connection to the matriarch had been violently severed at the end. Watching the events unfold from her perspective had been strange and mildly unpleasant, and Zorian would have to talk to the matriarch later about doing stuff like that without asking for permission, but considering the sudden end of the transmission? The matriarch was probably dead. And the rest of the aranea would probably soon be as well.

They failed. All that preparation and they had still failed. Damn it.

"Zorian?" a raspy voice from the floor near him broke him out of his thoughts. It was Zach, who was apparently conscious again, a heavy bandage wrapped around his head. "You with us again? You kind of drifted off for a while."

"Yeah," Zorian breathed out. "I'm... fine."

"They say you killed the lich," Zach said, pointing weakly towards a pile of black bones some distance away from them. A couple of braver students were clustered around the fallen body of the lich, whispering and pointing. "How the hell did you manage to do that?"

"I severed the connection between his soul and his physical vessel, thereby causing it to snap back into his phylactery. He's not really dead, just banished."

"Oh," Zach said. "Still, that's... I never managed to do anything even close to that. How... how is it that you knew how to do that? You... are you..."

"I need to go," said Zorian, rising to his feet.

"Hey, wait!" Zach said, trying to rise up before wincing in pain and giving up on that idea. "You can't just ignore me and go- Zorian! Zorian!"

Zorian ignored Zach, as well as Akoja's questions about where he was going. He just continued towards the exit, mentally plotting the path to the nearest sewer entrance. Nobody moved to stop him.

"Zorian, you ass! I swear I'm going to punch you in the face the next time I see you!" Zach shouted behind him.

"Sorry, Zach," Zorian whispered to himself. "But this takes precedence."

- break -

By the time Zorian had arrived to the aranean settlement, the whole place was dead, and Red Robe had moved on somewhere. Probably to hunt down any fleeing aranea that had scattered into the city – Zorian knew that a number of aranea were above ground at the time the ambush had been taking place. Whatever the reason, Zorian thanked his good fortune and started examining the place for additional clues about what had happened and for any surviving male aranea.

The fight had been fierce, but Zorian couldn't help but notice that most of the damage to the settlement had been inflicted by the aranea themselves, as they futilely tried to halt Red Robe's advance through the use of the spell cubes he had gifted them and their own traps. Red Robe killed incredibly cleanly, leaving no mark of damage on the bodies of the fallen – it was those strange purple spells obviously, but why was he taking such pains to kill all the aranea so bloodlessly when he could just chuck a fireball and fry the lot of them?

He was thorough, though. Zorian didn't know whether the man was unaware that the aranea males were not intelligent or simply didn't care, but quite a lot of males ran afoul of his desire to kill as many aranea as possible. This thoroughness was another strange thing – the man hadn't seemed hysterical or furious back in the dance hall, so why was he so insistent on getting every last aranea before the time loop was done? He even wiped out the children's crèche, for gods' sake! Yes, obviously killing them all would ensure that he got any time travelers amongst them for sure, but still – they would all be back in the next restart anyway.

Disturbing. Even though the emotional impact of seeing an entire settlement butchered down to the last child was blunted somewhat by their obvious non-human anatomy, Zorian was still sickened and disturbed by the cold-hearted brutality of the third time traveler.

Well. Maybe the matriarch's message from beyond the grave would provide some answers. With the help of his divination compass and his mind

sense, he slowly tracked down the surviving males one by one and extracted the pieces of the message they held.

There were two parts of the message, Zorian soon realized. The first was a simple narration – a voice message left to him by the matriarch explaining her actions. The second was a detailed map of Cyoria's underworld, with several locations marked as important. Both messages were incomplete, due to the thoroughness with which Red Robes hunted down the aranea, and the matriarch seemed to prioritize the map as more important, since several males had redundant copies of some of the sections of the map.

As the time loop inexorably inched towards its end, Zorian took stock of what he had managed to piece together.

[Missing] ...mean things went awry. I know you think I had it coming by rushing into this but... [Missing] ...simple: the time loop is degrading. I can't tell how long it will be before... [Missing] ...can leave at any time. Thus, stopping him was... [Missing] ...can only ever be one winner in this game. I am truly... [Missing] ...hope it won't be necessary, but just in case I put in a map to... [Missing] ...whole other continent. I didn't think it was possible, even with the help of... [Missing]

That was it. The map was also full of holes, although Zorian noted he still currently had what was an incredibly accurate map of Cyoria's underworld by commercially-available standards.

Before he could really consider the message at length, the loop ended and everything went dark.

- break -

Zorian's eyes abruptly shot open as a sharp pain erupted from his stomach. His whole body convulsed, buckling against the object that fell on him, and suddenly he was wide awake, not a trace of drowsiness in his mind.

"Good m-!" Kirielle began, only to get cut off as Zorian immediately shot upright into a sitting position, sweeping Kirielle into a crushing hug. The suddenness of the motion shocked Kirielle into a few seconds of silence as Zorian took several deep breaths to calm himself down.

"What's wrong?" Kirielle asked, wriggling inside his grip but not really trying to break free of his hold. Zorian promptly let her go and tried to think of a good answer. He failed to think of any.

"N-Nothing," he exhaled. "It's just a nightmare. I'm sorry for worrying you."

And it really was a nightmare. All their manipulation and preparations, all his combat practice, all the tricks he had thought of, and they *still* lost. They lost miserably. The aranea... they had been hunted down like stray dogs and massacred. Why? What could the third time traveler hope to accomplish with such pointless brutality? And the message the matriarch had left him didn't explain much of anything, either.

"Like I was really worried," she huffed, giving him a sharp poke and jumping away from him. "Mother wants to talk to you so you better hurry down."

"Right," Zorian said, getting up and making a motion towards the door. Predictably, Kirielle sped away to occupy the bathroom, and Zorian immediately locked the door to his room once she was gone and started pacing around like a caged tiger.

He needed to warn the aranea, and he needed to warn them as soon as possible. He wasn't going to bring Kirielle with him this time and the moment the train disembarked in Cyoria he was... no, no, no. That was too slow. Far too slow. Considering Red Robe's actions in the previous restart, and the fact that he 'knew' they were time travelers now, Zorian wouldn't put it past him to butcher them all at the start of the restart this time.

The aranea needed to be warned right *now*, not by the end of the day. He would have to teleport directly to Cyoria. He mentally apologized to his mother and Kirielle, since they were going to have a fit when they realized he had gone missing from his locked room, and started casting.

He couldn't teleport straight to the Aranean settlement. The araneas had actually warded most of their settlement against teleportation, and in any case the aranea lived deep underground. Teleporting underground was a bad idea – between the sheer amount of rock in the way and the magical interference created by heightened levels of ambient mana (which only got worse on a mana well like Cyoria), there was a good chance he'd end up killing himself. As much of in a hurry as Zorian was, killing himself in a teleportation accident was even worse than being late, and he had no mana to waste either. Teleporting to Cyoria's teleport beacon was going to be hard enough on its own for a mage of his meager capabilities in the field.

Teleportation had a reputation of being dangerous among most mages. This was because, at its core, the classical teleportation spell wasn't a pure dimensionalism spell – it had a substantial divination component that divined the exact coordinates of the location the caster was trying to reach, and if the caster set up the divination wrong... well, all sorts of weird and unpleasant things could happen. Then there was the fact that some people really didn't like people teleporting into their home and territory and set up wards that didn't just cause teleportation to fail, but to fail *catastrophically*. Such wards were illegal, but used by a certain type of people anyway.

Other than that, though, teleportation was a fairly safe and convenient method of transportation. So long as your destination wasn't behind wards. Or underground. Or somewhere you've never set foot in. Yeah.

Ah, whatever, the point was that it could get him to Cyoria in mere moments. Cyoria thankfully had a teleport beacon in the city that funneled travelers into a central location and simultaneously made teleportation easier (and less mana intensive) for the mage doing the teleporting. That meant that Zorian wasn't going to spend most of his mana on the teleport, which was a very good thing.

His world shifted unpleasantly – he still wasn't good enough with the spell to produce a smooth transition like Ilsa could manage – and suddenly he was at Cyoria's teleport redirection point. He promptly ran into the city proper and went about preparing himself. As tempting as it was to immediately descend into the Dungeon and seek out the aranea, he had to think of his own safety first. The aranea could be saved in some other restart, but if he got captured by the third time traveler, all would be lost. He had to wait half an hour or so until his mana reserves regenerated enough that he would feel safe descending into the Dungeon, so he set off in search of a store to buy some equipment at, as there wasn't enough time to make his own.

Well, finding a magical store in Cyoria wasn't too difficult. Unfortunately, their selection of spell rods legally available to someone like him had been very underwhelming. He bought a shielding bracelet and a rod of magic missiles, but everything else required permits he didn't have.

"I hate to sound like a crazed killer or something, but don't you have something... more lethal in your selection?" asked Zorian impatiently.

"Well sure, but I can't really sell them to you without getting into trouble, can I?" the merchant said with a radiant smile, not at all disturbed by his question. "The mage guild keeps a close eye on the sale of spell rods and such, and I don't really want to get into trouble for a handful of coins. Sorry."

He then gave him a shrewd look. "But you know, if it's lethality you're worried about, may I suggest a somewhat... unorthodox choice?"

He reached beneath the counter and withdrew a plain wooden box, placing it on the counter. With great fanfare, he opened the box and showed its contents to Zorian.

Zorian stared at the contents for a few seconds, thinking it over. It was unorthodox yes, but...

"I'll take it," he said.

The man gave him a knowing smile and started to write up a bill.

- break -

He knew something was wrong the moment he approached the aranean settlement without being intercepted by the sentries. He should have been intercepted by now, especially since he had been deliberately inflating his telepathic presence to be as noticeable as possible. But no one came to confront him, and no one answered his vocal greetings. It was unnerving, and as Zorian got nearer and nearer to the Aranea settlement, an undercurrent of dread began to seep into his mind.

Was he too late? But he came here as fast as reasonably possible!

He finally encountered one of the aranea after a few minutes, followed by another one 30 seconds later. Dead, both of them. There was no sign of physical damage Zorian could see, either on the dead aranea or the environment, and he could detect no magical residue to indicate heavy spellwork. It looked eerily like the aftermath of Red Robe's attack in the previous restart. He promptly stopped to cast 3 different protective spells on himself non-detection to stop simple divination, invisibility to hide from sight, and a spell to increase his natural spell resistance. He didn't know what those purple spells were, but they looked like direct effect spells rather than simple projection attacks, so spell resistance should work against them. Finally, he took out a cheap scarf he had bought back on the surface for this very purpose and wrapped it around his head to hide his identity. He was currently invisible, yes, but that was going to get disrupted the moment he cast a spell and it wasn't something to rely on.

Then he proceeded more carefully into the settlement proper.

It was a graveyard. Everywhere he looked there were dead aranea, silent and motionless, legs curved inward and glassy black eyes staring at nothing in particular. The terrifying thing was that there was absolutely no sign of struggle anywhere he looked – no spell damage, lingering mana concentrations or groups of corpses piled together as they attempted to delay the attacker at some chokepoint. In fact, most of the aranea seemed to have simply dropped dead in the middle of some mundane activity, such as feeding on a rat corpse or making some kind of sculpture out of webbing.

After thirty minutes of trying to piece together what happened, Zorian was tempted to conclude that the third time traveler enacted some kind of wide-scale area of effect ritual that duplicated the effect of those purple beams of his and killed every aranea in the settlement in a single moment, before they even realized what was happening. The problem was not *every* aranea had died. Some of the males had survived whatever spell wiped out all of the females and roughly half of the males. And them being simply outside of the settlement when the spell took effect didn't sound relevant, since the forward guards he passed earlier on the way to the settlement had also been dead and they were pretty far from the settlement proper.

After capturing several males and delving into their minds, he was starting to notice something. All of the males he captured felt... familiar to him. He had delved into their minds before, in the previous restart when he was retrieving the matriarch's message from them.

No. It couldn't be! The aranea weren't time travelers so why would-

A sizzling sound accompanied by a flash of light heralded the opening of a magical portal somewhere behind him, and he immediately whirled around to confront the newcomer. Hopefully it would be Zach and-

Of course it was the third time traveler.

For two whole seconds, the two mages stood in silence, staring at each other in surprise. The third time traveler was in the exact same getup he had used in the previous restart – a blood red cloak that covered every inch of his body and wreathed in some kind of protective spell that left his face as an empty, featureless patch of darkness beneath the hood. Zorian was technically invisible and the other mage shouldn't be able to see him, but he knew from the way the other mage was looking straight at him that the spell was not having any effect on the other mage.

The moment was broken when the Red Robe whipped out a spell rod in a fast, practiced motion and fired a swarm of 5 magic missiles at Zorian. Caught off guard, Zorian could do little except soak the hit with his shielding bracelet. Thankfully the shield held, but he knew he wasn't going to win any fights with a guy that bested Zach. He managed to set off a disintegration spell at the floor of the cave between them, throwing clouds of dust into the air and allowing him to disengage from battle.

He ran.

- break -

He didn't get far.

"You are shielding yourself from divinations," Red Robe said in his distorted voice. "Good. At least you're smarter than that fool Zach. Can you believe that even after all these decades in the time loop he still hasn't learned how to hide himself from the most childish of locator spells? You, on the other hand, have been in the time loop for, what? Three, four years? And you already know how to shield yourself from my soul perception."

Zorian said nothing, trying to sink further into the crack he was hiding in and wracking his brains for a way to lose the man. It was fortunate that Kael had taught him how to shield himself from soul sight, because Red Robe was apparently a motherfucking *necromancer*!

He was just fortunate he figured out how the man was seeing him, or else he'd be already dead by now.

"They're permanently dead, if you're wondering," Red Robe continued. He didn't seem to be able to pinpoint him with his soul protection active, but he clearly could tell he was around. And he was slowly getting closer to Zorian. "When I killed them in the last restart, I didn't just kill their bodies. No matter how many times the time loop repeats itself, the aranea will always start the time loop dead, their bodies present but their souls forever gone. Soul magic is so fascinating, isn't it?"

Even though he had been suspecting it, Zorian still felt his heart drop at the admission. The aranea... were dead permanently? That's... He felt a storm of outrage and guilt building up in him and ruthlessly crushed it. Now was not the time. There would be time for breakdowns and self-recriminations later, but now he had to make sure that there would *be* a later.

"But I'm not as violent and unreasonable as I might first appear, you know?" Red Robe said conversationally. "If you tell me the names of other people the aranea have brought into the time loop, I promise I will leave you alone. I might even teach you a thing or two."

Zorian blinked. Is that why Red Robe hadn't flooded the whole room in fire to flush him out? Because he thought there might be more time travelers beside him? Huh. In retrospect, that seemed like a reasonable conclusion: the matriarch did claim such to Zach, after all.

Suddenly Red Robe surged forward and snatched him by the shirt. Before Zorian could do much, the other mage slammed him into the rough wall of the aranea cavern several times, causing Zorian to see spots and hover on the edge of unconsciousness. He tried to break free, but he was never particularly gifted in the physical areas and Red Robe's strength was utterly superhuman and completely out of proportion with his size and build.

"How many others have the aranea brought into the time loop?" Red Robe asked menacingly, dropping all pretenses of politeness and friendliness.

Someone else might have been tempted to try and lie, but Zorian knew it was best to stay quiet. A statement could be divined for hidden meanings and veracity. You could not divine the meaning of silence.

"Oh fine, have it your way," Red Robe said with a dramatic sigh. "I guess I'll just have to rip it out of your mind like I did with Zach. Regardless of what those arrogant bugs told you, the aranea aren't the only ones capable of mind magic."

Zorian felt the other mage trying to connect with his mind, but he immediately realized the attempt was incredibly crude and simplistic. Zorian was better and he knew it. Not willing to let this mistake on the part of his opponent go to waste, he promptly clamped down on the connection and blew Red Robe's telepathic attack to bits before counter-invading his mind. Knowing he had no experience with subtle attacks, he simply proceeded to blast the Red Robe's mind with an undirected telepathic scream. Red Robe flinched back and tried to terminate the connection. When that failed, he reached for his spell rod, but Zorian caused his hand to spasm and it promptly slipped between his fingers and clattered to the floor of the cave.

After several seconds Zorian realized that, while the other mage was no match for him when it came to telepathic combat, he wasn't defenseless either. He couldn't overpower Red Robe mentally, and the moment his concentration dropped the other mage was going to sever the connection and beat him to a pulp in the physical world. He tried to commandeer the Red Robe's limb to release its grip on him so he could flee but the hand remained resolutely wrapped around his neck.

Well, fine then. Zorian reached to his belt and retrieved the revolver he had bought from the merchant, emptying the entire wheel into Red Robe at point blank range.

He lost concentration as the gun fired, the bang surprising him with its volume, but as the first two bullets impacted Red Robe's chest he immediately released Zorian in favor of erecting a hasty shield around himself. The last four bullets splashed uselessly against the plane of force the

other mage had managed to raise in front of him, but the damage was already done, as the first two bullets had already struck true, tearing through whatever protections the other mage had on his robe and drawing blood.

Zorian took advantage of the aftermath to flee, hoping that Red Robe's fresh wounds would inhibit his pursuits. The lack of footsteps following him told him he was correct.

A disintegration beam narrowly missing his head also told him that his opponent wasn't out of the fight yet.

"You shot me!" the Red Robe's voice yelled hysterically behind him. "What kind of mage uses a gun!?"

Zorian didn't grace this with a response and instead opted to keep running. The idea of simply activating his bombs (the only item he bothered to make before coming down here) and killing himself was tempting, but he realized that would be a horrible idea. His opponent was a necromancer – suicide wasn't going to protect him from Red Robe, not in any way that mattered. It wasn't like the time loop was going to reset itself when he died – it only did that for Zach.

No, he had to find a way to kill himself in such a way that Red Robe could not recover his body afterwards. After wracking his brains for a second, he accessed the map of the underworld the matriarch had left for him and searched for something... there! That tunnel led to a long vertical shaft that ended in a giant underground lake marked as 'dangerous'. That probably meant there was something living there, ready to eat anyone who ventured into the waters. His body would likely be eaten long before Red Robe could recover it. He sped off towards his destination.

He narrowly avoided the next two spells, Red Robes constantly on his toes, not nearly as crippled by his wounds as he should have been. He shot him in the chest, for gods' sake! Twice! What the hell did he do to himself to get that kind of resilience? Some kind of forbidden ritual, maybe?

Red Robe seemed to finally lose patience with him and flooded the entire corridor in a vortex of crackling blue lightning that immediately caused Zorian's muscles to lock up and washed all his thoughts in a sea of pain. He was too late, though, because Zorian had already stepped over the edge of the hole leading into the vertical shaft and inertia caused him to promptly tip over and fall in.

Zorian tumbled through the air, for some reason thinking it was funny he was doing his damnedest to kill himself while the third time traveler was trying to stop him. He had the presence of mind to activate the explosives in his pocket just before he hit the surface of the water and his world ended in light and pain.

End of Arc 1

27. Cast Adrift

Chapter 027 Cast Adrift

Zorian's eyes abruptly shot open as a sharp pain erupted from his stomach. His whole body convulsed, buckling against the object that fell on him, and suddenly he was wide awake, not a trace of drowsiness in his mind.

"Good morning, brother!" an annoyingly cheerful voice sounded right on top of him. "Morning, morning, *MORNING!!!*"

Relief immediately flooded his mind, closely followed by despair. He did it – he kept his soul safe from the third time traveler and survived the encounter entirely unscathed. But his allies...

"Zorian? Are you alright?"

Zorian stared at his sister for several long seconds, a million thoughts racing through his mind. She looked uncomfortable with his blank stare and silence, but Zorian couldn't really bring himself to care at the moment. His mind was still stuck on his desperate escape from Red Robe. On the fact that he almost got captured by a mass murdering psychotic necromancer with an untold amount of time looping experience. On the fact that said necromancer now knew there were other human time travelers running around and could be coming after him this very moment.

On the fact that the aranea were dead. Dead and never coming back.

He absent-mindedly pushed Kirielle off of him, put on his glasses and started pacing around the room.

Killing a soul was impossible. They could not be destroyed, only modified. Everyone said so – the teachers, all the books he had read discussing the topic, Kael the amateur necromancer... hell, even the goddamn *lich* had said so in one of his offhand comments back when Zorian was first brought into the time loop. How, then, did Red Robe manage to kill the souls of the aranea?

He supposed the simplest explanation would be that Red Robe simply found out something that normal mages hadn't. He was a necromancer with a huge amount of time and an easy way to avoid the usual consequences of various grisly experiments. Perhaps he succeeded where other necromancers had failed. Zorian didn't think this was likely – the lich seemed to be a better mage than anyone he had met thus far, Red Robe included, and he certainly considered a soul-killing spell impossible – but that just might all be wishful thinking on his part. He didn't want the aranea to be gone for good. Dammit, he had grown to like the stupid spiders! Sure they'd had their disagreements, but he had really never wished them ill and he didn't think they had wished him ill either. Novelty certainly hadn't, and she couldn't lie to save her life. If... if he was being perfectly honest with himself, he had practically thought of Novelty as a second little sister. But now she was gone, just like the rest of the aranea beneath Cyoria.

And the worst thing? He let it happen. He had spent the whole evening gathering the matriarch's last message, oblivious and uncaring to what was really happening, while Red Robe was hunting down the aranea across the city. He had *known* he was dealing with another time traveler and he had never once considered that the man might have developed countermeasures against others of their kind. Gods, he felt so stupid now.

Although it was strange... First of all, if Red Robe could permanently get rid of anyone who bothered him with a spell like that, why hadn't he used it more often? Surely the invasion would be a lot easier if he got rid of a couple of key stumbling blocks. Yet Zorian never heard of any notable people waking up dead at the start of each restart, and he had access to the extensive information network maintained by the aranea. There was an obvious answer to that, of course: there could be a significant cost associated with the spell which Red Robe was unwilling to pay. But the fact that he had gone out of the way to remove *every single aranea in Cyoria* made Zorian doubt that. If there was a serious cost associated with it, he would have made sure to investigate more thoroughly and soulkill only those he had to.

Secondly, the aranea weren't *actually* time travelers, so the spell shouldn't have worked! Zorian was quite sure that the time loop didn't pull every soul back in time – if that was the case, every mage would feel the difference after a dozen or so restarts as their shaping skills miraculously increased overnight. Plus, there are 'normal' necromantic killing spells that forcibly banish the soul from the body to kill people and Zorian had occasionally seen them in use during the invasion. If every person whose soul was banished from their body ended up dead at the start of the time loop, the number of inexplicable corpses showing up at the start of the time loop would have started to pile up quickly and everyone would have realized something was very wrong by the time Zorian was brought in. So all in all, clearly the souls of regular people who were not time travelers weren't affected by anything that happened to them in previous time loops. The fact that Red Robe's spell affected normal people in future time loops was strange, to say the least.

Zorian stopped pacing and frowned, idly noting that Kirielle had left the room at some point. He was getting the feeling that Red Robe was exploiting the very nature of the time loop to somehow get the desired effect. Zorian himself had no idea how the time loop really functioned, but presumably Red Robe did. Without that knowledge, he was probably never going to figure it out. Like always, he needed more information.

...except his main source of information – the aranea – had been utterly wiped out by the enemy, leaving him with nothing except a cryptic, incomplete dying message.

Damn it.

Over the next few hours, Zorian simply went through the motions, trying to hide the frustration, shame and panic he was feeling and to appear as normal as possible. He had failed to keep his inner turmoil strictly to himself, if mother's worried questions were any indication, but in the end she accepted his explanation of being slightly shaken from a recent nightmare and stopped bothering him so he took that as a win.

And what a nightmare it was! Aside from losing the aranea, there was a non-negligible chance that Red Robe managed to figure out his identity and was going to assault the house at any moment now. True, he had managed to hide his face behind a scarf and had never spoken, but there were ways nonetheless...

He didn't even think about trying to immediately leave the house in panic, though. The first and main reason for that was that if Red Robe had identified him and was coming to Cirin, then his family was in danger of being permanently killed, just like the aranea, and he wasn't willing to let that happen. Kiri had grown on him over the course of the time loop and while he didn't like his mother very much he wouldn't let some psycho murder her. No, it was bad enough that the aranea had paid the ultimate price for his mistakes - he'd be damned if he'd leave his family to save his own hide.

The second reason was that, while it was certainly possible that his identity had been compromised, it was just that – a possibility, not a certainty. Yes, it would be easy to track him down by noting which students from Zach's class were missing and then checking them out one by one, but it was entirely possible that Red Robe wouldn't think of it. After all, as far as Red Robe was concerned, the mysterious human time traveler was associated with the aranea, not Zach. There was no reason to search for him among Zach's classmates. And while Zach probably knew that Zorian was a time traveler by now, Zorian strongly suspected he would be out of Cyoria when Red Robe came knocking. If Zach had even a smidgen of common sense (not a certainty, admittedly), he would skip town first thing in the morning upon starting a new restart. Considering Red Robe thoroughly trounced Zach during the invasion by bringing the lich as his backup, and that Zach actually remembered it happening this time, Zorian felt that even Zach wouldn't be crazy enough to stay where the clearly superior enemy could find him.

That was a lot of assumptions to rely on, but what else did he have left? He was backed into a corner. All he could do was wait and hope Red Robe wasn't a master detective on top of being a scarily good necromancer and gods know what else.

In any case, his plan was quite simple at the moment - go board the train as normal, then promptly disembark upon leaving Cirin. He had no intention of going back to Cyoria in the near future. Red Robe was bound to pay attention to Cyoria for a while, trying to catch any time travelers the aranea may have brought in, so going there so soon would be just begging for trouble. Any minor misstep could blow his cover, and he didn't trust himself to be able to lay low for multiple restarts at a time. No, best if he avoided the city for a while. He would have to return there at some point, of course, but he had to be a lot stronger and a lot better informed before he could show himself in the city again.

Aside from his determination to avoid Cyoria at all costs, his plans were virtually nonexistent. He was feeling rather lost at the moment. All emotional attachment aside, the aranea were also his best allies in this messed up event, and losing them effectively pulled the rug from under his feet. What the hell was he supposed to do *now*?

The conclusion he settled on was that he needed some time to calm down and come to terms with what happened. Think up a new way forward. He would probably end up just wandering around the country for a restart or two. Or maybe a dozen restarts. Yes, now that he thought about it some, the time loop was the perfect time for him to go on a country-wide, maybe even a continent-wide tour. Just... exploring and sight-seeing. Very relaxing. Admittedly, the matriarch's last message mentioned something about the time loop gradually decaying, but she named no concrete deadlines in the fragments he had managed to piece together and he believed she would have put greater emphasis on that part if the timetable was particularly tight. No, that statement was there just to let him know he did not have an infinite amount of time to work with – he had some fairly large, but very much finite number to look forward to, and time was steadily ticking.

At least he hoped. He was quite doomed otherwise. 'Large but finite' he could work with, but if he had only a handful of restarts left? It didn't bear thinking about.

"Mister Kazinski?" Ilsa said, breaking him out of his thoughts. Just as well, his thoughts had taken a dark turn again, and he was tired of feeling depressed. "Are you listening to me?"

"I'm listening," Zorian lied. He wasn't really listening, of course, but that was because he'd had this conversation with Ilsa a million times by now.

"Right," Ilsa said dubiously. "As I was saying, you can pick up your badge when you finish school since it's so expensive and..."

"What if I want to pick it up now?" Zorian interrupted. His savings should be enough to fund a month of aimless wandering so he probably didn't need the badge for work, but he didn't like the idea of keeping his spellcasting abilities a secret lest some overzealous policeman report him to the guild and ultimately bring the academy in. Having a badge to prove his certification and membership would allow him to do as he pleased for the most part.

"You can pick one up at any of the mage guild offices scattered around Eldemar," Ilsa said. "Most large cities and regional centers have one."

Oh good. He had feared he could only pick one up at the Academy or something.

Eventually, Ilsa left, her parting words being that she looked forward to seeing him in class. Huh, that was new. Did she suspect he intended to blow off school to do his own thing? Well whatever, even if she did, it did not matter much – the academy always had a rather anemic response to students who didn't show up for class. They would send a letter to his parents informing them that he wasn't attending his classes, and that was it. And fortunately for Zorian, no one would be at home to read the mail by the time the letter arrived, since his parents were going to Koth to visit their precious Daimen.

Satisfied that his course had been set for the moment, he picked up his things and set off towards the train station.

- break -

As the train departed from Cirin and started its journey towards Cyoria, Zorian began to relax somewhat. Part of that was that train rides always made him kind of sleepy and therefore sapped the tension straight out of his body and mind, but a great deal of it came from the fact that Red Robe was nowhere to be seen. Hours had passed – enough time to prepare and mount an attack on the Kazinski household several times over for someone of Red Robe's abilities – and no hostile force had struck against him or his family, so chances were that Red Robe wasn't coming at all. That meant his identity was probably safe for now, which was a major relief. If he hadn't discovered Zorian's identity in the previous restart, he probably wouldn't discover it at all – a month was ample time to track him down if Red Robe knew where to look. He wouldn't really relax fully until several restarts passed as peacefully as this one, but this was an encouraging sign.

He just had to make sure he didn't make any more stupid mistakes in the future.

The train stopped for a moment and then continued onward towards Cyoria. Zorian opted to stay on the train for now, despite his initial intention of getting off the train on the very first station after Cirin. The first stop after Cirin was an even smaller village that gravitated towards Cirin and had nothing notable to recommend it to anyone. Him disembarking there would be noted and remarked upon by the inhabitants and there was a chance that someone might recognize him and report him to his family before they could leave for Koth. And that was the kind of drama he really didn't need at the moment. And besides, what the hell would he do in a tiny unfamiliar village like that? No, it was far better to wait until Nigelvar and then travel on foot to Teshingrad. Nigelvar was also a small town of little note, but it was an important enough transport junction that no one would find a traveler who disembarked there on the way particularly strange. Teshingrad was a regional capital. It couldn't hold a candle to Eldemar, Korsa or Cyoria, but it was big and influential enough that newcomers were normal.

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Teshingrad also had a mage guild office, so he could pick up his badge there.

He disembarked at Nigelvar without complications and immediately set out towards Teshingrad. Unfortunately for him, the storm that invariably hit Cyoria on the first day of every restart was apparently a more wide-scale phenomenon than he first thought, because he found himself in the middle of a raging rainstorm halfway there. His rain shield thankfully held out long enough for him to reach one of the roadside inns and take shelter there. He ended up spending the night there, slightly annoyed at the delay despite not having any concrete plans for the restart. It did not help that the food was terrible and the people kept giving him funny looks. It was probably his clothes – the ones his mother made him wear were clearly a bit fancy and out of the price range of most commoners, and he didn't have the chance to change before entering the inn. He made sure to put a basic warding scheme on his room to deter would-be thieves and attackers, but thankfully no one tried anything while he slept.

Having survived the night at the inn without incident, Zorian departed the place early in the morning and reached Teshingrad a few hours later... only to get unpleasantly surprised when he tried to pick up his badge. As it turned out, Ilsa had not been exaggerating when she said the badge was expensive. It would cost him half of his savings to have one of those made! It was a highway robbery in Zorian's opinion, but the man he spoke with in the mage guild office wouldn't hear anything about lowering the price. Instead he pointed Zorian at a nearby wall where a job panel stood. It was similar to the job panel posted at the academy in Cyoria, only the jobs were much more reasonably priced, since the town did not have the same glut of amateur mages that Cyoria did. It would take two days for Zorian's badge to be ready for pickup, so he figured he may as well earn some money while he waited to replenish his money stash. It wasn't like he had something better to do.

The job list was... rather more eclectic than he hoped. He was sure that 2 chickens and a bag of flour was a fair price for fixing up a broken wall, but it was of no use to him personally. And the couple of job postings that did not define any concrete payment sounded very suspicious to him. Even so, he still found plenty of things to occupy his time with. Thus, for the next three days, Zorian helped with a bunch of repairs, tracked down a missing goat, carried a stack of stone blocks from one end of the town to the other on one of his floating discs, helped the local alchemist harvest her herbs, and eradicated a particularly nasty rat infestation in one of the private granaries on the edge of town. None of it was particularly difficult, but Zorian would be lying if he said he didn't learn anything in the process. It was a lot different knowing a spell academically and trying to use it to solve concrete problems.

"Well, there you go," the man behind the counter said, handing Zorian his badge. It was quite unexceptional in appearance, though Zorian could feel a complex spell formula embedded in it when his fingers touched the surface. He would have to take one of these things apart someday to see what that was about. "You can apply to any job you want with that, not just unofficial ones like the ones on the job board. Nice work, by the way. It's been a while since someone went through the town and helped out the townsfolk like that."

"I didn't really do it out of charity," Zorian grumbled.

"Oh, I know," the man said. "But there are a lot of mages who would consider such petty jobs to be beneath them and refuse to do them out of principle."

"A lot of them look like something the civilians could do on their own," Zorian admitted. "And no offense, but why don't you help if it's something that so desperately needs doing? I kind of doubt the guild would place a non-mage as their representative for the area."

"Ha!" the man laughed, not at all insulted by the accusation. "I do in fact help... when I find the time. This position is a lot busier than it appears, trust me on that. And while those jobs are admittedly not very desperate, most of them would take great efforts and a lot of time to accomplish without magic, whereas even a baby mage like yourself can solve them in less than an hour with a handful of spells. So yeah, maybe you didn't

save the world in the past few days or whatever, but the people you helped are certainly glad you made their lives a little easier. The townsfolk saved some time, you got some easy cash to spend, and I got rid of some of my more annoying obligations. Everyone's a winner, no?"

"Hmm," said Zorian noncommittally.

"So... do you have a specific job already waiting for you or are you in search of one?" the man asked.

"Nothing specific," Zorian said. "I was going to wander around for a while and see what catches my eye."

"Ah, I see. Well, I can recommend a few neighboring sites if you're interested in checking them out."

"Sure," shrugged Zorian. "It can't hurt to check things out, I guess."

"Alternatively, if you're looking for a better paying version of the sort of one-off jobs you've been doing for the past few days, I recommend you go north, towards the Sarokian Highlands. Always plenty of work at the frontier, whether it's in infrastructure building or hunting monsters and whatnot. Much more dangerous than hunting overgrown rats, of course, but also a lot more profitable."

"An interesting idea," Zorian said. The only problem was that Cyoria was the main springboard for the expansion efforts into the Highlands. From what Zorian could figure out from the maps, it was very hard to bypass Cyoria when going that far north, and he didn't want to be anywhere near the city for the foreseeable future. "You know, I can't help but notice that the mage guild is pushing the settlement of the Sarokian Highlands pretty aggressively. What's up with that?"

"Ah, well, it's the whole thing with the Splintering, you see? Successor States are always looking to one-up each other and searching for advantages that could let them overcome their enemies. Eldemar has a nice big access to untamed wilderness to the north, so it would be a bit silly not to take advantage of it. It's a place rich in natural resources, I hear, both magical and mundane."

Zorian spent an hour with the man, discussing the region and his options. He didn't really want to settle down in any place in this particular restart, but he supposed he might want to try out some of the options presented by the man in the future, and in that case it might be convenient to have visited the location already and thus be capable of teleporting there directly.

So for the next two weeks, Zorian walked around the region, visiting various workshops, libraries, alchemists, herbalists and so on. Or just plain sight-seeing and doing odd jobs for the villagers and townsfolk he encountered along the way. He did not stop his magical training, but in the absence of any sort of clear goal or a convenient repository of spells like the academy library had been, he defaulted to the most basic of advancement methods – shaping exercises. It helped that most of the rural mages he met on his journey had some private shaping exercise they were willing to show him... and unlike Xvim, who simply told him the end result he wanted and refused to elaborate, they actually had detailed instructions about what to do and in what order.

By the end of the time loop, Zorian had learned how to peel the surface of a marble away, layer by layer; how to do the same to an apple and other fruit; how to cut paper by dragging his finger along the cutting line; how to induce a gentle ripple in a pool of water without touching it; how to levitate a blob of water and shape it into a perfect sphere; then freeze that sphere; and finally, how to telekinetically draw geometric shapes in the dust. None of those were really mastered in the Xvim sense of the word, but luckily Xvim wasn't anywhere near him this time so he could simply move on to the next exercise when he felt he had absorbed it to his liking. Shaping exercises were a lot less annoying when he didn't have to keep doing them until they could be done flawlessly, he found.

He also continued practicing his mind powers. They were extremely important, he felt – if it weren't for them, he would have never survived his altercation with Red Robe intact. At some point he planned to seek out other aranean colonies and execute his 'exploit the time loop to slowly leech aranean magic from them' plan, but right now he couldn't do it. It was too soon, his memories of aranea and their demise (and the role his obliviousness and carelessness played in it) too fresh in his mind. So instead he simply used his empathy on every person he spoke to and practiced connecting to the minds of various animals. He particularly liked walking near streams and ponds and taking control of the dragonflies flitting about in order to make them perform dizzying acrobatics around him. Insects had such rudimentary minds that taking total control over them was exceedingly easy, though figuring out how to puppeteer them effectively took some doing and he still couldn't keep control over more than 3 dragonflies at the same time.

Time passed. For the most part he managed to keep himself busy enough that he didn't have enough time to be depressed, but all his worries and feelings of powerlessness returned in full force every evening as he prepared himself for sleep. Every plan he tried to make seemed hollow, doomed to failure. He wasn't powerful enough. He didn't know enough. Red Robe had years and years of experience over him, and that was never going to change.

As the end of the restart approached, his mood only turned darker. He had avoided another confrontation in this restart, but what about the next? Would he wake up next time to eerie silence, only to find out that Red Robe got to his family after he had left and left them lifeless, soulless husks for him to find?

On the last night of the restart, Zorian didn't sleep at all, simply watching the night sky from a small, isolated hill he had found in his travels, idly using his mind powers to deflect mosquitos away from him as he stood consumed in his own thoughts.

- break -

Zorian's eyes abruptly shot open as a sharp pain erupted from his stomach. His whole body convulsed, buckling against the object that fell on him,

and suddenly he was wide awake, not a trace of drowsiness in his mind.

“Good mor- Hey!” Kirielle yelped as Zorian enveloped her into a strong hug. “What the hell, Zorian!? Let me go, you brute!”

“Still the same Kirielle as ever,” Zorian sighed dramatically, a weak smile on his face. “Now get off of me before I hug you some more.”

His family was alright and, just like in the previous restart, Red Robe was nowhere to be seen. Thus, a much happier Zorian once again boarded the train and disembarked at Nigelvar. He didn’t bother picking up his badge this time, though – it really was very expensive, and no one had actually asked to see it anyway. Instead he simply teleported himself to the last place he’d been at in the previous restart and continued his wanderings.

Being a mage out there in the periphery was a lot different than being a mage in Cyoria, Zorian mused. Without the massive quantities of ambient mana gushing out of the Hole, conserving mana was actually a noticeable issue – even shaping exercises tended to deplete his reserves after a couple of hours, whereas back in Cyoria his main limitation had been his patience and existing obligations eating into his free time. That was another reason why Zorian focused on shaping exercises in preference to any actual spellcasting while traveling.

He was also starting to miss the academy library. He had thought its reputation was way overblown for a while now, but now that he could no longer hit its vast shelves every time he ran into some issue he realized just how damn convenient it really was. It had a lot of holes where really exotic topics were concerned, but its selection of basic spells and books on common topics was second to none. Out here in the periphery, finding a spellbook that had the exact spell you needed was damn hard. They existed, but they had only the most basic of things and if you wanted anything exotic you were directed to some other settlement or private collection or whatnot.

He also found out that magic detection spells were a lot more useful than he had first realized. Outside of Cyoria, magical items and creatures actually stood out when exposed to such scrutiny. Back in Cyoria, most general magic detection spells just returned false positives all the time – you had to narrow your divination criteria down to something specific to get results.

All in all, he was starting to understand why mages tended to flock towards Cyoria and other cities situated on top of mana wells. Those kinds of places provided a whole lot of resources that were hard to acquire elsewhere in one convenient location.

But Zorian’s journey continued. He was determined to visit every large city in the country, if nothing else then so he could teleport to any of them as he pleased, and he was seriously considering a journey around the continent as well. The only thing stopping him was that international travel was bound to be a hassle, and he was doing all this traveling to relax, not argue with border officials about authorization.

When another restart passed and Red Robe still failed to show up, Zorian finally allowed himself to more fully relax. It had been three restarts, and Red Robe still hadn’t tracked Zorian down – he was pretty sure that meant he never would, then. Not a master detective then, that was good to know. Buoyed by the knowledge that he dodged the bullet this time, Zorian seriously considered what to do next.

He needed to contact Zach, but it wasn’t a priority. Zach likely didn’t have any crucial information that would help Zorian figure out how the time loop functioned, and Zorian didn’t know how to find the other time traveler anyway. They were bound to meet again at some point, and Zorian wasn’t going to play dumb again when they finally encountered one another, but he saw no need to waste his time on looking for a boy who probably didn’t want to be found right now. It wasn’t like he didn’t have anything to do in the meantime. He absolutely needed to master a number of skills before he considered going back to Cyoria and looking for Zach: he needed to find out more about soul magic, he needed to hone his mind magic into a proper tool and weapon like the aranea had done, and he needed to raise his combat skills to a level where he could meaningfully counter Red Robe in open combat.

The first priority was pretty obvious: he needed to know how to at least counter soul magic if he wasn’t going to get blindsided again when dealing with Red Robe. Preferably he also wanted to figure out what Red Robe really did to the aranea and – if possible – reverse it. He still had Kael’s list of people who could help him in that regard, and all of them were conveniently outside of Cyoria.

The second was just as crucial. Whatever knowledge about the time loop the matriarch gained behind his back, she almost certainly did it by ripping it out of someone’s mind. Someone who wasn’t Red Robe – probably a handful of normal people not aware of the time loop but still holding a small part of the puzzle. If he could identify these key people and read their minds he could find out what the big secret was. In other words, he *needed* to develop his mind magic, ethics be damned. He didn’t think he could do this on his own, so he would have to seek out other aranea webs for this.

Lastly, he was embarrassingly powerless against Red Robe in their last encounter, and if the other mage hadn’t made some big mistakes when handling him he would have lost utterly. He needed better traps and ambush tactics, better combat skills in order to not be utterly doomed when said ambushes fail, and better movement magic to retreat and escape when said combat skills prove insufficient. As far as he could tell, the only effective way to improve here was simple practice – in other words, going around and looking for trouble. The only problem with this was that this went against pretty much every instinct he had.

It would have to be done, though. He figured that delving into the Dungeon and taking a few restarts to visit the untamed wilderness to the north should do for a start, and he would figure out later where to go from there.

In line with those goals, he decided that his third post-aranea restart was going to be a bit more systematic than his previous wanderings. After marking down the locations of Kael’s associates on a map, he chose a medium-sized town called Knyazov Dveri as his next destination. The town was close to the northern wilderness and had a notable dungeon access, so there should be plenty of opportunities to practice his combat skills; it was situated on top of a Rank 2 mana well, which was fairly anemic as far as mana wells went but was nonetheless better than nothing; and finally,

it was roughly in the center of a diffuse cloud of Kael's associates scattered throughout the region, so he would have easy access to the rest of them should the one in the city prove to be a dead end. It was, as far as Zorian could tell, an ideal place to start at.

The next day he teleported to the nearest town he could reach with his teleport spell and set off towards his target.

28. Cauldron

Chapter 028

Cauldron

‘Life takes you to all sorts of unexpected places,’ Zorian mused, once again taking the knife to the winter wolf’s corpse. ‘If someone had told me, back in my first year at the academy, that I would need to know what the best way to skin a winter wolf was, I would not have believed them’

Then again, he technically didn’t need to skin the animal – he just felt it would be a horrid waste not to, since winter wolf pelts fetched a pretty high price back in Knyazov Dveri. If he was going to venture into the wilderness, looking for monsters and dangerous animals to fight, he might as well earn some money doing it.

Finally, the bloody work was done. He was sure a real hunter could have done it in a quarter of the time and hassle, but he didn’t care – a success was a success. He placed the pelt in his bag and went off in the direction of the stream he had encountered earlier, intent on washing the blood and grime off his hands and clothes. At some point he intended to use spells to do these sorts of things, but since harvesting spells were based on animation they were sort of useless to him right now. Animation spells worked by embedding a portion of the caster’s mind into the spell, so until Zorian knew how to properly skin an animal the old-fashioned way, he couldn’t hand it off to an animation spell.

As he walked towards the stream, he kept an eye out for the reason he was in this particular section of the forest in the first place – a small cottage of an old witch called ‘Silverlake’, who was one of the possible sources Kael had named in his list. So far, Kael’s prediction that he wouldn’t be able to find the place on his own and that he would have to loiter around the area until she approached him herself had been entirely correct – no divination could track the cottage down, and he hadn’t stumbled onto it by simply wandering around the place. If he didn’t have Kael’s assurance that someone lived here he would have given up long ago. The only reason he even managed to pinpoint the area as well as he had was because the old witch had a habit of harvesting all of the alchemically-useful plants and mushrooms in the area and Kael warned him to be on the lookout for suspiciously picked-clean areas like this one.

With a sigh, he plunged his hands into the stream. The recent rains had caused it to swell into a small muddy river, but the water was good enough for washing his hands in and cooling off. That done, he crouched next to the water and idly studied his reflection. He looked like a mess. He *felt* like a mess too. While he wasn’t entirely out of shape, and this wasn’t the first time he ventured into a forest, there was a difference between taking a two-hour stroll through the semi-tame forest near his town and spending most of the week in the great northern wilderness, hunting winter wolves and dodging snakes and other dangerous wildlife. Thank the gods he had the foresight to put that anti-vermin ward on himself or else he would have been covered in ticks and leeches by the end of day one... and that was assuming the mosquitos hadn’t driven him mad before that.

And the worst thing about it all? He would never get used to it, because any muscle growth and body adaptation would be wiped out when this restart ended. He made a note to himself to look into the possibility of getting enhancement potions or rituals to improve strength and stamina, because spending the first week of every restart with every inch of his body tense and hurting wasn’t a fun prospect at all. Or at least a potion to ease the- wait, was the bottom of the stream *moving*?

He managed to throw himself back just in time to avoid the huge brown shape that jumped out of the muddy water and tried to envelop his head with its massive jaws. He quickly backpedaled as the huge lizard-like creature tried to haul itself onto the shore and sent a small missile swarm consisting of three piercers straight at its head. Thankfully, the lizard thing was actually pretty slow, its surprise attack notwithstanding, so all three missiles found their mark. The creature’s skull promptly exploded from the impact, showering bits of tissue everywhere, and it immediately slumped dead where it stood, its lower half still submerged in the stream.

Zorian immediately turned on his mind sense and scanned the creek for the possible presence of more such monsters and then, having discovered none, slowly approached the corpse to inspect it.

It was a salamander. A huge brown salamander with a massive triangular head and beady black eyes that probably couldn’t actually see anything. It was a miracle that something that big could actually hide in a stream this shallow, but the muddy water provided it with just what it needed to surprise him. Damn, that would have been humiliating – killed less than a week in by a giant salamander. Then again, he nearly fell into a ravine on his first day here, and there was that assassin vine that tried to choke him yesterday...

“Is there anything here in this forest that isn’t going to try and kill me the moment I take my eyes off of it?” Zorian asked out loud.

He didn’t expect anyone to answer, since he was alone and all, but he did receive an answer. Sort of.

“What do you think you’re doing, feeling all sorry for yourself?” a harsh female voice answered him.

There was no one present as far as Zorian could see, and his mind sense detected only animals, but he still managed to detect fairly quickly where the voice was coming from – the source of the speech was the raven perched on a nearby branch.

“Well don’t just stand there and stare at my familiar, boy,” the voice said, cutting in through the silence. “Quickly, haul it out of the creek before the stream washes it away! Do you have any idea how valuable giant salamanders of that size are? This is the find of a century!”

Zorian was tempted to point out that this ‘find of a century’ nearly killed him, but decided not to. If this was who he suspected, he needed to stay on her good side. According to Kael, asking the old witch for help was a bit of a long shot, but likely to achieve very good results if he could convince her to seriously try and help him. Silverlake was very powerful and skilled, but also very annoying to deal with. She wouldn’t kill him or

do anything overtly hostile to him without provocation, but she was capricious and prone to wasting people's time. Zorian figured it was at least worth a try to approach her for help.

"You would be Miss Silverlake, I presume?" guessed Zorian.

The raven answered him with a burst of laughter. It was really strange to see a bird laugh like that.

"Miss, am I? Well aren't you a polite one... don't get too many of those, these days. Why, maybe I'll even listen to whatever silly request you came here for!" the bird finally said. "Now why are you just standing around? Didn't I give you a task to accomplish?"

With a sigh, Zorian turned away from the bird and started casting a levitation spell to haul the giant amphibian out of the water.

- break -

Silverlake (no last name, and he shouldn't ask about how she ended up without one – Kael was very firm on that part) was not like Zorian had expected her. She was old, yes, but for a woman of 90 years she was incredibly lively and spry. In fact, Zorian had a feeling she had an easier time moving through the forest than he did. She wasn't particularly unkempt, either, despite living in the middle of the wilderness – her pitch-black hair was devoid of a single white strand (she probably dyed it regularly), and the simple brown dress she was wearing was unremarkable but immaculate. If it weren't for the wrinkles, he would have pegged her as less than half her age. Was this a consequence of some sort of potion regimen or was she just lucky that way?

Well, no matter. Zorian followed her back to her cottage, the giant salamander floating behind him on a disc of force, where she promptly started to butcher the beast with practiced ease. Her hands didn't tremble at all as she handled the various knives and heavy jars at her place, and Zorian became even more certain she put herself through some kind of enhancement regimen to ward off the effect of aging.

She was a potion master according to Kael, and alchemy had always been one of the best ways to prolong your life and keep yourself healthy.

"Don't think I didn't notice you faffing around the area for the past few days," she suddenly said, never taking her eyes off the salamander corpse. "Rather annoying, that. Also worrying. Means that someone told you where to find me. I don't suppose you could shed some light on that, could you?"

"Kael told me where to find you," Zorian readily admitted. It wasn't a secret, really.

"Kael?" she asked, before frowning. "No, wait, don't tell me. I'm sure I heard that name som- oh! Now I remember – he's the little rascal that knocked up Fria's granddaughter! But I heard he ended up marrying her afterwards, so I guess that's not so bad. Actually, I recall that Fria had been quite happy about that. She had been afraid the girl would never find herself a husband."

"Why?" asked Zorian curiously. Silverlake shot him a judging look, her brown eyes boring into his own, before returning to her work. "I mean, if it isn't impertinent to ask. You don't have to –"

"Relax, boy," Silverlake snorted derisively. "I am a lot of things, but I was never very tactful. If I'm bothered by something you say, I will tell you. If you ask something impertinent, I will tell you to go screw yourself. I'm just thinking. Let's see... as you probably suspect by now, Fria, Kael's mother-in-law, is a witch like me. There are some nasty rumors circulating about witches and their daughters – about how they sacrifice male children, have orgies with summoned demons, poison their husbands for inheritance, how they're too lazy to work around the house and other ridiculous bilge. It makes a lot of men reluctant to marry the daughter of a witch."

"I see," said Zorian. He had never heard about that particular issue, but it sounded plausible enough – witches had a really bad reputation for dabbling in various unethical and forbidden magics.

"It's been years since I last seen Kael and his wife," Silverlake said. "Or Fria, for that matter. I guess I should have been a little less harsh the last time they visited, but... well, what's done is done. It's strange the morlock saw fit to send you here when he himself dares not show his face to me."

Zorian frowned. "I... think you're misinterpreting the situation somewhat. I don't know what happened between you and them, but the reason they haven't visited you is because they're dead. Fria and Kael's wife both contracted the Weeping and died. As for Kael, he had been too busy grieving and taking care of his daughter to go on a trip like this. You are rather isolated."

For the first time since he met her, Silverlake seemed taken aback by his answer.

"Dead? Fria is... and all this time I thought..." she mumbled, before halting and giving him a considering look. "Wait. You said Kael and his daughter. I see... hmm..."

Silverlake spent the next few minutes considering something. Zorian took the time to observe and study the cottage next to them. It looked rather flimsy and old, but it shone like a lighthouse to his senses when he discreetly cast a magic detection spell on it. How the hell hadn't he noticed the thing earlier when he was searching for it? Those must be some powerful divination wards she placed on it. He couldn't figure out how she was powering them, though – wards that strong needed a powerful source of magic, and this place wasn't a mana well. There was no way Silverlake could be powerful enough to provide enough mana for the entire edifice, could she? Kael did mention that she was extremely strong and skilled in magic of both Ikosian and witch origin, and that he should never underestimate her, but this was still beyond what he was expecting.

Aside from the impossibly complex and powerful warding scheme, though, the cottage looked unremarkable. There were several racks next to it where various herbs and mushrooms were drying in the sun, but it wasn't unknown for hunters and lumberjacks to have a side business of gathering herbs to sell in the nearby city so hardly something that would raise warning flags all by itself.

Silverlake snapped her fingers in front of his face, spraying droplets of salamander blood and other bodily fluids all over his glasses and breaking him out of his inspection. Despite his resolve to be polite to her, Zorian couldn't help but glare at her in response. She just grinned at him, showing him two rows of gleaming white teeth. Apparently in all of her 90 years of life she hadn't lost a single tooth.

Yes, definitely magic.

"If you're done gawking at my home, we can continue our discussion," she said. "I have a request for you. You have a way to get in contact with Kael, yes?"

"Of course," said Zorian. "We're friends, he and I." Or they would be, once he returned to Cyoria in one of the future restarts.

"Then I would like you to deliver a message to him," she said. "It's nothing urgent, but I want him to know... that I regret how our last meeting ended and that I would very much like it if he came to visit me with his daughter sometime in the future. Oh, and that I want to teach his daughter the secrets of my magic. She is a descendant of a proud line of witches stretching back to time immemorial, and it is her birthright to continue it... should she want to. Got all that?"

"Sounds simple enough to remember," Zorian said. "And... could I now trouble you with the reason I came here for?"

"No," she snorted. "What, you think that just because you know a couple of people close to me and agreed to help me with a simple request like this that I'll jump into whatever crazy problem you need help with?"

"You don't even know why I'm here," Zorian pointed out.

"Nobody ever comes to me for help with the little things," she said with a grin. "If Kael sent you to me, that means he's truly stumped for a solution."

"I... suppose I can't argue with that," Zorian admitted. "You see, I—"

"I don't want to hear it," Silverlake said, pointing her bloody palm towards him to shut him up. "Until you make it worth my time, I don't want to listen to your sob story. If you want my help, you're going to have to earn it."

"How do I even know you can help me at all, then?" asked Zorian. "I could end up paying you for nothing in the end."

"You could," Silverlake grinned. "You will have to risk it."

Damn witch. She was probably just wasting his time, but...

"Fine," he sighed. "What do you want from me?"

If anything, her grin just got wider.

- break -

The narrative has been illicitly obtained; should you discover it on Amazon, report the violation.

Space blurred around Zorian, and then he was back in Knyazov Dveri, in one of the less traversed streets where he was fairly sure no one would see him teleporting in and out. It wouldn't be a huge problem if it got out that he could teleport, but at the same time it would be notable and would attract attention to him. Few mages would be willing to teach the spell to a 15-year-old, and even fewer 15 year olds would be capable of learning it. It would be best if he were discreet about it for now.

Seeing how his arrival appeared to have gone unnoticed, he promptly exited the street and went towards the town square to grab something to eat, only to get distracted by the newspaper boy's shouting.

"Shocking news!" the boy yelled. "A Cyoria mercenary company found dead to a man in their homes! Monsters stalk the streets of the city! Coincidence or conspiracy, read all about it in today's edition! Shocking news, shocking news!"

Well... that sounded interesting. Zorian wordlessly shifted his course towards the boy and bought the newspaper in question. He then found a quiet corner to lean on and started to read.

Like he suspected, the mercenary company that was found dead was the one he and the aranea hired to participate in the ambush – there was a picture of the man who led the group next to the article and Zorian would recognize the man anywhere thanks to the distinctive scar he had above his right eye. Apparently they were all found dead at the start of the restart, with little clue as to who killed them and why. Naturally, that immediately produced a lot of interest from anyone, since it clearly wasn't natural. The obvious conclusion – that someone managed to off an entire group of experienced battlemages in the span of a single night, not all of which were asleep at the time of death and some of whom were under heavy wards – was highly disturbing, but there were very few alternatives.

Another complication was that immediately after that discovery, there had been a stream of incidents involving various monsters moving out of the Dungeon and into the sewers... and sometimes then even emerging into the streets of the city. The experts were baffled as to why this was happening now, and the city leadership was hastily organizing an operation to descend into the Dungeon in order to bring the situation under control before the summer festival.

Well, that certainly put a damper on the invaders' plans. Zorian wondered how they would deal with *that*. In retrospect, it wasn't hard to explain why monsters were invading the sewers and the streets of the city – the invaders were putting pressure on them from below, so they went upwards as a response. In the past restarts, the aranea were there to act as an unwilling anvil to the invaders' hammer, preventing the inhabitants of the Dungeon from breaking into the upper levels. But the aranea were dead now, and with them gone a whole layer of Cyoria's defense that most people hadn't even known about had collapsed.

Zorian couldn't suppress a nasty grin at the thought that maybe Red Robe ended up shooting himself in the foot when he enacted his 'soul killing' tantrum.

Interestingly, the mysterious murders and the monster attacks seemed to have had an effect on the academy too. There was a short sub-article next to the main one about the families who withdrew their children from schools in Cyoria, including his own academy. Jade, one of his classmates, had been pulled by her parents from the academy. She was listed among the names of notable students who opted to leave the city for their own safety – her father was a high-ranking member of House Witelsin – while the other notable names included... him?

Yes, there was no mistaking it – 'Zorian Kazinski, younger brother of Daimen Kazinski', was listed in the article as one of the students pulled from school by his parents. He wondered what that was based on – he was certain no one had managed to contact his parents before they left for Koth, so either the academy or the newspaper had decided to interpret his absence in light of current events and trends.

Zorian shook his head and closed the newspaper before continuing on his way.

- break -

After spending a week in Knyazov Dveri, Zorian had decided he kind of liked the town. It was a busy, lively place where the arrival of a newly-minted mage like him was unremarkable and raised no eyebrows, yet not so large and prosperous that people like him were common and underappreciated. Thanks to the town's position as a regional center and the presence of both a notable mana well and a dungeon access attractive to dungeon delvers, the town was full of shops catering to mages or requiring mage employees, and thus offered plenty of employment opportunities for a young mage... enough so that people sometimes offered him employment without him even asking about it.

He didn't accept any offers, since a regular job would eat up a lot of time and would just distract him from his real quest, but it was something to keep in mind if he ever got out of the time loop.

"Why, hello there. Mind if I join you for a bit?"

Zorian peered up from the map of the surrounding region he was studying and took a good look at the man who interrupted him. He was middle-aged, had a prominent mustache and a pot belly, and had a wide smile plastered on his face. Despite the fact that Zorian took several seconds to study him in silence, the man's smile never faltered. Judging by the clothes he was wearing, he seemed to be one of the more well-off residents – a small-time merchant, perhaps, or one of the craftsman-mages that had stores in the town.

He was probably going to get another job offer, then.

"Sure," Zorian said, gesturing towards the empty chair on the other end of the table. "Help yourself."

He thought for a moment whether he should get rid of the map while he talked to the man, but then decided not to bother. There was nothing incriminating on it anyway – a couple of marked down locations that would mean nothing to the man without some kind of context and some equally unhelpful notes scribbled on the margins. Silverlake had given him a task of gathering rare magical plants all over the damn forest, but gave him only the vaguest clues about where they could be found, so he was reduced to deciphering her statements and consulting the local herbalists for more information. And the local herbalists weren't terribly cooperative. He had a feeling this was only the start of her demands, so he was trying to finish it quickly.

"Don't mind if I do, don't mind if I do," the man said happily, plopping down onto the offered spot. "These old bones just aren't what they once were, I'm afraid. Standing around does terrible things to my knees. I guess the years caught up to me, eh?"

"The pot belly probably doesn't help," Zorian thought inside his head, though outwardly he remained silent, waiting for the man to tell him what he wanted of him.

"I have to say, this looks like a nice place to relax in," the man said, idly looking at the sheet of paper that listed the prices of some of the meals and beverages. "A little pricy, but quiet and out of the way. Private. Anyway, you don't mind if I order us a drink, do you?"

"I don't drink alcohol," said Zorian with a shake of his head. And he didn't trust any of the non-alcoholic beverages in a place like this, either – it wasn't that upscale of an establishment, regardless of what the man said. "I'm going to have to decline."

"Now that's just unfair," the man said. "Oh well, I guess I'll have to drink alone then. Forgive the impoliteness but I'm rather parched and it just feels wrong, having a conversation in a tavern without a mug of beer to sip on occasionally."

A few minutes later, the man took a swig from his mug and got to the point.

“Ah, that hits the spot,” he said. “With that out of the way, allow me to introduce myself. I am Gurey Cwili, of Cwili and Rofoltin Equipment. Though I’m sad to say old Rofoltin passed away two years ago, so I’m the only owner now. I kept the name as it is, though. Tradition.”

Zorian resisted the urge to tell him to get on with it.

“Anyway, I see you’re a busy man so I’ll get straight to the point – I’ve heard you’ve been going out into the forest to gather alchemical ingredients and hunting winter wolves. And also that you’ve been selling magic items on the side, too.”

“Yes, what of it?” asked Zorian. Nothing he did was in any way illegal. The winter wolves had sizeable bounties for every pelt brought to the nearest guild station for the express purpose of encouraging people to hunt them, as they tended to prey on the livestock, children, and lone travelers, and selling magic items and alchemical ingredients was hardly a crime. Some places had arcane restrictions about what could and could not be sold and by whom, but those were usually the consequence of regional monopolies granted to someone and Knyazov Dveri was under no one’s monopoly. He’d checked. “I’m a certified mage, if that’s what’s bothering you.”

He even had a badge to prove it. It was pricy, but he interacted too often with mages in the town to risk getting caught doing business without a license. Especially since he had gotten an impression that a couple of shop owners resented the competition he represented and would love to report him to the guild if they could find an excuse.

“To put it bluntly, I want you to sell your alchemical ingredients and magic items to me instead of my competitors,” the man said. “Don’t think this is some kind of threat or blackmail, though – I’m willing to pay you extra for the privilege.”

Zorian blinked. He didn’t expect *that*.

An hour later, the man had hashed out some sort of agreement with Zorian. The extra money didn’t mean all that much to Zorian, but the man did have something he wanted – a fully-equipped alchemical workshop that he wasn’t using all the time. In exchange for the right to use said workshop from time to time and the right to consult the man’s private library for botanical books, Zorian agreed to offer all his products to the man before he did to anyone else. The man seemed pretty pleased with himself at having closed such a deal. Honestly, so was Zorian – the local library had a miserable selection of books on plants and herbs, but Gurey claimed his own private library was not nearly so limited. Having access to a proper alchemical workshop was also convenient, and not something he could easily get elsewhere, unless he was willing to teleport to Korsa every time he wanted to make something. And he really didn’t have that much mana to burn.

“How come there is such a demand for potions and magic items here, anyway?” asked Zorian. “This city seems a little too small for the amount of magic shops. I understand the workshops since they can always export their products elsewhere, but how do shops like yours achieve such volume on the local market?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” Gurey said. “Travelers. Or more accurately, settlers and adventurers. You see, this city is one of the last stops for settlers going further north as part of the ‘Great Northern Push’, as the government likes to call it. As one of the last centers of ‘real civilization’ on their journey, we get a lot of demand for critical supplies of all sorts.”

“Great Northern Push?” asked Zorian.

“Not a regular reader of the newspapers, I take it? It’s the whole thing with colonizing the Sarokian Highlands that the government has been pushing so hard lately. You must have noticed the posters around advertising free land and tax exemptions and whatnot. It’s part of Eldemar’s current strategy for achieving supremacy over Sulammon and Falkinea. The idea is that by taming the northern wilderness the country will get a major population and resource boost. All countries that have a border with the wilderness do this to a greater or lesser degree, but Eldemar has really invested a lot into this endeavor. Not sure whether it will be really worth it in the end, but I sure don’t mind the traffic it gives me!”

Hmm, now that he thought about it, there were traces of that even back at the academy – it was nothing horribly blatant, but textbooks and class assignments often worked in mentions of the Sarokian Highlands far more than one would expect, considering their low population and current importance.

In any case, the man soon left and Zorian returned to staring at his map. Goddamn witch.

- break -

“I don’t suppose that now that I have brought you the plants you asked for –“

“Don’t be silly, boy,” Silverlake said, snatching the bundle of plants from his hands. “You don’t really think a silly little fetch quest like this is all it takes to get my help? Think of this as an... elimination round. You were horribly slow, anyway.”

“Slow...” Zorian repeated incredulously. “It took me only 3 days. The only reason I could get them all so quickly at all was that I could teleport from place to place. Not to mention the danger involved – you never even told me those ‘redbell mushrooms’ of yours exploded into clouds of paralyzing dust if handled improperly.”

“Well that’s just common knowledge,” she said, waving her hand dismissively. “Everyone knows *that*. Here, grind these snail shells for me, please.”

Zorian looked at the small leather bag full of colorful red-and-blue snail shells and frowned. He knew that species of snail. They were used in production of certain drugs, and were very much illegal to harvest. More important than that, their ground up shells were a powerful hallucinogen and inhaling even a handful of dust would leave him delirious and incapacitated. He threw the annoying old woman a brief glare before simply casting a ‘dust shield’ spell on himself – the same one he used to protect himself against the paralyzing mushrooms – before grabbing a mortar and pestle and getting down to work.

After he was done with that, the old witch promptly handed him the very bundle of plants he had spent three days gathering, rattled off a series of brief instructions and pointed him towards an old cauldron leaning on the wall of her cottage. Wonderful – apparently he was going to be making a potion the old way. He *had* been tutored by another witch as a child, so he wasn’t totally lost here, but the potion she wanted him to make now was unfamiliar to him. Not to mention that there was a reason why traditional potion making was considered obsolete compared to modern alchemy – it was harder, less safe, and usually gave worse results to boot.

Hopefully the potion she was having him make wasn’t the sort to explode in his face or poison him with fumes if he didn’t get it right. Oh, who was he kidding, *of course* it was. Frankly, if it weren’t for the time loop and the resulting immunity to simple death, he would be leaving at this point.

As he suspected, he botched that potion. Thankfully, every time he was about to make a particularly disastrous misstep, Silverlake stopped him. He just wished she found a better way to warn him he was about to make a mistake than hitting him with a willow branch. She could have poked his eye out with that thing!

He never thought he would say this, but he was starting to miss Xvim and his marbles. His old mentor was a saint compared to this crazy old woman.

“Well that’s no good,” said Silverlake, peering into the cauldron and idly stirring the foul-smelling purple gunk that Zorian ended up producing (it was supposed to be a viscous, sweet-smelling, totally transparent liquid). She gave him a bright smile. “I guess you’ll have to go gather a whole new batch of ingredients before you can try again, won’t you?”

Zorian stared blankly at the grinning woman, feeling her anticipation through his empathy. She fully expected him to explode at this and was looking forward to it! Sadistic bitch. Unfortunately for her, she was about to get disappointed. He wordlessly reached into his backpack and withdrew a fresh bundle of ingredients.

Her smile never faltered, but Zorian could *feel* her disappointment regardless. It made him smile inside, though he maintained his poker face.

“You gathered extra, huh?” she asked rhetorically.

“I have plenty of experience with abrasive teachers,” Zorian said simply. “I have another bundle besides this one, too.”

“Good. You’ll need it,” Silverlake said, knocking on the rim of the cauldron. “This was terrible. I don’t think two attempts will be enough. Hell, I’m skeptical you can get it in three! Go empty this crap you’ve made in the neutralization pit over there and start over.”

Zorian sighed and levitated the cauldron onto a disc of force before marching off into the direction of the neutralization pit. It was really just an open pit that had been lined with stones and painted over with alchemical resin so that alchemical compounds poured into it didn’t seep into the ground or nearby water supply. His alchemy teacher back at the academy would have been horrified at the mishandling of alchemical waste, but if the great Silverlake thinks an open pit is sufficient for disposal of alchemical sludge then who was Zorian to disagree?

That done, he placed the cauldron back over by the fireplace and started over. Silverlake was probably right that he wouldn’t get it right in the next two times either, though – the potion clearly required fairly delicate temperature management, but that was a very hard variable to control when using wood burning and a regular fireplace. An old witch with lots of experience like Silverlake probably knew by instinct how to control the fire, but Zorian didn’t have the faintest idea of how to do it.

That was generally the main problem of ‘traditional alchemy’, as it was sometimes called. It relied heavily on the ability of the practitioner to adjust their methods on the fly to produce a usable product. Unlike modern alchemy, which relied on standardized equipment and exact measurements, traditional alchemy was all about eyeballing it and improvisation. Expressions like ‘a handful of leaves’, ‘a slow fire’ and ‘a moderate amount of time’ were extremely common in traditional alchemical recipes. Zorian knew because he once broke into his grandmother’s recipe cabinet to see if he could learn something from them. ‘A pinch of salt’ apparently meant very different things to him and his grandmother, if the results of his secret potion attempts were any indication.

A further problem for him was that he was only really proficient in producing potions one by one, and the cauldron method was designed for producing batches of potions. There were some very important differences between production methods for single potions and for batches, but hell if Zorian could remember what they were at the moment.

“Who taught you?” Silverlake asked suddenly.

“Huh?” Zorian mumbled. “What do you mean? You want to know my alchemy teacher?”

“I want to know your *potions* teacher,” she corrected. “You’re still pretty terrible, but you’re not nearly as clueless around the cauldron as I thought you would be. Who taught you?”

“Err, that would be my grandmother, I guess,” Zorian said.

“A witch or just a housewife that picked up a few recipes?” Silverlake asked.

“A witch,” said Zorian. “Though not a particularly dedicated one, I think. She gave me some lessons when I was a kid, but it didn’t last very long. My mother didn’t really like her teaching me.”

Actually, Zorian was pretty sure his mother didn’t like his grandmother, period. Mother and daughter did not get along, in their case. Zorian always found it kind of hypocritical that mother spent so much time preaching to him about the value of family when she herself couldn’t stand her own mother if her life depended on it.

“Huh. Interesting. Don’t expect to get any fuzzy feelings out of me just because of that, though,” Silverlake said.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Zorian said lightly.

“Good. You’ll be happy to know I’ve decided on the price of my help for you.”

“Oh?” said Zorian, suddenly perking up.

“Yes. You see, a little birdy told me you’ve been wandering around the forest, picking fights with the wildlife. So this should be something right up your alley. Tell me... have you heard of something called ‘the grey hunter’?”

29. The Hunters and the Hunted

Chapter 029 The Hunters and the Hunted

Considering the reputation the Great Northern Forest had among people living in more southern, civilized territories, one would expect the place to be a giant death trap, with every animal and a good portion of the plants trying to kill you at every turn. The truth, Zorian had found, was a little more complex. While yes, the forest was full of dangerous creatures – even the deer were kind of aggressive and had tried to gore him a couple of times instead of fleeing from his approach – it was entirely possible to spend an entire day without endangering your life if you knew what you were doing. Granted, Zorian had a somewhat unfair advantage in the form of his mind sense, which let him sense a lot of the dangers before they had the chance to detect him in turn. Furthermore, the region he was frequenting was a border area – thus a little friendlier to humans than the deep, untouched wilderness in the far north. Still, he was confident that even a skilled civilian could move through the forest unmolested, much less a mage. Hell, he was doing just fine at the moment, despite having less than a month of experience.

Usually, Zorian wouldn't have wanted to move through the forest undetected. The whole point of going here was to get combat experience, so avoiding danger was kind of missing the point. This time, however, sneaking around was more or less mandatory. He really didn't want to get distracted around a threat on the level of a grey hunter, and he definitely didn't want to alert the monster that he was coming by engaging in a loud, flashy fight right next to its lair. He slowly circled the area around the grey hunter's lair, checking it for threats and hostile terrain that might inhibit him should he choose to retreat in any particular direction. In several places he carved clusters of explosive glyphs into the trees and exposed rocks – he doubted they were powerful enough to seriously hurt a grey hunter, but they might buy him a few seconds he needed to teleport away to safety.

He almost succeeded in reaching the lair without a fight. Thankfully the trio of fly-mosquito-whatever things that tried to ambush him were very easy to dispatch (they burned beautifully) and the fight didn't raise enough ruckus to attract the monstrous spider's attention. Zorian picked out a rather tall tree close (but not too close) to the grey hunter's lair and levitated himself to the upper branches, where he promptly took out the binoculars he enchanted earlier for the purpose and started studying his target.

The location was actually kind of picturesque – a small rocky gully surrounded by forest, with some pretty sediment lines crisscrossing the stone and a few strategically placed clumps of grass growing between the cracks. On one of the walls stood a perfectly circular hole that served as the entrance to the cave. It was pitch black and surprisingly unremarkable and unthreatening – if Silverlake hadn't told him it was there, it was entirely possible that Zorian would have missed it entirely if he had ever stumbled into the place in one of the restarts.

It would have been the last mistake he ever made, at least in that hypothetical restart – grey hunters were crazy good jumpers and possessed downright surreal speed. Zorian would bet anything that the one inside that cave could jump straight from the cave entrance to the other side of the gully in a single leap and close in before Zorian could so much as realize what was happening.

The grey hunter was fundamentally a very simple monster. It was a grey, furry spider the size of an adult man... and it also happened to be incredibly fast, strong, durable and spell resistant. It could run faster than a hasted mage, jump incredible distances, shrug off regular firearms and lower-level attack spells like a duck shrugging off water, outright ignore most direct-effect spells and bite through steel. Oh, and it had a very nasty poison that, instead of destroying tissue or wrecking the nervous system like most poisons, utterly disrupted a mage's ability to shape and control their mana instead. Once bitten, you wouldn't be casting anything for a while, and it would take weeks for the poison to fully flush out of your system. Apparently it was a type of poison adapted specifically to bring down magical beings that were the grey hunter's typical prey, but it was just as effective against human mages. Basically, if you were fighting against a grey hunter alone and got bitten, you were done for.

These things were known for chewing through entire groups of battlemages sent specifically to get rid of them. Quite a feat for what is ostensibly an animal-level creature – most non-sapient monsters, no matter how impressive, were too easy to lure into traps to pose such a huge danger to a prepared hunting group. Naturally, Silverlake wanted him to tangle with said mage-killing super-spider as her price for her help. The good news was that she hadn't asked him to kill the thing, something that Zorian suspected might be beyond him at the moment. The bad news was that her request was only a smidgen easier than that. She wanted him to confront the female grey hunter who laired in the cave he was currently observing and steal some of her eggs.

The lifecycle of grey hunters was a total mystery, as they were considered too dangerous to study through anything other than post-battle reports and vivisection, but Zorian was willing to bet that grey hunter mothers were fiercely protective of their spawn. Getting even a single egg was likely to be quite a challenge. In all likelihood, the mother would be reluctant to go far from her egg sack for any reason, so waiting for the chance to simply swipe some may be impractical, or even futile. For all he knew the female sat on her egg sack all day long and lived off her fat reserves until the young hatched.

Zorian placed the binoculars back into his bag and started jotting down notes in one of the notebooks he brought with him. The question of how to acquire the eggs without getting horribly murdered in the process was ultimately a question for another time – he was currently here just to scout out the situation and see if the task was even *possible*. As much as he wanted to prove the shriveled old witch wrong by completing her impossible quest, dying here would be incredibly stupid. He was on a time limit. A long time limit, but repeatedly dying because he decided to take on opponents way over his level would be an unforgivable waste. Every restart cut short was a restart he wasn't using to its full potential. If he couldn't think of a way to get the eggs that he was absolutely sure would work, he wouldn't do it. And even if he could think of a way, he would only try it out near the end of the restart, when the most he would lose was a couple of days.

"Alright," he mumbled, snapping the notebook shut. "Let's see what I'm dealing with."

The first thing he did was try to locate the grey hunter female to make sure she wasn't outside her lair at the moment. He had no way of tracking down grey hunters specifically through divination, as he had never seen one before and lacked any grey hunter body parts, but a simple locator spell searching for a 'giant spider' pointed him straight at the cave. Since the other two giant spider varieties that lived in the region – giant tree spider and giant trapdoor spider respectively – didn't live in caves, the conclusion was obvious. He then tried to scry the spider, which immediately failed. Well, the spell technically worked... but the cave was totally dark. There were no glowing crystals or ember moss that occasionally lit natural caverns – just an ordinary cave full of impenetrable darkness that hid everything.

Damn, he hadn't thought of that. Wracking his brains for a spell combination that would allow him to scout out the lair without having to go back into the city and hit the books, he decided to combine two different spells. First he cast the 'arcane eye' spell, creating a floating ectoplasmic eyeball through which he could see remotely. He then created a floating ball of light, functionally identical to the simple 'floating lantern' spell, except he altered the spell parameters so it would follow the ectoplasmic eye around instead of himself. He then sent the eye into the cave, closing his real eyes and connecting his sight to his remote sensor. There was a chance that the light would aggravate the grey hunter mother, but he doubted she would run out to confront him just for that, or that she could track him down on his tree for that matter.

As it happened, the grey hunter was either very, very bothered by his floating lantern or perhaps saw it as prey, because the eye had barely advanced into the cave, floating lantern in tow, when a grey blur slammed into it and Zorian's awareness was violently wrenched back into his body. Blinking in surprise at his sudden perspective shift, Zorian was then treated to the sight of the grey hunter leaping out of the cave and skittering around the area in search of something.

After 10 seconds or so of looking at the spider, Zorian noticed two things. First, the grey hunter female didn't have to sit on her egg sack all day long, *because she was freaking carrying it on the underside of her abdomen!* That was so freaking unfair. He withdrew everything he said about Silverlake's task being easier than killing the thing – this was actually way harder, since he was only getting the eggs by taking them from the grey hunter's cooling corpse but had to be careful when killing her not to damage the (likely much frailer) egg sack.

The second thing he noticed was that the spider was steadily getting closer to his location.

It wasn't immediately noticeable. Rather than immediately making a beeline towards him, the spider shot off in a random direction for a second; stopped for a moment, as if reorienting herself; and then shot off in a seemingly random direction again. It repeated the same stop-and-skitter routine second after second, and though the movements seemed random at first, Zorian noted with dread that it was steadily getting closer to his tree as time passed.

So the murder-spider also had hypersensitive senses, now? This was such bullshit. How the hell had it noticed him anyway? He'd even taken the time to set up some camouflage spells and silencing wards around himself just to prevent stuff like this from happening. True, they were fairly weak, in order to conserve mana, but that shouldn't have

He frowned. That was it, wasn't it? The grey hunter was tracking him through the wards. Its natural prey was said to be other magical creatures. It had a poison specifically designed to counter magic. It probably had some kind of innate magic sense that let it sense its prey over great distances. Rather than shielding him from the grey hunter, the wards he set up were revealing his location to it. The fact they were so weak was probably the only reason it hadn't divined his location instantly and was instead reduced to stumbling all over the place in an attempt to locate him.

If so, he was in trouble. He couldn't do *nothing*, as the monster would eventually sniff him out. On the other hand, the moment he tried to teleport away, his location would almost certainly be completely blown.

10 seconds later, with the spider getting ever closer and no solution in sight, Zorian decided he would just have to work fast and pray for the best. Taking a deep breath to calm himself down, he started casting the teleport spell as fast as he could.

As he feared, the grey hunter reacted instantly. The moment the first word of the chant left his mouth, the spider surged towards him, abandoning its previous jerky, uncertain advance. As it sprinted towards him, it angled away from the explosive glyph cluster Zorian placed on one of the rocks in its path, somehow aware of its existence and function, and launched itself sideways into the air. It landed vertically on the trunk of a nearby tree and immediately launched itself sideways again, bouncing from tree to tree and gaining altitude with each jump, until at last it was both close and high enough to reach Zorian's location.

Zorian finished the teleport spell and was whisked away in the nick of time. The terrifying vision of a giant spider sailing through the air towards him, front legs extended and huge black fangs poised for a strike, would haunt his nightmares for days to come.

- break -

Following his almost-lethal encounter with the grey hunter, Zorian decided to put Silverlake's quest on indefinite hold. There were plenty of other people that Kael listed as possible help, after all, and maybe if he talked to her in some other restart and tried again she'd send him on a less suicidal quest.

It was very frustrating, though. The thought of how thoroughly he had been outclassed by what was fundamentally a dumb beast brought to mind the memory of that final restart in Cyoria when he clashed with Red Robe in the ruins of the aranean settlement. The fact that the grey hunter was a giant spider, just like the aranea, further brought to mind uncomfortable parallels. Despite the fact that he knew intellectually that there was no shame in losing to a creature that even famous mages would balk at facing, and that he should in fact be happy to even be alive, he found himself very bothered at his ineffectiveness.

He spent the next day by tracking down giant trapdoor spiders, which were of similar size to grey hunters but brown-colored and a hell of a lot

less dangerous, before smoking them out of their holes and then killing them in a variety of painful fashions. Their eyes and venom glands sold a lot better than winter wolf pelts, too. He should do that more often.

Still somewhat in a foul mood, he set out to see if any of Kael's other contacts were able and willing to help him. When he arrived in the village where his first candidate lived and was informed by the locals that the man hadn't been seen in the past two months, he was unconcerned. The man was a retired mage fascinated with familiars – he had six of them as well as a great number of more mundane pets, and was always looking to add another exotic creature to his menagerie. An absence of two months was a bit unusual, but not something to immediately raise an alarm about.

But then other disappearances started piling up. The old herbalist lady that also sometimes removed curses was simply gone, and her neighbors had no idea where she went. The two brothers that lived in a tower they built away from civilization and secretly studied soul magic were not present at their home, the gate to their tower broken and the insides stripped bare of anything worthwhile. The priest in the nearby town dedicated to studying the undead and ways to fight them had been found dead in his home 4 days ago, cause of death unknown. He was young and had no known medical problems or addictions, so foul play was suspected. An alchemist specializing in transformation magic was torn apart outside his village by a pack of unusually aggressive boars. And so on. Only the priest and the alchemist were actually confirmed dead, the others having gone on sudden business trips or just plain gone missing one day, and the disappearances were in a sufficiently large area that no one seemed to have connected them in a single pattern, but Zorian knew this was not accidental.

Someone was deliberately targeting anyone who had some sort of knowledge on soul magic. The only question was whether the missing people were dead or just kidnapped for some purpose.

Thankfully, he finally managed to locate one of the people Kael mentioned to him. Unfortunately, the man in question didn't actually know any soul magic. Vani was 'just' a scholar, and according to Kael could probably point him towards someone who does. Probably. The only trick was that Vani liked to talk, meandering from topic to topic as he pleased, and he would refuse to help anyone who was in any way impolite with him. Thus, anyone seeking him out for advice had to be very patient and ready for frequent digressions.

This book was originally published on Royal Road. Check it out there for the real experience.

Zorian could do patient. He knocked on the door to the man's home and was promptly ushered inside by Vani, a cheerful older man with a receding hairline who was not at all surprised that someone sought him out for advice.

The inside was... packed. That was the only word that fit, really. Almost every inch of the house was filled with boxes, shelves and pedestals that held books, statues big and small, plants and animals preserved in bottles, glass cases that held tiny models or buildings and other such things. Where the walls were visible, they were usually filled with paintings and drawings. As Vani led them both into his study, Zorian's view fell on a particularly large and lifelike statue of a naked woman with some rather... bountiful... assets and he quirked an amused eyebrow at the man.

"It's a, err, goddess of fertility sort of thing," the man hastened to explain. "Just a temporary thing, a friend of mine sent it to me for safekeeping and you know how it goes. Fascinating stuff. Anyway! Don't think I don't know who *you* are, young man – you're the one who has been killing all the winter wolves in the region lately!"

"Err, is that a problem?" Zorian asked.

"Problem?" the man laughed. "Just the opposite! Finally someone did something to cull those awful beasts a little. They're not too bad right now, but come winter they get aggressive and start assaulting travelers and outlying communities. There's been a number of child disappearances the last few winters, and everyone knows it's probably the winter wolves at fault. Damn things get bolder with every passing year..."

"How come nobody organized a hunting party yet, then?" asked Zorian. The mage guild was pretty much founded to respond to situations like this, after all.

"It snows pretty heavily here in winter, and whole towns can sometimes get cut off from the rest of the world for days, so it's hard to marshal a response in time. Most of the time no one even finds out there was a crisis until days afterwards, when nothing can be done," Vani tapped the table with his fingers contemplatively, as if considering something. "Or at least, that's what the hunters and the authorities like to say. Personally, I just think they're afraid of the Silver One."

"Silver One?" asked Zorian curiously.

"It's a rumor. A few years back, when the winter wolves first started acting up, there was an attempt to organize a wide scale cull and a large hunting party was organized. It ended... poorly. According to stories, several winter wolf packs worked together to lure the hunters into traps, separating them into smaller groups that were then defeated in detail. They acted more like an army than a group of wild animals, and survivors claimed they were led by a huge winter wolf with a shiny silver pelt. The Silver One – an alpha of alphas, as smart as any man and with the power to direct his lesser brothers against humans. There was an official attempt by the Eldemar's mage guild to locate and eliminate this winter wolf, but they found nothing – neither the silver wolf nor any evidence of multiple packs working together. A lot of the locals are still convinced he exists, though – they say that anyone who goes after the wolves ends up getting confronted by it sooner or later."

"I see," frowned Zorian. "And what do you think?"

"It's possible, I suppose," admitted Vani. "We live in a crazy world, and you can never really say that something is impossible. It could be a runaway experiment made by some crazy mage in the forest. It could be a new species originating from the Heart of Winter. It could even be a

polymorphed mage on some deranged crusade to protect the bloodthirsty monsters from those terrible humans. All I know is that I'm glad someone is not getting intimidated by all the scaremongering floating around..."

It took another 15 minutes till Vani decided to even ask what Zorian came to him for.

"Kael sent me," Zorian said. "Or rather, he listed your name as a possible source of advice."

"Kael!" Vani said happily. "Oh, I remember him... shame about what happened to his wife and mother-in-law. The Weeping took so many great people from us. He still has his daughter, though, doesn't he?" Zorian nodded. "Good. Children are the greatest treasure. Tell him I said that. He helped me write a book, you know? Did he tell you that?"

"He did," Zorian confirmed. Kael had warned him that Vani was a little vain and loved discussing his books, and that it might be a good idea to read one or two. Zorian took this advice and read two of them. The first one, the one that Kael had helped the man write by gathering the accounts of various people in the region, was about the recent history of the region and was mostly a collection of anecdotes, some interesting and amusing and some of them mind-numbingly boring. If it weren't for Kael's advice, he never would have gone past the first chapter. "I even read it, as well as one other book."

"Oh?"

"It was titled 'History of Pre-Ikosian Altazia,'" Zorian said, considering whether to tell the man the truth or to simply flatter him. He decided to go with the truth for now. "I... it was kind of interesting, but I don't really agree with the lot of it. My principal complaint is that you keep talking about pre-Ikosian tribes living on Altazia as if they had lived in total vacuum, when the reality was that the entire southern coast of Altazia was dotted with Ikosian colonies and forts stretching back for at least a thousand years. Ikosians were hardly the total aliens to Altazia that you portray them as in your work."

"Ah, but the historical evidence clearly shows that the cultural influence of those coastal states didn't extend very far inland," pointed out Vani triumphantly.

"That may be strictly true, but Ikosians were vastly more technologically advanced than Altazian tribes in most areas, and I think you're greatly underestimating the effect of simple technological diffusion on people's culture..."

Yeah. This was probably going to take a while.

- break -

"Ah, thank you for that," Vani said. They had been talking for several hours at that point, and Vani seemed surprisingly pleased to have met someone who disagreed with his conclusions and was willing to talk about it. Zorian also found out that the man was incredibly well read and seemed to have memorized half a dozen encyclopedias, because he was a font of various trivia. Whatever he thought about the man's conclusions, he clearly hadn't arrived on them on a whim. "It's been a while since I had this kind of discussion with someone. Usually the kind of people willing to talk to me don't know enough to challenge me, and the ones that do know enough aren't interested in talking."

"You flatter me. I don't really think my opinions have the same weight as yours. I certainly haven't done even a hundredth of the research you did," Zorian said. Never hurt to butter people up a little. "But I really shouldn't waste your time for much longer. I came to you because I wanted your advice on how to find an expert in soul magic."

"Soul magic?" the man asked with a frown.

"It's a personal issue that I'd rather not talk about," Zorian said. "Suffice to say I have been hit by a soul magic spell of unknown effects and want to talk to someone about finding out what exactly has been done to me and how to protect myself against any further such events."

"Hmm," Vani hummed. "And Kael sent you to me?"

"You were on the list of people he said could help me. However, you were the only one I could actually locate. The others were... well, it's very disturbing. Let me tell you about my last couple of days..."

Vani listened to Zorian's description of disappearances with growing unease, writing down the names and facts that Zorian uncovered on a piece of paper.

"That is indeed very disturbing," Vani agreed when Zorian was finished. "To think that such a thing could happen without everyone realizing it for so long... I will bring this matter to the attention of proper authorities, have no worry about that. It does make me wonder who I can recommend to you when so many of the obvious choices have become, err, unavailable. Let me think about this a little."

Five minutes later, Vani managed to think up a solution.

"Tell me," he asked. "What do you know about shifters?"

"That they're people who have the ability to turn into animals?" Zorian tried.

"Shifters are people with two souls," Vani said. "Long in the past, the ancestors of the shifters enacted rituals that fused their souls with the souls of

their chosen animals, allowing them to take the forms of the animals in question and even access some of the abilities of said animals in their human form. It is a very old form of magic that predates the Icosian invasion of Altazia, and I'm sad to say that most shifter tribes have lost the knowledge of the original rituals they used to create their kind. These days, they grow in numbers purely through mundane reproduction, with children of shifters inheriting their parent's dual soul. There exist, however, tribes that retain the knowledge of ritual magic and soul mechanics necessary to perform the ritual in the modern age. While the purpose of such expertise is to turn regular humans into new members of the tribe, it may very well be general enough to help you with your issue."

"I see. And where can I find these shifters?" Zorian asked.

"That," Vani said, spreading his arms in a helpless gesture, "I do not know. Shifter tribes have a checkered history with the, shall we say, *civilized* communities. They rarely want to be found. But! I do know that there is a fairly powerful wolf shifter tribe living in this region – a tribe that definitely has the expertise you seek. I do not know who you need to talk to in order to meet with their leadership, but I do know that the leader of the tribe sent his daughter to Cyoria to get an education in more modern forms of magic. Raynie is her name, I think. A redhead. Quite the looker, I'm told. Perhaps you can start there?"

Zorian blinked. Raynie is a *wolf shifter*? That... wow. Yeah, now that he thought about it, there were some things that could point that way.

"Well," said Zorian rising from his seat. "You gave me a lot to think about. Thank you for your time."

"Think nothing of it," Vani smiled. "Go kill a few more winter wolves for me, is all I ask for."

"Wouldn't a tribe of wolf shifters kind of dislike me for killing so many wolves?" Zorian asked.

"They're wolf shifters, not *winter* wolf shifters," Vani said. "I'm pretty sure they don't like each other much. Winter wolves have a habit of killing their more mundane relatives and invading their territory."

Zorian left after that, unsure how to proceed further in the restart.

- break -

"Back already?" Silverlake asked him, not bothering to look up from her bundle of herbs while addressing him. "I'm not seeing any egg sack on you, though."

"That's because spider-mommy is carrying her eggs on her underbelly," he said. "The task is impossible. Why would you even send me on such a fool's errand? Kael said you were eccentric, but ultimately harmless. This isn't harmless. I almost died."

"If I thought you were the sort to rush in half-cocked and get your fool ass killed by something like that, I never would have sent you on that errand," Silverlake scoffed. "And anyway, isn't it a bit premature to declare failure after less than a week? I'm patient. I waited for years, I sure as hell can wait for a few months more till you think of something. You're a smart boy, I'm sure you'll figure out a way."

Zorian opened his mouth and then closed it. Suddenly, her logic sounded a lot more reasonable to him. She didn't know he was on a month-long time limit, after all. As far as she was concerned, giving him a task that would take several months to complete was perfectly logical. Where was the hurry? As for the suicidal nature of the task she gave him... apparently she had more faith in his skills than he himself did. Did he really give up too soon?

"A few months is too late," he said. "Anything that happens after the summer festival might as well not exist for me."

Silverlake finally stopped fiddling with the herb pile and gave him a hard look, her eyes glowing brightly for a moment.

"You're not dying," she stated. "Not out of sickness, anyway? Someone hunting for you?"

Zorian hesitated, the image of Red Robe dancing before his eyes and opened his mouth to say 'yes'. Silverlake cut him off, though.

"No, not really," she stated, going back to her herbs. "You have an enemy, but then again who doesn't?"

Zorian exhaled in irritation and rose up, deciding to leave before he lost his cool and attacked her. He'd probably get stomped into the ground, anyway. Just before he teleported away, though, a thought struck him.

'To hell with it,' he thought. 'Why not?'

"Hypothetically speaking," he said. "If you were visited by a time traveler who claimed to know your future self, what would you ask of him as proof?"

"*Hypothetically speaking*," she said, her mouth stretching into a cruel grin, "I would have asked him to retrieve a grey hunter egg sack for me."

Throwing his hands in the air in defeat, Zorian teleported back to his inn in Knyazov Dveri, the cackling of a sadistic old woman echoing behind him.

- break -

In the safety of the room he rented at the inn, Zorian was sitting on the bed, dismantling a rifle he had bought earlier. It was kind of amusing how easy it was to procure a firearm compared to high-level combat magic aids, despite them being just as lethal, but there you had it. They were especially easy to procure here in Knyazov Dveri, which was so close to the wilderness and its dangers. In any case, he was trying to see how the things worked and, more importantly, how they could be enchanted.

Firearms were notoriously tricky to enhance with magic. Like all ranged weapons, they had the problem that you could only enchant the device to be more accurate and durable, and if you wanted the projectile to have any sort of magical effect upon striking the target you had to enchant the projectile itself. Bullets were unfortunately very hard to enchant, being much smaller than arrows and crossbow bolts and usually made from some very magically unsuitable materials. You also couldn't touch the bullet to channel mana into it once it was already in the gun... though maybe if he installed some crystal mana channels into the gun via alteration...

While he studied the device in front of him, Zorian idly considered ways to off the grey hunter from earlier. He had no intention of actually trying any of them, as they were each more implausible than the last, but there was no harm in coming up with scenarios.

Grey hunters had known weaknesses. First of all, they were purely melee opponents – if you could keep them at a distance, there was nothing they could do to you. The trouble was that they were really, *really* good at closing in on their target. Secondly, they were ultimately just magical animals so they could be lured into prepared traps and kill zones fairly easily. The problem here was that they were fast and tough enough to probably survive such a blunder. The magic sense the grey hunter demonstrated in Zorian's first encounter with it probably also helped it avoid the most blatant of such traps.

He could think of a several ways to trap it, but most of them required knowledge of spells that he didn't have. If he knew how to make a simulacrum and open portals, he could simply send in his simulacrum as bait and then open a portal leading to wherever he set the trap up. Hell, simply knowing how to make a simulacrum would make things a million times easier since he could test his ideas without endangering himself. If he knew large terrain alteration spells he could simply seal it off in its lair and wait for it to suffocate. If he knew the spells to manipulate large amounts of water he might be able to drown it. And so on, and so on...

He also considered poisoning the thing or putting it to sleep or otherwise using some kind of alchemical concoction that would cripple or kill it... but anything potent enough to kill such a beast was heavily restricted, made out of super-rare ingredients and expensive as all hell. He didn't know how to make anything like that, and couldn't get his hands on something that valuable and forbidden through trade.

He could try for brute force and build a golem to take the spider down. Since they were machines animated by magic, they were immune to poison and could be extremely strong – strong enough to crush the stupid spider in a head-to-head fight. Unfortunately, he didn't know how to build a golem. Any golem at all, let alone one good enough to go toe-to-toe with a grey hunter. The art of golem making was complicated enough that several Houses were dedicated to mastering it, and not something to dabble in for a week or two. Or even a month or two.

Furthermore, even if he knew how to build it, the process of building would take at least a week and probably more, require a specialized workshop and consume a lot of expensive materials. He would likely bankrupt himself before he was even halfway finished.

Which brought him to firearms. The revolver worked well enough against Red Robe when his spells had failed him, after all. No regular firearm would do against the grey hunter, though – he needed something stronger than that. Unfortunately, higher calibers were usually reserved for the military and he would need to raid a military base and steal one if he wanted to go down that route. That could end very badly – who knew what kind of defenses a military base had, and being captured and interrogated by military investigators while drugged out of his mind on various truth serums was almost as bad as being discovered by a hostile mind mage or a necromancer. Plus, he was pretty sure they had a couple of mind mages and necromancers on the payroll anyway.

Oh, and even if he did find something suitable under a lax enough security, there was the matter that it would almost certainly still have to be enchanted and he couldn't even figure out how to effectively enchant a simple rifle at the moment. Probably wouldn't by the end of the restart, either.

A knock on his door woke him up from his musings and he quickly put the rifle into its box and hid it under the bed. Him owning the rifle wasn't illegal, but he'd still rather not let whomever was looking for him see him tinkering with it. He made sure his shielding bracelet was on, just in case, and then opened the door.

It was Gurey, which did not surprise Zorian all that much. The man had been dutifully buying off any of the various alchemical ingredients and assorted body parts Zorian had gathered in the forest and allowed Zorian to use his workshop when he needed to make some of the trickier potions and magic items. The man had already commissioned a couple of magic items from Zorian, so he expected Gurey's arrival to be about another commission.

As it turned out, Gurey had another kind of deal in mind. Once the pleasantries were exchanged, he skipped straight to the point.

"I want you to help me rob my rival."

30. A Game of Shops

Chapter 030 A Game of Shops

“I want you to help me rob my rival.”

Zorian blinked in surprise before giving the man an incredulous look. What?

“And... why the hell would I do that?” he asked the man curiously.

Gurey grinned triumphantly. “I knew I was right about you,” he said. “You didn’t even pretend to be outraged at the question.”

Zorian frowned. “I’m just not a very excitable person, that’s all. It doesn’t mean I’m going to actually help you rob someone,” he shot back crankily. “In fact, I can scarcely imagine a situation where I would agree to such a thing. I was just curious what possessed you to broach the topic at all. This isn’t some kind of attempt at blackmail, is it?”

“Oh no, I’d have to be pretty stupid to try and blackmail a man who hunts winter wolves and giant trapdoor spiders for a living,” Gurey assured him quickly. “Not that I have anything worthwhile to blackmail you with, anyway. No, I just felt I had an interesting deal for you and that I had nothing to lose by making an offer. You don’t seem like the sort that would get all high and mighty on me just because I employ a few shady business practices. I figure the worst you’d do is say no.”

Zorian was silent for a moment. He supposed that Gurey had him there – even if Zorian actually cared to turn Gurey in, it would still be his word against Gurey’s. Proving the man’s guilt would be a hassle, Gurey would likely get a mere slap on the wrist even if convicted, and it would lead to far greater scrutiny of Zorian’s activities by nearby powers than he was comfortable with. All in all, it would mean an entire restart wasted on a pointless crusade that had no meaning inside the time loop and would quite possibly attract the attention of the academy authorities – previous restarts had made it clear they were very quick to involve themselves when one of their students had a brush with the law or the police, and he was still technically enrolled there. And if the academy found out about his whereabouts and activities, it was entirely possible Red Robe would also find out about it through cephalic rats or his other spies...

No, even if Gurey was planning to murder someone, Zorian would not intervene. A simple theft... well, he wasn’t sure he would actually care all that much even if he wasn’t stuck in the time loop and he certainly didn’t care at all *now*.

“Well, the answer is definitely no,” said Zorian finally. “I know that wanderers like me have a reputation of being opportunistic, but I’m afraid my ethics aren’t quite as flexible as that. I’m not going to stoop to banditry or burglary or whatever it is that you have in mind for this... ‘deal’ of yours.”

“Ah, I don’t think you quite understand what I’m talking about here,” Gurey said. “You think I want you to steal something physical and that I’m offering you money in exchange, yes?”

Zorian raised an eyebrow at him.

“Nothing could be further from the truth,” Gurey shook his head. “I know better than anyone that you’re raking in too much money at the moment to be tempted by petty burglary. Ethics aside, that’s too much risk for too little gain. No, if this operation goes off without a hitch – and I think you’re capable enough to pull it off – there will be nothing missing and no indication that a crime has occurred at all.” He leaned towards Zorian conspiratorially and whispered the next part. “You see, what I’m trying to steal is not material wealth, but *secrets*.”

Oh. Oh! Well that changed things considerably. He still didn’t want to have anything to do with Gurey’s deal, but he at least understood why the man felt comfortable discussing such an offer with him. Spying on other mages was technically illegal, but everyone knew it was a common and universal practice. Hell, according to some stories every Noble House worth its name had its own division dedicated just to that. You just had to make sure that you weren’t caught. Even the academy, which generally tried to give students a very rose-tinted version of mage culture, admitted that such ‘professional espionage’ occurred all the time. Some of it was entirely legal, such as analyzing a rival’s products and spellwork with divination spells, or poring over publically available documents to see if they’d let something sensitive slip by without noticing... but such legal methods were usually very limited and mages often resorted to shadier methods. Bribing assistants and apprentices into selling out their master’s secrets, hiring burglars to raid archives and research notes, dedicated scrying campaigns, seduction plots... the possibilities were endless, and new ones were devised every day. As well as countermeasures for such.

Zorian recalled a particular fable that spoke of two mages that spent years devising ways to steal each other’s secrets and thwarting the other’s attempts to do the same to them. Eventually, after a decade of back-and-forth, they both succeeded in reaching each other’s inner sanctum at the same time... only to find out that neither had any secrets worth stealing. They had spent so much time and effort trying to one-up each other that they’d never gotten any actual work done.

Well, that was an obvious exaggeration, but it honestly wouldn’t surprise Zorian to find out that every magical business (and probably quite a few non-magical ones) in Knyazov Dveri did do at least a little bit of illegal espionage as a matter of course. The world of business was a cutthroat environment. Zorian knew from his parents’ stories that even seemingly simple and honest farmers were willing to renege on their contracts if they thought they could get away with it. To someone like Gurey, this sort of thing was probably just business as usual.

But it wasn't business as usual for Zorian. And frankly, Gurey was completely right when he said that the whole thing was a huge risk for little gain. He opened his mouth to give Gurey a firm (but polite) refusal, but was interrupted when Gurey pushed a brown, leather-bound book in his hands.

Zorian looked at the book in surprise for a second, idly wondering why it had no title, before giving Gurey a searching look. The man motioned him to open it.

Zorian did, and promptly found himself leafing through pages of hand-written notes and complicated diagrams. It was a journal of some sort. That's why the book had no title or markings. A research journal of some mage, if he had to guess.

"What is this?" he asked, giving Gurey a suspicious look.

"A sample," Gurey said with a grin. "As I said, I know it would be foolish of you to do something like this for money – well, for the sums I am able to pay you, at least – so I came up with something that will hopefully be more attractive to you. Feel free to peruse that thing at your leisure and then come see me in my store tomorrow to give me an answer. Just remember, there is more where that came from!"

Gurey then immediately left, leaving Zorian alone with the mysterious journal/thing. Curious, he opened the book at the beginning so he could see if it perhaps had a title written on the first page. The first few pages were blank, but he did reach the title page in the end.

'Breaking and bypassing wards and other magical defenses,' it said. 'By Aldwin Rofoltin.'

Rofoltin? That would be Gurey's deceased business partner, wouldn't it? Intrigued, Zorian sat down on the edge of his bed and began to read.

- break -

Having read through Rofoltin's book, Zorian had to admit he was feeling a little... underwhelmed? It wasn't a *bad* book by any means, but by the way Gurey had presented it, he'd expected more. As it was, the most useful thing he found inside was the step-by-step instruction of how to build your very own magic-analysis goggles, complete with a spell formula blueprint. That was convenient, as he had been meaning to build one of those for a while now and there were no publically available creation manuals on the topic that he could find – the spell formula blueprint alone probably saved him a restart-worth of work.

Other than that, there was little of real use in there... but perhaps that was what Gurey had been aiming for. It was a sample, as he said, meant to entice Zorian into cooperation by alluding to the possibility of granting Zorian access to the rest of Rofoltin's books. If Gurey's old partner had 5 other books like that, and each one had just one useful thing like the goggle thing, that was a couple of months of saved time right there. And if Gurey was keeping the good stuff for the end like Zorian suspected... tempting. Far more tempting than he'd thought this would be.

Shaking his head at his own greed, he locked his room behind him and set off in the direction of Gurey's shop. He would have to check with the man what exactly he expected of him, but... chances were he was going to say yes. In truth, this sort of thing wasn't that far off from what he had been planning to do on his own at some point. Chances were that he was going to have to learn how to break into people's homes and spy on images sooner or later – gathering information about the time loop, Red Robe and soul magic was bound to require it at some point. At least this way he would get some guidance from someone who'd done it before, get a chance to practice his skills on what was probably a far less difficult target, and get paid for it to boot.

Realizing he was in no hurry to actually confront Gurey, Zorian eventually slowed down and decided to take the scenic route to the place. He idly observed the people and buildings as he wandered the town, suddenly aware that he knew very little about the place, despite living in it for a while now. He had been so busy with other things that actually exploring Knyazov Dveri sort of slipped his mind. He didn't even peruse the town's Dungeon access, though that one was intentional – he had decided to hold back on doing that until he had a chance to judge how much of his time and attention his other tasks in this restart would take, and ultimately decided to leave that for some other restart. The Dungeon wasn't going anywhere. In any case, now that he had taken the time to explore the town a little, he could say with some certainty that he hadn't missed much. He had already visited most of the shops to determine what the best price for the ingredients he was gathering was, and aside from that the town was fairly average. It was similar to Cyoria in the sense that it was clearly a city that had experienced rapid growth in recent times – the old core of the city was easily recognizable by the single-story buildings painted in the traditional yellow color that usually signified Eldemar's native architecture, while subsequent layers radiating from it had newer, multi-story buildings. Other than that, he hadn't noticed anything particularly noteworthy, though he would have to set aside some days for exploration just to be certain.

Finally, he reached the building that proudly proclaimed it housed a business establishment known as Cwili and Rofoltin Equipment and walked inside. The little bell attached to the door rang out as Zorian entered, notifying Gurey of his arrival – a solution surprisingly devoid of magic, for a magic store – and the portly man soon poked his head from the back room he was currently in to see what he was dealing with. His eyes lit up immediately when he recognized Zorian.

"I'll be with you in a second!" the man yelled before getting back to whatever he was working on in the back. Zorian took the chance to study the shop a bit while he waited.

Just like the first time he had been here, he was once again struck by how diverse the products sold by Gurey's store were: he offered everything from wilderness-appropriate attire to the various magic items, potions, survival guides, dried herbs and other magical materials used by alchemists and artificers, and so on. And actually, it was even more impressive than it first appeared – Zorian knew from his previous talks with the man that Gurey actually offered a great deal more than what was displayed at the shelves of his store, so long as the customer seeking them was properly vouched for or knew how to ask the right questions.

Gurey once told a story about a customer who tried to buy the decorative potted plants he strategically placed around the shop to liven up the place, and while Zorian understood Gurey's mirth at the incident, he also understood how someone might have decided they were for sale. With all the other things Gurey was selling, it really wouldn't have surprised Zorian to find out that he dealt in potted plants as well.

"Ah, Zorian, my friend..." said Gurey, walking out from the back and approaching him. "Did you read it? An interesting book, isn't it?" he prodded.

"It was... somewhat useful," said Zorian noncommittally. "Not much on its own, but if there really are a couple more where that came from, it might actually be worthwhile for me to work with you on your... problem."

Gurey frowned, apparently expecting him to be more impressed with his partner's work. He opened his mouth to speak, but Zorian interrupted him.

"Before we discuss this any further, I'd prefer if we move to somewhere more private. Do you have a room I could set up some basic privacy wards in?"

"I have better," Gurey said smugly, quickly shaking off his previous disappointment. "I have a room with privacy wards already present... and not just the basic ones, either. Follow me."

He led Zorian to a small, inconspicuous room with a single desk and two chairs... a room whose walls, floor and ceiling were full of magical glyphs and geometric shapes made out of crystalized mana. Gurey placed his hand on one of the circles and the whole complicated spell formula pulsed twice in bright blue light before becoming seemingly inert. Zorian wasn't fooled though – those pulses signified the more mana-intensive portions of the ward scheme becoming active. Much like many powerful warding schemes, the one he was looking at had two modes – the normal, mana-conserving one that could be powered indefinitely from its mana source and the advanced, super-charged one that burned through mana faster than the ambient mana levels could provide it with but was far more effective for the time it was active.

The sound of Gurey clearing his throat jolted him out of his thoughts and he realized he had been studying the wards for quite a while now. Oops.

"Is this one also 'somewhat useful'?" asked Gurey with a smirk when he realized he had Zorian's attention again.

"No, this is quite impressive," Zorian admitted. "Is this also made by your former partner?"

"Yes," Gurey nodded. "He was quite good at this. Setting up wards, I mean. Also breaking and bypassing them, but I understand those two are related. Learn how to make a ward and you're 90% there to figuring out how to defeat it."

"That's the conventional wisdom, yes," agreed Zorian. He decided not to dance around the issue any longer. "So... I'm guessing your former partner was your go-to person for these kinds of deals in the past, and now that he's dead, you need to find someone else to do your dirty work."

"My, you're direct," Gurey laughed nervously. "But you've hit the nail on the head, more or less. You see... magic was never my thing, as strange as that may sound from an owner of a magic shop. That was always Aldwin's thing – he was the one that worried about the spellcasting part of the business while I was always more comfortable on the more mundane, civilian side of things. Making contacts, closing deals, finding new business partners, that kind of thing. I'm a really terrible mage when it comes down to it. I can barely cast anything at all."

Zorian gave him a curious look. "I'm pretty sure I saw you manipulate mana plenty of times, and activating the greater privacy mode of this room couldn't have possibly been a matter of just channeling mana into that circle."

Stolen story; please report.

"Oh, I was always very good at using magic items," Gurey said. "You don't need to be a proper mage to do that. Lots of practice and some specialized shaping exercises and you're set. If you're fairly wealthy like me and live on a mana well, you can even commission items that draw power from the ambient mana instead of from my own minuscule reserves... but we both know there are severe drawbacks to such items, and this sort of job really needs a proper spellcaster."

Zorian nodded. He had been considering the possibility of using 'self-casting' magic items to make up for his below-average mana reserves for a while now, but there were a lot of problems with it. The core, inescapable issue was that souls of spellcasters were pretty damn good at spellcasting, while even the best-made magic items... weren't. Making an item that allowed the caster to skip some of the steps during spellcasting was simple enough, but creating something that was capable of casting a spell entirely on its own upon command? Hard. Possibly very hard, or even impossible, depending on what spell you were trying to imprint into the item. Warding schemes and one-use magic items like his suicide explosive cubes got around the issue by having the maker cast the spell during creation, after which the spell formula simply stabilized it and kept it from degrading, but that workaround wasn't very useful for the majority of spells.

And then there was the issue of powering said items. Not every place had much in the way of ambient mana, and even places that did often couldn't provide the amount necessary for the spell at once. That meant that most self-casting items needed an internal mana battery, which brought a whole host of problems of its own. No battery was totally efficient and reliable – they all leaked mana in varying amounts, and could easily blow up if overcharged or poorly constructed. And that was without even getting into the number of actual combat spells that were specifically designed to make mana batteries blow up from internal pressure.

All in all, the creation of self-casting items was something that Zorian put squarely into the 'probably not worth it' category. He wasn't nearly good

enough with spell formula currently to pull it off, and even if he were, it was still a very difficult sub-field of magic item creation that gave very dubious gains. Though he did eventually intend to track down a blueprint for a blasting rod – probably the simplest of self-casting items that blasted whatever it was pointed at with a torrent of barely-constrained energy, usually fire. A fittingly named item, and one of the few self-casting items that was known to be reliable and effective in actual combat, at least at close range. It was not a priority, however – such an item would be more of a last resort, side-arm sort of weapon than something to build his skills around.

“I’m not as useless at this sort of cloak-and-dagger stuff as you might think, though,” Gurey said. “As I said, Aldwin was the spellcaster, but I was the one who identified the targets. You can’t spy on a threat unless you know they are a threat, after all. And I was always very good at spotting who our competition was and keeping an eye on their activities. People underestimate how much information you can get simply by being well connected and giving a few expensive gifts to people.”

“You mean bribes,” said Zorian.

“Zorian, my friend, you have much to learn,” Gurey said, shaking his head. “Bribes are illegal. There is no law against generosity. Giving that bottle of expensive wine to your drinking buddy or inviting someone to that fancy annual dance that they’ve always wanted to attend is just being nice and no one can prove otherwise.”

“Right,” Zorian sighed. “I guess I shouldn’t talk, since I’m willing to go along with your plans. And speaking of which, why don’t we get back to the reason we’re here in the first place. What exactly do you want from me and what are you offering?”

“Very well. I presume you know about Vazen’s General Store?”

“The biggest magic-related shop in town?” asked Zorian.

“That one, yes. Cwili and Rofoltin Equipment was once bigger and able to compete with them on a more equal footing, but since the death of my partner two years ago those days have passed. Recently they have closed a deal with another company from Cyoria, but they have been silent about the contents of the deal. Everyone knows they have bought a bunch of spell formula schematics, alchemical recipes and production licenses, so it’s obvious they intend to seriously branch out into the production side of the business, but the exact details have been successfully kept secret. That is a problem. Depending on what Vazen intends to produce, some things are going to decline sharply in value, while the price of the raw materials used to make them goes up to a similar degree.”

“I see. You need to see what your rival will release so that you can prepare for the impact it will have on the market,” mused Zorian.

“Well, that and so that I can see if it is possible to counter his move in some fashion,” Gurey said.

“I suppose you know where I can find that information?” Zorian asked. “Not in the shop itself, I hope. That place is bound to be heavily warded.”

“It’s not nearly as warded as you might think – some basic counters to stop teleportation and divination, and that’s about it. But the place is always manned, even during the night, so you’re right that they’re not something you’d want to tangle with. Fortunately, you don’t have to. In the end, Vazen’s own paranoia is his undoing – I have found out that instead of keeping the documents in his heavily guarded shop, he has brought them into his much less protected home. Apparently he doesn’t even trust his own employees.”

“How protected is his home?” asked Zorian.

“Well, my information might be a little outdated since I got it two and a half years ago, from my then-living partner who scouted the entire building, but I doubt much has changed. It has an anti-divination ward and all the doors and windows have intruder alarms and that’s it. The documents themselves are kept in a safe, though, and *that* is bound to have much more serious defenses.”

“Not too bad of a setup, to be honest,” Zorian said after thinking about it for a minute. “The divination ward stops casual espionage and makes it impossible to just scry-and-teleport inside, while the alarms on entrances make it impossible to simply sneak inside without magic.”

Covering only the entrances with the wards was a common mana-conserving measure. True, it made the wards useless if the attackers could phase through walls or were willing to make their own entrance by blowing a hole in the building, but thieves capable of phasing through solid matter had bigger fish to fry than robbing small-time shop owners and blasting holes in the walls would kind of defeat the point of trying to acquire the information undetected.

“You *can* teleport, though, right?” asked Gurey. “I mean, I’m sure you can – the speed of movement over large distances that you’ve demonstrated pretty much requires it – but how good are you at it?”

“I can teleport,” Zorian said hesitantly. He didn’t think he was making it that obvious, though he supposed he couldn’t keep leaving in the morning and coming back before the sun set with things only found deep in the forest without someone questioning just how he was doing it. “I’m getting pretty good at it, in my opinion. It takes me a while to shape the spell, but I can consistently pull it off.”

“Excellent. The intruder alarms shouldn’t be much of a problem, then,” Gurey said with a grin. “Aldwin had this neat trick where he could turn an item into a teleport beacon of sorts, and then simply teleport himself to its location without having to have been there in the past. I’m sure I can get some innocuous-seeming thing through the door, you just have to cast the spell on it. I don’t know how to cast the spell myself, but Aldwin did write it down in one of his journals...”

“Spell, you say? No spell formula involved?” asked Zorian curiously.

"No. 'Spell of recall', I think it's called. It's a two-part spell – you first cast a personal teleport beacon on an item, and it immediately forges a connection between you and it. You can then cast the second spell at any time, causing yourself to be 'recalled' at the location of the item. According to Aldwin, it was meant to be used for rapid escape – you cast the first spell on a retreat point and then use the second spell to teleport there if you end up in a bind."

"Why not use a regular teleport for that?" frowned Zorian. "Sounds like a lot of trouble when a normal teleport will suffice. After all, you've already been to the location you're teleporting to if you're setting it up as a retreat point."

"I really don't know. You will have to find that out yourself if you're interested," Gurey said.

"Hm. So assuming this spell works as advertised and you can smuggle something in like you said you would, I 'just' have to defeat the protection on the safe to get to the documents."

"Yes. That part will be all you, since I have no idea where it is or what protections it has," confirmed Gurey.

Zorian stared at the man for a while before taking a deep breath.

"Lovely. Unfortunately for you, I am not the professional ward breaker you seem to think I am," he told Gurey. "When you said you wanted my help with this, I had thought I would just play support or something. Something like this is, to put it bluntly, out of my league. I'm sorry, but unless there is something you're not telling me, there is no way I'd be able to pull this off."

Gurey leaned forward and gave him a conspiratorial grin. "Even if I gave you Aldwin's spellbook and his notes on how the spells are meant to be used?"

Zorian blinked. "What?"

Two hours later, Zorian left Gurey's shop with three new books under his arm. They had agreed to make the attempt at the documents three days before the summer festival, ostensibly to give Zorian the time he needed to practice the spells in Aldwin's spellbook but also because that way, should the whole thing go pear-shaped, Zorian would only lose three days of the restart.

Zorian hummed to himself in satisfaction as he walked back to the inn. It was nice to catch a windfall from time to time. After the whole annoyance with Silverlake and the mysterious disappearance of soul magic practitioners, he had begun to think that this whole restart had been a giant waste of time. Now... well, at least he'd gotten some shiny new spells out of it, ones of the sort that he could never have acquired through any legal avenue.

Things were looking up.

- break -

After his talk with Gurey, time passed quickly. It was difficult to practice the spells found in Aldwin's spellbook, as most of them only interacted with wards and required an actual warding scheme as a target. Thankfully, Zorian had managed to find a warded house whose owner had left on a trip, allowing Zorian to practice on it to his heart's content, provided he kept out of sight of the main road. He also occasionally warded objects himself for practice purposes, usually when practicing the more destructive spells, but that just wasn't the same as interacting with an unknown ward.

Surprisingly, Gurey was also willing to have Zorian practice the spells on his shop's warding scheme, so long as he didn't do anything permanent. Zorian wondered about that. All things considered, Gurey was being far too accommodating to him. He suspected that the portly man thought of him as an investment and hoped to turn him into a more long-term asset, and as such was rather more generous to Zorian than he otherwise would have been, but he had no way to be sure. There did not seem to be anything malicious about it, so he mostly ignored it and tried to be simply grateful for his good fortune.

There were essentially three ways of dealing with wards. The first one was to starve the ward out, depriving it of mana until it simply fell apart. The second was to identify a way to disrupt its structure, causing it to fail on the spot. And finally, the third one was to trick it into not activating in the first place. 'Siphoning', 'breaking' and 'bypassing' were the terms used in literature for the three methods. Each one had its advantages and disadvantages, but for the task Gurey entrusted him, he would have to rely on bypassing the wards on the safe.

Siphoning had the advantage that it always worked – every ward could be siphoned to death with enough time and effort, it was just a question if the attacker was willing to devote the necessary resources for the task. Some wards could last for months after being isolated from their power sources, even when actively drained of mana during the isolation. Unfortunately, it required that the attacker have complete control of the area around the ward, as siphoning operations were difficult to set up and maintain – anything less than total control made it too easy for the defender to wreck the setup. It was mostly used for sieges and bringing down legacy wards that had outlived their usefulness.

Breaking was the fastest method of neutralizing wards – just disrupt the structure of the ward and let it collapse on itself. Unfortunately, many wards collapsed explosively or had other unpleasant side effects if simply broken, often resulting in the destruction of the warded thing and sometimes the one doing the breaking as well. A lot of wards were also simply too powerful to be broken by a single mage, or even a group of mages, unless the attacker had identified a particularly glaring weakness. So all in all, breaking a ward was often not possible, and, even more often, not desirable even if the possibility existed. Still, if one wanted to get rid of a ward quickly and had power to spare, breaking the ward was the way to go.

Finally, there was bypassing the wards – the preferred way of dealing with them, if at all possible. If the attacker knew how the ward functioned, either because he had been given access to the schematics of the warding scheme or because he had analyzed its structure via divination spells, they could take care not to activate any of the triggers that made the ward recognize there was a problem to be countered. Depending on how the ward functioned, it might even be possible to put additional layers on top of it to neutralize it completely. If an attacker wanted to keep their intrusion secret, bypassing the wards was a must, as it was the only method that left the wards intact after they were done.

Since the idea was to leave no trace of his home invasion, he obviously couldn't break or siphon the wards on the safe – he had to trick his way past them and leave them intact. There were lots of ways to do that in the books Gurey had given him, since Aldwin was primarily interested in that sort of solution to the wards himself, but until Zorian took an actual look at the safe he couldn't tell which ones he should use. So he settled on simply practicing all of them.

As the date of the summer festival approached, Zorian decided to visit Vani one more time to see if the man had any news on the missing soul images. He didn't, though he admitted he hadn't tried to find out anything about that very hard. It was a matter for law enforcement, Vani had claimed, and getting involved would just paint them as suspects. He was probably right, and Zorian knew there was no point in snooping around now that the case was being investigated by the police, but he definitely intended to launch a personal investigation in future restarts to see what was going on there.

Vani had asked him whether he had found the shifter tribe, but Zorian admitted that he sort of gave up on that. He couldn't go to Raynie, as she was in Cyoria, and nobody else could direct him where to go. Or maybe they could, but didn't want to – the result was the same in either case. Besides, he was skeptical in regard to how much they could actually help with his issue.

Finally, the day had come. Gurey had managed to get a small plaque inside Vazen's house by stuffing it inside an envelope and mailing it to the man along with some ridiculous advertisement. Zorian couldn't believe that had actually worked, but it had, and now they just had to wait for the man to go to work before he could teleport inside and search for the safe. Vazen was a 40-year-old bachelor, so there was supposed to be no one in the house with him gone, but Zorian had prepared a set of concealing clothes for himself anyway (that he intended to throw away immediately after the operation) and was willing to teleport out at the first sign of trouble.

After an hour of waiting, Vazen left the house and Zorian teleported inside. Gurey remained outside under an invisibility field, acting as a lookout – if he spotted Vazen coming back, he would press a button on the stopwatch Zorian had given him, which would cause a ring on Zorian's hand to heat up.

The house was, thankfully, completely empty... but also completely lacking in safes, warded or otherwise. Even after he'd added an additional layer to the wards in order to exclude the inside of the house from the anti-divination ward, his spells still gave no results... probably because the safe was itself warded against divinations. Frustrating. It was obviously hidden behind something, but Zorian couldn't figure out where. There were no hollow walls, secret hatches beneath the carpet, places where the floor was scraped due to constant movement of furniture, and so on. Just as Zorian was about to give up and hit the books for an exotic divination spell that could work despite the ward, he finally found it. It was in the fireplace, of all things – if he hadn't noticed how relatively clean it was (and reminisced about how much he hated cleaning the one back home in Cirin), it would have never occurred to him to look there.

The fireplace was not built for convenient access, so interacting with it was rather annoying – the safe was positioned to the left, making it impossible to actually see the lock without the use of a mirror. Still, that was just an inconvenience, not a real obstacle. He began casting analysis spells at the ward that protected the safe, trying to find a way past them.

He had just enough time to register that there was a very weak, localized ward present in the fireplace before he was forced to jump back and erect a shield in front of him. A deafening explosion erupted from the fireplace, enveloping the whole room in blinding, choking ash as the ward triggered the explosive trap in response to detecting his analysis spell. His shield protected him from the blast, but the ash cloud was hell on his lungs.

He teleported out, grabbed Gurey and then teleported again – this time away from Vazen's house. The operation was a bust.

- break -

In the aftermath of the botched operation, the whole idea had been scrapped. Security was bound to go up now that Vazen knew there was someone after the documents, and Zorian didn't fancy going against the new and improved defenses when even the old ones nearly killed him. Gurey was, if anything, even more shaken about the whole thing than Zorian was. He apologized profusely for the whole episode and ranted about how such lethal traps were illegal and how he couldn't believe Vazen would employ such a thing, which Zorian found more than a little amusing. It helped explain why Vazen seemingly didn't bother to report the break-in to the police, though.

Personally, Zorian was feeling pretty annoyed with himself. Despite what Gurey seemed to think, this was all on him. He really should have checked the fireplace for traps. Hell, he should have checked the whole house for those! Just because Gurey had said there were no other defenses didn't mean he should have taken it for granted. The man had even said his information was outdated...

Well, no matter – he got some nifty spells out of the whole thing and he knew what to watch out for in subsequent restarts.

He thought about confronting the grey hunter at the end of the restart, but then decided against it. He would have just died messily, and he'd had enough brushes with death in this particular restart.

He went to sleep and woke up with his sister wishing him a good morning.

31. Marked

Chapter 031

Marked

Zorian stared at the grinning face of his opponent, his own face a blank, expressionless mask. This was it. This last round would decide who the victor was, no question about it. His opponent thought he had Zorian backed into a corner, but Zorian had a secret weapon – he had already peered into the man's thoughts and knew that he had already won.

The rules of the card game were pretty clear, after all.

"Twelve of pumpkins," Zorian said, placing his last card on the table. The man's face instantly lost its grin. Zorian tried to keep a cool façade, but he probably smiled at least a little.

"Motherf- How are you this lucky!?" the man cursed, slapping down his own card on top of the stack – a measly seven of oaks, not nearly enough to win – and taking a swig from the glass of hard liquor next to him. He drank way too much in Zorian's opinion, his thoughts steadily growing more and more muddled to Zorian's mental probes as time went by... and while that did make him harder to read via psychic powers, it also made him progressively worse at playing the game. He probably didn't even need to cheat to win the last two games, but cheating was kind of the whole point – he joined the card game to practice his mind reading skills in a real environment, not to win money off hapless victims.

"Well, this is it for me," Zorian said, standing up. "It was fun and all, but I really have to get going now."

"Hey, you can't just leave now," the man protested, frowning at him. "That's not how it's done! You have to give me a chance to win my money back!"

"Orinus, you're drunk," one of the other men at the table said. The two of them dropped out three games ago, but they still stuck around to talk, drink, and act as judges and money holders. "You didn't lose anything. It's the kid who just got back the money he lost to you in the previous game. Nobody has to pay anyone anything."

"Yeah, the last five games have basically been for nothing," the other man piped in.

Zorian nodded. Even with mind reading on his side, some hands were just unwinnable. Besides, he purposely threw a couple of games so as to not arouse suspicions of cheating in his partners. "We're both even at this point, and I really have to get going, so it's a perfect place to stop," he said. "Still, if you're that desperate for a rematch, I can always relieve you of your money some other day. I'll be staying in the town for a whole month anyway."

"You relieve *me* of *my* money, ha! The only reason you haven't ended up in your underwear is that you're immune to my secret technique!" Orinus half-shouted.

The other man snorted in amusement. "Getting the newbie drunk is a secret technique, now?"

"Hey man, don't reveal all my tricks to outsiders... what kind of friend are you?" Orinus protested.

After a few more minutes of bickering and refused offers of alcoholic beverages, Zorian finally managed to excuse himself. Ignoring Orinus's muttered questioning of Zorian's masculinity due to his refusal to drink anything remotely alcoholic, he left the inn and started searching the streets of Knyazov Dveri for an out-of-the-way corner he could teleport from without being seen. The game had been both unexpectedly fun and useful for his mind magic training, but he hadn't been lying when he had said he had to get going. Timing was crucial for what he intended to do.

In the previous restart he learned that most of the soul mages on Kael's list had disappeared or died recently. That was, of course, highly suspicious – there was a good chance the whole thing was somehow connected to the time loop, which meant he had to know more about it. Sadly, during the last restart he had made the mistake of telling Vani about the disappearances, and he had raised enough of an alarm to have the police crawling everywhere around potential clue-sites. Consequently, Zorian had been forced to set the issue aside and wait for the next restart to conduct his own investigation.

Which is exactly what he did, the moment he woke up in Cirin and could leave without making Mother and Kirielle throw a fit. As he suspected, virtually all of the soul mages had been already gone, even on that very first day. Whatever had happened to them had been going on for far longer than the time loop existed, it seemed. There were only two exceptions: the two mages that were confirmed dead in the previous restart were alive and well at the start of the new one. The first one, a priest named Alanic Zosk specializing in fighting undead, had simply been found dead with no obvious cause a few days into the restart. The second one was Lukav Teklo, an alchemist specializing in transformation magic. He had been killed by boars not far from his home, on the evening of the second day of the restart.

Naturally, Zorian intended to talk with both of them, which necessitated saving their lives. The alchemist was a priority, as he died sooner and the cause of death was known and easily preventable. Thus his hurry to leave the game – if he timed things correctly, he would arrive at the man's home an hour or two before his fateful stroll outside the village. If he mistimed things or his actions somehow caused the alchemist to accelerate his schedule... well, there were always future restarts. It's not like the man would die for good.

He could have contacted the man sooner to warn him, he supposed, but how would he explain his knowledge of the attack? He'd just make

himself look suspicious. And besides, he actually wanted the attack to happen. He doubted those were regular boars that attacked him, so he wanted to examine them up close... and also, the man was bound to be a lot more helpful if he met Zorian as a savior who protected him from a vicious pack of boars than if he just showed up at the man's door with no warning.

After teleporting just outside the man's house and making sure the alchemist was still in his house, Zorian settled in for a wait, making sure to keep out of sight of any windows. If there was anything that tiny villages like this one never had a shortage of, it was nosy old people who had nothing better to do except watch the streets for anything out of the ordinary. Honestly, some of the old women back in Cirin spent practically every waking moment glued to their window sills, making note of everyone that passed through their domain... he lost count of the number of times they got him into trouble with his parents when he had foolishly forgotten to account for their presence.

He didn't have to wait long. Barely half an hour after he had settled in to wait, the alchemist left his house. It was a good thing he had come early, then. Zorian promptly cast an invisibility spell on himself and then started following after the man some distance away. Hopefully he remained far enough that the man would not find it suspicious when Zorian burst onto the scene at the first sign of trouble, but that couldn't be helped. He didn't feel comfortable putting even more distance between the two of them, lest the man be killed before he could come to his aid. Depending on how oblivious and combat capable the man was, he could get overwhelmed in seconds.

And the attack itself was bound to happen any moment now. The report he saw in the last restart said the man was killed just outside the village, and Lukav had immediately made a beeline towards the main road leading to the next settlement. Cautiously, Zorian drew his spell rod and strained his mind sense to the limit in order to find the attackers before they could strike.

He found nothing out of the ordinary, and was thus just as shocked as the alchemist when a bunch of boars burst out of the tree line and charged the man. They both froze for a second, and before either could react the boars had already closed half of the distance to the alchemist.

Embarrassingly enough, the alchemist reacted first. With a practiced movement, he threw a bottle of some sort into the path of the approaching horde and immediately dropped on the ground. Lacking the alchemist's reflexes and thinking himself too far to be affected by the bomb, Zorian opted to simply drop invisibility and erect a shield in front of him as a precaution. That turned out to be a mistake, as the deafening explosion of light and sound left him dazed and blinking spots out of his vision for the next few seconds.

When he did recover, he saw that the bomb's effect on the boars themselves had been underwhelming – they had been thrown about by the blast (as had the alchemist himself, having misjudged the distance somewhat in his panic), and the leading boar that had been caught in the center of the blast had been blown to bits, but the others were already up on their feet and converging on their target. Even the one with a broken leg was stubbornly stumbling towards the dazed, bleeding alchemist, undeterred by what should have been excruciating pain.

They made no sounds, they were unafraid of loud sounds and bright light, and completely ignored severe injuries like they were nothing. So much for the idea that they were ordinary animals. Oh well, he kind of suspected it was something like this. Acting quickly to stop them from killing the other man, he cast a swarm of 5 magic missiles at the boars closest to the downed alchemist. Smashers instead of piercers; if he was right about what these things really were, holes in their bodies wouldn't even slow them down. The missiles were there just to knock them away from their target and give Zorian time to cast another, more unorthodox spell that he didn't put in his spell rod. Oh, and possibly shift their attention towards him instead, though he didn't think anything could make them switch targets. They were clearly sent to kill a specific man.

The smashers hit the boars in their flanks, sending them tumbling. As he suspected, they immediately scrambled to get up as if nothing happened, and the other four kept running towards the alchemist. He had finished his spell before they could reach him, however, causing a large shining disc of force to materialize between his hands.

The severing disc was a powerful cutting spell that was surprisingly mana efficient and allowed the caster to 'pilot' the disc, changing its flight path at will. Taiven had not thought much of it, as it was not a fire-and-forget sort of combat spell, requiring constant concentration from the mage to keep existing. And it moved pretty slowly for a magical projectile, too. According to Taiven, competent mages would dispel the disc before it could reach them or otherwise evade it, and the caster is something of a sitting duck while directing the disc.

But the boars couldn't dispel it, and had no ranged attacks to take advantage of his lack of shields. At Zorian's direction, the disc shot forward, flying close to the ground – at the height that Zorian judged to be around knee-height for the boars.

Zorian's fears that he had overestimated the power of the disc and that it would not be able to cut through the bones of tough animals like the boars proved completely unfounded – the disc encountered the legs of the first boar and simply passed through with no visible resistance. In its wake, the boar fell apart, its legs separated from its torso. Directed by Zorian the disc continued towards the rest of them.

In the end, it was a close thing. On one hand, the boars didn't even try to dodge, charging in straight lines that made them easy to intercept with the disc. On the other hand, Zorian had not practiced the spell in question particularly heavily, so he missed two boars on his first pass. Thankfully, the alchemist had recovered by this point and helpfully dealt with the two stragglers by causing an arc of spear-like spikes to erupt from the ground in front of him with some kind of alteration spell. The boars were so insistent on getting to him as fast as possible that they impaled themselves on the makeshift rampart and got stuck.

Zorian let the disc dissipate with a sigh. That was a win, yes, but he wasn't satisfied with his performance. He'd frozen at the start, and his mastery of the severing disc spell left much to be desired. But what was done was done, and at least he achieved what he came here to do. Time to face the music. He set off towards the alchemist, who was kneeling on the ground and alternating between staring at the approaching Zorian and at the still twitching, legless boars not far from him.

He frowned at them as he approached. They had no minds, he realized. That was why he didn't detect them until they attacked – as far as his mind

sense was concerned, they didn't exist. Coupled with the fact they were still alive with their limbs cut off and that their wounds didn't bleed at all, the conclusion was obvious.

His hunch had been right: they were definitely undead. As far as he knew, the only beings that counted as 'mindless' for the purposes of mind magic were oozes, golems, creatures under the Mind Blank spell, and the so-called 'mindless undead'. The boars were clearly neither golems or oozes, and he doubted Mind Blank was involved. It would also explain why they seemed to have no blood and felt no pain or hesitation.

"Are you alright there? You kind of took the worst of that blast," said Zorian, shifting his attention towards the man he came here to save. Now that he was close to the man, he could see that Lukav Teklo was a fairly handsome middle-aged man, sporting long black hair, a carefully sculpted beard and rather muscular physique. Zorian was a little surprised by this, as he had expected someone... wilder. After all, his fellow villagers had told him that the man disdained human contact and preferred to spend his time in the wilderness.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm alright," the man said, rising to his feet before swaying dangerously. Zorian quickly caught him and helped him regain his balance. "Dammit. Hoisted on my own petard, literally. Didn't even accomplish anything with it. Totally ignored my patented animal repellent. That's some compulsion they were under..."

"I'm pretty sure they're undead," Zorian said.

"What, really?" Lukav said, squinting at the closest boar. "My vision is a little blurry right now. Is it... is it really trying to *wriggle* towards me still?"

"I think so, yeah," Zorian confirmed.

Lukav barked out a stream of words in some Khusky language that Zorian didn't recognize. He was pretty sure they were swear words, though, so maybe it was better that way.

"I'm sorry," the man said after a few calming breaths. "I don't mean to be rude. I want to thank you, young man. I was lucky you happened upon me when you did. I surely would have died otherwise."

"Well, it wasn't entirely luck," Zorian said, causing the man to give him a hard look. "You are Lukav Teklo, yes?" The man nodded. "I have been looking for you based on the recommendation you received from one of my friends, one Kael Tverinov."

"Ah, Kael!" Lukav immediately brightened. "Great kid, shame he stopped coming when he got engaged to that witch girl. I was hoping to recruit him as an apprentice, but I'm afraid Fria got to him first and unlike her, I didn't have a cute daughter of my own to tempt him away with. Talented alchemist, that boy. I'd ask you how he's doing, but we can do that in my house, when I calm down a little."

"That would be fine," Zorian said. "Though I want to take a look at these undead boars that attacked you, first. I'm pretty sure someone just tried to murder you. I don't think undead boars arise on their own."

"Oh no, definitely not," Lukav agreed. "Minor undead like that are basically flesh golems, only with an enslaved soul or spirit placed inside instead of an automation core. The only 'naturally' arising undead are ghosts and other soul entities. Alanic was always very clear on that. Not sure who would try to kill me, of all people, but apparently I pissed off a necromancer somewhere. Just my luck. I'll report this to the guild and have them deal with this, but feel free to examine these things as much as you want in the meantime. I'm kind of curious myself, but divinations were never my thing so..."

Zorian nodded and got to work, using an alteration spell to bind the legless torso of the nearest boar so it wouldn't thrash and move around before moving to analyze it.

As he feared, he didn't find out anything particularly useful and was forced to leave the scene to the guild investigators. At Lukav's advice he summoned the severing disk and chopped all of the downed boars except one into smaller pieces that no longer moved. Lukav claimed that one undead boar was enough for the guild investigators and he didn't want to risk the attacker picking them up, sewing the legs back on and sending them after him again.

The last intact boar was buried deep into the soil via another alteration spell from Lukav, there to wait for guild investigators to arrive.

"Zombies, skeletons and other undead are not nearly as easy to make as stories make them out to be," Lukav explained as they made way towards his house. "Easier and cheaper to make than golems, sure, but still a significant expenditure of alchemical ingredients and time. Losing a dozen zombies like that has got to be a major loss for whoever is targeting me. No sense in letting them recuperate losses by leaving the zombie boars in fixable condition. Alanic told me to always destroy any disabled undead after the battle, just in case their maker is around to fix them back up. I didn't think I'd ever be in a position where that advice would be useful but there you go."

"Forgive me, but is the Alanic you're talking about Alanic Zosk?" Zorian asked.

"Why yes," Lukav confirmed. "I suppose Kael recommended him too?"

"Yes. He actually gave me a pretty long list of soul mages – you were just the first name on the list." He wasn't really, but it hardly mattered. The man motioned him to continue. "I need your help with a piece of soul magic I got hit with. I don't feel comfortable talking about it here in the open. I hope you'll hear me out when we get to your home."

"Fair enough. But unless you got hit by a transformation curse, I don't think there is much I can do for you. Alanic is actually a better bet – he's no curse-breaking specialist, but he knows the basics of the field at least. Of course, it would have been even better to seek the help of the guild, but I'm guessing you have a good reason for not wanting to get them involved."

"I do," confirmed Zorian. "And while I realize that the chance of you being able to help me is slim—"

"Hey now, those are fighting words," Lukav warned.

"—I still hope you will hear me out and try to help me. It's entirely possible that you hold a crucial key to solving my problem, even if you are unable to give me a total solution. My problem is not a curse, exactly. It is exotic enough that Kael recommended Silverlake as a possible solution if all else fails."

"Say what?" Lukav asked incredulously. "He recommended that crazy old witch as a *solution* for something?"

"I know," Zorian sighed. "I heard from a reputable source that she asked for a grey hunter egg sack from the last guy who asked her for help."

"Now that's just ridiculous," Lukav snorted derisively. "Someone is pulling your leg. Not even Silverlake would do that. Anyway, I'll see what I can do. It's the least I can do for someone who saved my life."

- break -

After they had reached Lukav's house, the man penned a quick report to the nearest Mage Guild representative and paid one of the village boys to deliver it to Knyazov Dveri while they talked. Apparently the kid was a very good runner and had done such things for Lukav in the past.

Regardless, it took a full hour for Lukav to tackle Zorian's problem, during which Zorian explained Kael's rather tragic situation to the man and Lukav gradually calmed down and waited for the potion he ingested to take care of his concussion.

"Horrible. I thought that hearing about Kael would cheer me up after this whole ordeal, but it only makes me feel even more depressed," Lukav said. Zorian stayed silent, content to wait for Lukav to continue. After a few seconds of being lost in his thoughts, the man shook his head with a sigh. "Well, I think the potion did its work by now, since staring into the lamp no longer hurts my eyes and my head no longer feels like it's been stuffed with wool. Do you think you could tell me more about your problem now? The house has some basic wards to shut down scrying but it's not professional work, just something I had a friend make for me. The village doesn't have enough ambient mana to support anything substantial in terms of permanent wards, anyway. I guess we could go to Knyazov Dveri and hire a private room in one of the more expensive inns, but that would cost a pretty penny and I'm kind of averse to spending money like that."

"It's fine," said Zorian. He had already analyzed the man's warding scheme as practice and found it adequate. Slightly worse than Zorian could manage with a full day's work or so, but far better than a hastily erected privacy scheme that had been his original plan.

After a few seconds to collect his thoughts, he began to talk. Telling the man about the time loop was absolutely out of the question, of course, but that didn't mean he had to be totally vague about his situation. He told him how he stumbled upon a fight between a lich and an unknown mage, and was caught in the crossfire, getting hit by an unknown soul magic spell in the process. The other mage dispelled it, but the damage had already been done. After spending several weeks sick, he seemingly recovered, only to find out later that the spell had left its mark on him after all. Here Zorian went a little vague, refusing to state what the consequences he noticed were, simply insisting that the issue was private.

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"Difficult," Lukav said unhappily when Zorian was finished. "Knowing what the consequences were is a pretty crucial clue as to what the spell actually was, you know? You are sure it has nothing to do with transformation?"

"Absolutely," Zorian confirmed.

"Not even partial transformations?" The man asked. "Remember, not all transformations are total or involve obvious physical changes. The vast majority of magical enhancements are actually transformation, even if they only do things like increase your strength and agility – they all call upon attributes of some other creature to do their thing, transforming the user in some non-obvious way."

"I didn't know that," Zorian admitted. "But no, it's still not a transformation effect. It's actually more of an out-of-body experience, with my soul periodically leaving the body and then snapping back to it. So magical augmentations are generally transformation magic? Is that why they always seem to ask for animal parts and the like?"

"Astral projection?" Lukav asked. "Hmm, makes sense. Some soul magic spells definitely weaken the links between the soul and the body if used incorrectly, and you said the spell the lich cast on you had been botched. Not that letting the spell run its course had been a good idea, mind you, but some of the necromantic arts are just as dangerous if dismissed incorrectly as they are in their raw form. You're definitely right to seek help over this. And yes, the parts of animals and magical creatures are there to provide an example of what you want to the transformation spell. 'Eagle Eye' spell literally gives you the eyes of an eagle, for instance. Transformation magic is very useful for such augmentation because it is very easy to reverse."

"It is? I thought transformation was dangerous," said Zorian. That was what they were taught in the academy.

"Well... maybe a little," the man admitted. "But compared to the alternatives, it is incredibly safe. You see, when you cast a regular transformation

spell on yourself you are essentially putting clothes on your soul. Don't look at me like that, it's what it is. Yes, the official term is 'transformation shell', but they're basically like soul clothes. You can put them on, see, and you can take them off. Even if you mess up the spell and can't turn back or you get locked into an alternate form by a malicious opponent, you are still just a dispel or a curse-breaking session away from returning to normal. Your soul is still intact and unchanged beneath the transformation shell, and once the spell is gone you revert to your base form. The problem is that sometimes people overreach and end up transforming too far, so you end up with a mage, say, transforming into a troll in both mind and body and killing his entire family before the spell runs out of mana and he reverts back to normal. Or they attach the transformation shell too firmly to their soul and can't change back, and are then stuck in the form of a sparrow or something and can't talk to people or meaningfully interact with their environment. That's why a lot of people don't do transformation via invocations and rituals any more, and just buy transformation potions from people like me who know what they're doing – no chance of messing up, just drink a potion made by an expert and you're golden."

"Ah."

"On the other hand, when you're literally messing with your body chemistry and using alteration on your flesh, you're usually doing something totally irreversible," Lukav continued. "The human body is a complex thing, and I don't think anyone really understands enough about it to meaningfully improve it. Most potions that aim to enhance the real body with some exotic concoction are basically stimulant drugs with addictive properties or cause hard-to-cure damage if used often. And alteration spells that aim to alter the flesh directly have heavy drawbacks that make them hardly worth the effort and are often a total bitch to undo. I should know, I got called in often to help out with the fallout created by such magic. But we're getting off track. Come with me and I'll see if I can do something about your problem."

Lukav led him into his basement, past several locked doors, until they reached a spacious underground chamber. The huge spell formula on the floor in the form of two circles, one large one and one small one, each of which was ringed by lots and lots of magical glyphs, was a dead giveaway that this was some kind of ritual room. The fact that the room was perfectly cubical, with identical dimensions in all directions, was a further confirmation – flawless geometric shapes were always better for holding magic than anything remotely irregular, which was why Ikosian artifice featured a lot of circles, triangles, cubes, pyramids, cylinders, domes and so on.

Other than the ritual circle on the floor, the room was empty and featureless – likely to minimize magical interference from anything else. Zorian hoped he would not have to get naked for this – he had heard some of the more delicate magical scans were actually bothered by clothes and the like, and wasn't at all enthusiastic about that possibility.

Thankfully, Lukav's instructions didn't turn out to be that bad.

"Alright, leave any magical items on your person outside the room and then step into the center of the big circle, right into that big empty space," he told Zorian.

Zorian was more than a little apprehensive about leaving his magic items behind, since that would leave him totally defenseless. Especially the three innocuous-looking steel rings he had hanging on a necklace tucked into his shirt. Those rings were the latest iteration of his explosive suicide device that he had been steadily refining throughout the restarts. Anyone could make an explosive device with a bit of spell formula knowledge, of course, but making them stable enough not to go off by themselves yet capable of going off on a moment's notice whenever he gives a signal? Shrouding the explosive mana core with enough divination blockers to make the bombs invisible to wards designed to detect those very kinds of devices, thus allowing him to take those things literally everywhere he went, including the tightly warded academy facilities? Making them small and convenient enough that they weren't a chore to carry around? Not everyone could do that, he was sure.

In the end he decided to remove everything except the necklace. Getting killed by betrayal would suck but ultimately just be an annoyance, whereas getting stuck in some kind of soul mutilation ritual without means of suicide would be irreparably catastrophic. He just didn't trust Lukav that much, even if his empathy was telling him the man was honest enough and harbored no hostile feelings towards him.

He quickly put his spell rod, shielding bracelet, bag of small explosive cubes (kept for offensive purposes) and the experimental automation core he had been fiddling with in his spare time into a small pile next to the door and walked inside. Lukav was already sitting inside the smaller circle, which also had an empty space in the center of it that could accommodate him easily. Zorian copied the man and promptly sat down on the stone floor inside the larger circle. He had a feeling this could take a while.

Apparently Lukav's magic couldn't detect the necklace, because he said nothing about it.

"You don't have any kind of soul shell on top of your soul," Lukav decreed after 15 minutes of examination. "I kind of expected that. The sickness you said followed the spell that hit you strongly hints that part of your actual soul was affected. Let's see if I can detect any foreign bits in your soul then..."

Now this was the part that Zorian definitely cared about. He had been wondering for quite some time how big of a chunk of Zach's soul did he end up with and whether it was having some kind of effect on him that he was unaware of. Hopefully Lukav would be able to shed some light on that issue.

After more than half an hour of spellcasting and lots of frowning, Lukav was finally ready to give his report.

"Weird. You definitely have something woven into your soul, but it's not like anything I've ever seen. Actually, you have *two* somethings. One is some kind of complicated bit of spellwork woven incredibly tightly into your soul, definitely not soul-stuff but not something I recognize either. Very weird that something so complex could result from a botched spell. Not calling you a liar but it doesn't make sense to me. The other something... well, it's definitely a piece of foreign soul stuff fused into your own soul, but I don't think you have to worry about that much. It's not a spirit or some soul parasite, and it seems to have all but dissolved into your own soul. In a year or two it will be gone entirely, completely

assimilated."

"What kind of consequences will that have?" Zorian asked worriedly.

"None, I think. Your soul appears to be converting it into just another piece of itself rather than trying to keep it distinct. So there shouldn't be any major personality shifts and you probably won't get any nifty abilities from whomever or whatever it was that donated a part of their soul to you. Though, I guess it is possible that the fragment had affected your personality to an extent when you first got it, before your soul had the chance to assimilate it sufficiently, and such influences may linger still. Do you think and act radically different ever since the incident?"

Zorian frowned. "To be perfectly honest, yes, I am *quite* different from how I used to be. But I'm not sure how much significance to attach to that. The incident was very traumatic, and so much has happened ever since then..."

"I understand," Lukav nodded sympathetically. "Your life has taken a completely different course after your fateful encounter with the darker side of magic. You would have changed anyway, and any changes caused by the soul fragment would have been lost in the noise. If you want my advice, you should not worry about it. You are who you are right now, and the fragment is all but gone. If shifters can claim to be the same person after stapling an animal soul to their own, then I'm not sure why a little nudge from a soul fragment should worry you."

"It's in my nature to worry," Zorian said. "Though admittedly the fact the fragment will be gone soon does make me feel better."

"Well," said Lukav, rising to his feet with an audible pop of his joints. "I'm glad to have allayed at least some of your fears, but this is as much as I can personally help you, I'm afraid. For the strange spellwork in your soul, you will have to talk to Alanic. He tends to be very suspicious of strangers and unannounced visitors, but I'll accompany you to smooth things over since you did save my life and all. Is there anything else you wanted my help with?"

"Well, not really," said Zorian. "But if I can trouble you some more, what can you tell me about shifters? You mentioned them several times while we talked today. Are you in contact with the local wolf shifter tribe by any chance?"

"No, not really," said Lukav, shaking his head. "I mean, I could locate them if I had a week or so, but I'd really rather not. Talking to them is annoying, and they don't like me very much ever since I tried to buy the shifter ritual off of them that one time."

"Ah," said Zorian with some disappointment. "It's just that I also talked to Vani, the local scholar in Knyazov Dveri, and he recommended I try to contact the local wolf shifters for help. Do you think the idea has any merit?"

"In terms of whether their soul magic expertise could have helped you? Maybe, though I wouldn't bet on it," said Lukav. "But I really, *really* doubt they would agree to help you. The shifter tribe he speaks of, the Red Fang tribe, is fiercely protective of their special magic and suspicious of anyone who takes an interest in it. Hell, they don't even talk to other shifter tribes about it! Having nigh-exclusive access to shifter magic is very prestigious for them, and they don't want to share it with anyone."

"Then why did you offer to buy it off of them?" asked Zorian curiously.

"Well I didn't know that then, did I? How the hell was I supposed to know these things when they barely talk to anyone in the mage community?" groused Lukav. "Okay, yeah, I may have been a *little* too insistent, but they could have explained things to me politely instead of making such a big deal out of it."

"I see," said Zorian carefully. Lukav probably wasn't the best person to help him contact the shifters, it seemed. Just as well, since he had a much likelier lead right now in the form of Alanic.

He agreed he would drop by tomorrow in the evening to pick up Lukav, and that they would then go meet Alanic together. The two men were old friends according to Lukav, and Alanic would be easier to deal with if he was there to vouch for Zorian's character and honesty.

Zorian hoped that the priest would be as useful as Lukav claimed he would be.

- break -

The next day Zorian spent an entire morning practicing the severing disc to make sure he could actually control it properly the next time he used it, switching to various levitation exercises when he got bored or ran low on mana. As evening approached, Zorian teleported to Lukav's village and spent an hour or so in idle chitchat with the man. Zorian wasn't sure, but it seemed to him that the man had hinted at the possibility of teaching Zorian some of his secrets. Of course, there would probably be an apprenticeship contract involved if he wanted to take Lukav upon that offer, but with the time loop in place, such entanglements wouldn't be permanent in nature. Perhaps he should set aside a future restart or two to see what the man had to offer, but transformation magic simply wasn't a priority right now. He needed information and defenses against soul magic before anything else.

Eventually, they both got on their way. Lukav had wanted to walk to Alanic's residence, but Zorian had vetoed the idea arguing that would be a waste of time when he could just teleport them next to the man's house instead. Admittedly his only experience in teleporting others had been when he had retreated from Vazen's house with Gurey in tow, but he was confident he could replicate that success. And as it turned out, he was right about that.

"I'm surprised someone as young as you can teleport," Lukav said conversationally, looking at their new surroundings to determine where exactly they ended up at. They were not far from the temple that Alanic worked at and which also served as his home, but Zorian opted not to teleport too

close, as Lukav indicated that the man could be somewhat trigger happy about such things. "You're, what, 16? I guess I finally met one of those kid geniuses people talk about. You're not *that* Kazinski, are you?"

"No, I just happen to have the same last name as Daimen," Zorian lied.

"Figures," the man said. "You must get that question a lot."

"You have *no* idea," Zorian sighed. Thankfully, Kazinski wasn't that rare of a last name and no one had accused him of lying when he denied any connections.

Whatever Lukav had been trying to say next was promptly drowned out by the unmistakable sounds of explosions coming from the house in front of them, immediately followed by angry shouting in an unknown language and sounds of gunshots.

Zorian quickly drew his spell rod and scowled. He had been afraid of this. Whoever was behind the disappearance of the soul mages had noticed their assassination of Lukav had failed and decided to throw subtlety out of the window and move fast to eliminate their remaining target. They no doubt knew that Lukav and Alanic were friends and that Alanic would soon know all about the assassination attempt.

He cautiously advanced forward, Lukav trailing after him.

There were no undead this time, probably because the target was a well-known undead-hunter and was thus bound to be good against them. Instead, the attackers consisted of 15 men armed with rifles – probably non-magical mercenaries – and 2 mages acting like spell support. They were hesitant to simply storm Alanic's house, for some reason, and instead waited outside for something to happen. Unwilling to charge into a group of riflemen like idiots, both Zorian and Lukav settled in behind some trees to observe the group.

"They're trying to bring down the wards before they move in," Zorian realized after a few seconds. "The mage on the right is trying to collapse the entire warding scheme, the one on the left is protecting him from all reprisals while he's busy and the riflemen are periodically shooting at the windows to keep Alanic from raining down offensive spells on them at will."

A ray of fire punctuated his whispered statement by erupting from one of the second story windows, aiming for the mage who was dismantling the wards. The other mage immediately shielded his companion from the attack, and the riflemen responded with a withering barrage of bullets at the offending opening.

"We have to help him," Lukav said firmly.

"The only option I see is waiting for a good opening," Zorian said. "I don't see a way to get involved right now that wouldn't immediately get us both killed."

"Can you deal with the two mages if I take care of the gun-toting idiots?" Lukav asked.

Zorian gave him a curious look. How did he intend to do that? Was he one of those idiots that still underestimated the effectiveness of guns even after the huge death toll they racked up against combat mages in the Splinter Wars?

"Well?" Lukav asked, a little more harshly.

Deciding to take some risk, Zorian skimmed the man's surface thoughts for a moment. He promptly realized that the man beside him cared deeply about Alanic and couldn't bear to see him killed if he could do something, *anything* about it. He was ready to move in with or without Zorian, but he honestly thought he could prevail against the riflemen. He was far less sure whether he could survive against them if he had to deal with the mage support as well, though.

"I can deal with them, yeah," said Zorian. "Wait for two minutes before you charge in."

He then promptly cast invisibility on himself and walked off in the direction of the two mages.

He wasn't walking for the sake of being dramatic – the invisibility spell he was using was a very delicate optical illusion that required his conscious attention to maintain. Any sort of distracting activity, such as fighting or casting spells, immediately unraveled it. He couldn't even run without turning into a shimmering humanoid outline that was far more attention grabbing than simply walking up to the mages with no cloaking attempts.

But a fast walk turned out to be sufficient. He was practically on top of the two mages when Lukav finally grew sick of waiting and charged into the fray with a battle cry.

At least he thought the creature that came charging in was Lukav. The huge bull covered in dark green, fishlike scales, its eyes glowing with malevolent red light, seemed like something a transformation expert would use and it sure as hell wasn't aligned with the attackers. The beast let loose a loud bellow that was laced with some kind of magical fear effect. Zorian ignored the mental attack easily enough, but three of the riflemen weren't as fearless and immediately fled screaming. The rest were shaken enough by the fear effect that they gave the bull a few crucial moments to close in before they started firing.

As Zorian expected, those scales weren't just for show, and the bullets didn't do much. The two hostile mages beside him seemed to realize their forces weren't going to fare well against this new threat because the defender suddenly started to cast a spell and the ward breaker sped up his work. Deciding that the defender was the bigger threat, Zorian decided to forgo any fancy spellwork and simply pulled out a knife from his belt

and rammed it harshly into the man's neck, dropping his own invisibility in the process.

The other mage didn't react fast enough, too shocked at Zorian's sudden appearance, and received a swift kick in the groin a moment later. He immediately collapsed on the ground with a keening wail. After checking to see if any of the riflemen were gunning for him (they weren't, as they were too busy being trampled by the bull beast that Lukav had transformed into) Zorian reached into the mage's mind and blasted it with a crude telepathic assault. The man went unconscious like Zorian had been hoping he would, out of the fight.

Before Zorian could decide whether he should get involved in the fight against the riflemen (it seemed unnecessary, and he wasn't largely immune to gunfire like Lukav was), a trio of flaming projectiles rained down from the second floor and incinerated three of the riflemen that had been trying to rally the others. The bull-beast let loose another fear-laced bellow at this, and the survivors promptly fled.

Zorian watched them go, ready to erect a shield around himself if one of them decided to let loose a few parting shots. None of them did.

The bull beast let out a derisive snort and kicked the ground a few times before suddenly... folding upon itself, for the lack of a better word, and becoming a man. Specifically, Lukav.

Man, transformation was more useful than he had figured it was. He understood why Lukav had been reluctant to engage the attackers without someone to take out the mages though – without hands, the alchemist could not cast any defensive spells himself, and was very vulnerable to hostile magic.

Any conversation was postponed when a short, bald, muscular man literally dropped out of the sky in front of them. It took Zorian almost a second to realize that this was probably Alanic Zosk and that he had *jumped down from the freaking two story window!*

He looked unaffected by the fall, but still!

"Al, you idiot, I told you not to do that shit!" Lukav yelled. "I almost firebombed you before I realized it was you!"

"You, boy," Alanic said to Zorian, completely ignoring Lukav's anger. "Why did you let those men go? You could have picked them off as they fled."

"I... didn't think it was okay to kill fleeing opponents?" Zorian said, surprised at being put on the spot like that. "I don't know, it just seemed too bloodthirsty to just shoot them in the back while they ran."

A short silence ensued as Alanic gave him a blank look. His mind, though unshielded, was incredibly disciplined and gave Zorian no insight to the man's personality and mood. He idly noted that one of the man's eyes was blue, while the other one was brown. There was a horrid vertical scar over his blue eye, which really looked like it should have destroyed it as well when it was made.

"I see," he said finally. "You're young."

"What has that got to do with anything?" Zorian protested, annoyed at the man's attitude. They just saved the man's life, for god's sake!

"You haven't been fighting for long," he simply said. "You're inexperienced."

"Yeah, well, you're an asshole," thought Zorian. But outwardly he just frowned instead.

Yeah, Zorian could already see Alanic would be one of *those* people. He really had the damnedest luck.

- break -

Alanic Zosk turned out to be pretty calm about the full blown assault on his temple by two dozen gun-wielding mercenaries, refusing Lukav's demand that they go and report the thing to the nearest Guild station right away with a dismissive statement that it was 'too soon to involve them'. He even had the unconscious mage that Zorian had disabled transferred to the dungeon in the temple's basement (why exactly did a temple have a dungeon, Zorian wondered but was afraid to ask), openly admitting he intended to have the man interrogated later.

In the meantime, he wanted to know what Zorian and Lukav came to him for. No, he didn't need time to calm down, why do you ask?

Zorian had to admit he admired the man's composure, even if he was a rude ass.

"Interesting," Alanic said after Zorian repeated the story he told Lukav. "Very well, I will see what has been done to you. Lukav, please leave the room while I examine mister Kazinski here."

Just like that? Apparently yes. Unlike Lukav, Alanic didn't use any fancy ritual rooms, and the examination took all of five minutes before the man had pronounced his verdict.

"You have a marker stamped into your soul," Alanic told him bluntly.

"A what?" Zorian asked.

"A marker is a combination of a beacon and an identification tag. It allows certain spells to find the marker very easily across great distances and unambiguously identifies whatever is tagged by the marker. They are often used by shopkeepers in fancier shops to track stolen wares, by high-

security prisons and spies to track movements of marked individuals and in construction of certain wards that allow people to be 'keyed in' and therefore free of some or all of the restrictions that all other visitors labor under. Among other things. They are usually placed on items, as placing permanent markers on people is iffy and requires tattoos and such. Yours though, is stamped directly into your soul."

Zorian remained quiet, his thoughts churning. A marker. That was why he ended up caught in the time loop along with Zach, wasn't it? The spell wasn't keyed in to the originator's soul or some such, since those things were ambiguous and could fail – the original looper could end up with his soul damaged or slightly altered, much like what happened to him and Zach in the end, and then the spell could glitch and fail to loop them back like it's supposed to. No, the makers of the loop instead stamped Zach's soul with something unchangeable and unmistakable.

And then Red Robe and Zorian inherited it, because the makers of the loop were a little too smart for their own good...

"Removing the marker- " Alanic began, oblivious or uncaring about Zorian's obvious state of deep thought.

"I don't want it removed!" Zorian immediately protested, broken out of his thoughts.

Alanic gave him a considering look.

"I suppose you are fortunate then, because I do not think I could remove it even if I wanted to," Alanic said. "It is unlike anything I have ever seen. The marker is woven incredibly tightly into your soul, suffusing every corner of it. It is as if a chunk of your soul was replaced with it and it then grew to fill every nook and cranny it could find to root itself in as firmly as possible."

Oh hell...

He rose from his seat in agitation, pacing around the room. Alanic watched him impassively, silent and expressionless, until Zorian calmed down a little and sat back down.

"I need more information," he said. "And I need a way to protect myself from things like this in the future. Can you help me?"

Alanic nodded.

"But tomorrow," he added. "For now I have a prisoner to interrogate."

32. Alternatives

Chapter 032 Alternatives

Despite Alanic's proclamation that he was going to interrogate the prisoner, he did not immediately descend into the temple dungeon. Instead he started rummaging through a nearby cabinet full of potion bottles while Zorian slowly absorbed today's newest revelations, opting to remain in the room for the moment. He was not in the mood for answering questions that Lukav would have for him once he got outside, and Alanic seemed like the sort of person who would warn him if he was being bothersome. Since Alanic said nothing about his continued presence, Zorian felt he had tacit permission to stay.

He had a piece of propagating, self-repairing magic lodged in his soul. Part of him marveled at the magical expertise of the person or thing that created the time loop system, but the greater part of him couldn't help but wonder what exactly was crammed into said wonder of magical spell design. Alanic's description, as well as Lukav's inability to identify the spell despite his advanced-looking ritual, painted a picture of something far too complex and lifelike to be a mere identification tag.

This was important, he could feel it – he needed to know how the marker functioned as soon as possible. For one thing, if there was some kind of hostile contingency woven inside it, ready to screw him over once he tripped over some esoteric activation condition, he wanted to know about it. Not to mention that this particular piece of magic could very well be a key clue to understanding the time loop. What kind of secrets were locked inside of it? Kael had speculated that whatever spell had been placed on Zach to initiate the time loop had all sorts of safeguards and contingencies woven into it, and while the marker clearly wasn't the source of the looping magic itself, it sounded like the perfect place to put those safeguards in. Maybe it had the time loop instructions manual encoded somewhere in its structure? Well, probably nothing so convenient, but still.

There was one thing that still bothered him greatly – if he had a marker in his soul that uniquely identified him as a time looper, why the hell hadn't Red Robe tracked him down by now? His enemy was a proficient soul mage, after all. Zorian found it difficult to believe he was ignorant of the marker mechanism. With that in mind, he should have had little trouble locating every single time looper, Zorian included. But he didn't. Why was that?

"Mister Zosk?" Zorian spoke up. "Could you spare a moment, please?"

"Call me Alanic," the priest said, stopping his inspection of the cabinet with an annoyed huff. Zorian got the impression the annoyance was directed more at the cabinet than at Zorian, though. "What is it?"

"I know you said we'd speak tomorrow, but I'd just like to know how difficult it is to locate a marker like mine. How hard would it be for you to track me down with the best magic at your disposal?"

"By tracking your marker? Almost impossible," Alanic immediately stated. "I'd need the original keystone from the maker of the spell to define the search criteria properly. That thing is far too complex for anything else."

Zorian frowned. "Wouldn't having my own copy of the marker sidestep that?" he asked.

"Well yes, but that would require you to be right beside me and serve as a willing focus of the spell. A tracking spell that requires you to be right next to the target is functionally useless, wouldn't you think?" He suddenly gave Zorian a shrewd look. "But what you're really wondering about is not you tracking down the person whose soul fragment gave you the marker, but them tracking you, aren't you, Mister Kazinski?"

"Call me Zorian," he said. If the man wanted Zorian to be casual with him, he should show the same courtesy. "And yes, that is basically what I'm worried about. How easy would it be for another holder of the marker to track me down?"

Alanic quickly walked over to a nearby bookshelf, plucked a plain brown book from its shelf and handed it to Zorian.

"The spell you want is on page 43," Alanic told him.

Zorian quickly leafed through the book until he reached the indicated page. The spell in question was not an invocation, but rather a 10-minute ritual. It allowed the caster to locate a specified marker based on the copy of the marker in the caster's possession, and it had a downright jaw-dropping range. If Zorian was reading this correctly, it could locate any and all copies of the marker over a circular area that extended well beyond Eldemar's borders!

Yeah, it was not cheap in terms of mana use – it required enough mana that Zorian wouldn't have been able to cast it at all before the time loop, and even now, after 3 years of restarts, it would take a sizeable chunk of his reserves. But still, for a nation-wide search spell it was shockingly accessible. He supposed its very narrow search focus allowed it to be hyper-efficient about mana use. Really, the only possible deal breaker was that the spell assumed the caster had a keystone imprinted with the copy of the marker, and would have to be slightly modified to switch the reference target of the spell from a stone held in the caster's hand to a marker stamped on their soul.

Zorian sincerely doubted Red Robe was incapable of making such minor alterations to spells, though.

"I could be tracked from one end of the country to another," Zorian mumbled disbelievingly to himself.

"Yes," Alanic agreed. "Possibly even further. I don't claim to have comprehensive knowledge of tracking spells so there may be a version with

even greater range. Your insistence that the marker must stay on was quite surprising. I hope you have a good reason for leaving a giant target painted on your soul.”

“Ugh. I’m not happy about the situation, but I do. I really, really do. I’d also like to cast this tracking spell myself to see how many other people turn up in results, but we can deal with that tomorrow. I’ve already kept you from your interrogation long enough.”

“Unfortunately, I seem to have run out of truth potions,” the priest said unhappily, throwing a glare at his potion cabinet. “Annoying. You can’t buy those on the open market and it takes days for Lukav to make a batch. It seems I won’t be interrogating anyone today...”

Oh. He agreed with Alanic, that really was annoying – he wanted to know who the guy was working for just as much as the priest did. He thought about offering his services as a mind reader to the priest but quickly shelved that idea. Aside from the very likely possibility he would make Alanic too suspicious of Zorian to help him with his soul magic problems, there was the fact that he wasn’t sure how much help he would be anyway. His mind reading skills were still very unreliable at this point. He’d feel pretty stupid if he outed himself as a mind mage and then failed to achieve anything of note – better try that in some later restart, after he gave his telepathic abilities some polish.

“No matter. I will figure something out. I’m afraid I’ll have to postpone our meeting for a day or two because of this, though. I’ll send a message through Lukav once I have sorted my business in order. Agreeable?”

“Sure,” Zorian shrugged. “Just don’t die before we meet again. Whoever wants you and Lukav dead can clearly throw a lot of resources at the problem so they’re unlikely to stop now.”

“The same goes for you, young man,” Alanic scoffed. “You seem to have an uncanny ability to be in the right place at the right time. Suspicious, that. If I were in the attacker’s place, I would definitely make sure to get rid of you before trying again. And no offense, but you look like a much softer target than me.”

Not having much to say to that, Zorian simply bid the man goodbye, had a brief conversation with Lukav outside the room to inform him of everything and then went back to his room at the inn. He would sleep on things before making any decisions.

- break -

With the next several days freed up for his own activities, Zorian decided to go visit Silverlake and see if the capricious old witch was in a better mood to help this time. The trouble was, he could no longer find her cottage. His memory was extremely good, and he remembered exactly where it was in relation to surrounding natural landmarks, but when he physically got to the location there was nothing there. No cottage, no witch, no nothing. As far as Zorian could tell, it wasn’t an illusion and there was no ward in place messing with his mind to stop him from noticing it – he detected no mental tampering, his area-wide dispels revealed no optical flickering, and he physically passed through the area that the cottage stood on in the previous restart and met no resistance whatsoever.

How the hell did she do that? Dimensional shenanigans, maybe? Like a pocket dimension that can intersect with reality under some circumstance or something?

Whatever the exact mechanics, he clearly wasn’t going to reach Silverlake’s place without her inviting him first. Considering that last time it took him several days of wandering around and almost dying to get her attention, he decided to not bother with that and find something else to do.

Namely, investigating the rest of the disappeared soul mages. While it was true that Alanic seemed to be his best clue at the moment, it wouldn’t hurt to check the other locations as well. Thus, while waiting for Alanic to contact him again, Zorian proceeded to break into the homes of each of his targets before combing through them with every divination spell in his arsenal. The knowledge he picked up from Gurey’s little escapade was quite useful here, as a number of those homes were warded against entry and divinations, and that would have given him quite a bit of trouble in the past.

What he found out wasn’t much, but it did put at least one question to rest – the attackers had indeed been active long before the time loop started. Two of the houses showed signs of a struggle, and forensic spells dated those signs about a month to a month and a half before the start of the time loop. In addition, the house of the old curse-breaking herbalist lady looked pristine on first glance, but Zorian easily detected evidence of repair magic used on furniture and sloppily erased blood splatter on the walls – both dated 3 days before the start of the loop.

Zorian silently thanked Haslugh for his divination instructions – without them, he would have never been able to tell such things with any degree of certainty.

He also made sure to search the houses for anything personally interesting while he was at it, and here he had greater success. The herbalist lady had intact notes about her curse-breaking side-business – Zorian pocketed those, even if he wasn’t able to make use of them at the moment. She also had a pretty extensive journal that listed where to find rare plants in the nearby forest as well as detailed some of her rare recipes. Zorian left that alone for now, but made a mental note to show it to Kael at some point and see if it was worth something. The ransacked tower turned out to have been imperfectly ransacked, and Zorian managed to find two different secret compartments that the attackers missed. One held a trio of high-quality combat staffs and a stack of blasting rods. The other held a bunch of spellbooks containing combat spells – specifically, the sort of combat spells you couldn’t buy legally anywhere because they were far too effective and lethal for the Mage Guild’s tastes. Naturally, Zorian swiped all of it for his personal use. He found more interesting stuff in other houses, but nothing he felt like taking at the moment. The familiar-obsessed guy, for instance, had mountains and mountains of books and journals dedicated to soul bonds, magical creatures, and familiar-related magics. It was interesting, but not something he needed at the moment.

In the end it was five days before Alanic finally contacted Zorian again. If Lukav didn't insist that his friend was alive and well, just unusually occupied with something, Zorian would have feared the attackers got him.

Regardless, Zorian soon found himself seated in front of Alanic, ready to finally discuss things.

"I apologize for the wait," Alanic said. "I'm afraid that the confessions I managed to force out of the prisoner had far more far-reaching consequences than I had initially suspected."

"Oh? I don't suppose you could tell me what those are?" asked Zorian.

"I'm afraid not. It's not something you should concern yourself with," Alanic said, leveling him a mild glare.

"Fine, fine, I get it," Zorian said, raising his hands in a placating gesture. Truthfully, it did not matter much because he already knew what Alanic had found out. While the priest seemed to have some sort of natural mental defense, his friend Lukav didn't. Zorian had simply pestered the transformation expert about the prisoner and read the man's thoughts wherever he refused to answer.

Basically, the mage Zorian incapacitated was hired by none other than Vazen – the man who Gurey wanted him to rob (well, spy on) in the previous restart. Worse, the man appeared to be just an underling himself, with the real ringleader being someone more highly placed in the local hierarchy. Someone capable of interfering with the police and guild investigations.

It was certainly an interesting piece of information, and Zorian had some suspicions of his own about Vazen now. The man had concluded some kind of deal with a company in Cyoria, so it was entirely possible he was connected to the invaders somehow. He had intended to have another go at those documents anyway, but now they acquired a whole new importance.

"Good," Alanic nodded. "What did you want to start with?"

"Well, first of all I'd like to know if you could help me defend myself against soul magic in the future," said Zorian.

"Why wouldn't I be able to help you with that?" asked Alanic curiously, cocking his head to the side slightly.

"I was told that spellcasters without some measure of soul perception can only cast the most rudimentary of soul magic," said Zorian. And from his attempts to duplicate Kael's spells, he knew that to be largely true – the only spell he managed to learn from Kael was the one that cloaked him from the soul perception of other necromancers, and Kael claimed that was baby stuff.

"Ah. You've been talking to a necromancer, I see," Alanic said.

Zorian winced. "It... seemed like a logical course of action. I had a soul magic problem, and he was a soul mage."

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"Hmph. *Necromancers*," began Alanic, taking pains to stress the word, "have a habit of targeting others with their spells, so of course they consider soul perception to be absolutely essential for their craft. If you just want to cloak your soul in some protective effect, it is hardly necessary to go to such lengths."

Oh, is that why he could cast Kael's soul sight invisibility spell but not the rest of his arsenal?

"Even for other things, it is possible to use lengthy rituals to get around that requirement. I believe you've already experienced an example of such a ritual when Lukav tried to determine what is wrong with you. Don't be fooled by his lack of skill – Lukav is but a dabbler in this branch of magic, and if you dedicate yourself to the discipline you could end up much more impressive than he is."

"But I'm never going to progress beyond unwieldy ritual setups without soul sight, am I?" guessed Zorian.

Alanic sighed. "Yes. But soul sight is too much of a temptation. It makes soul magic *too easy*. For the sake of your immortal soul, I implore you to turn away from that path. It is not necessary to go that far just to protect yourself."

"I see," said Zorian. "Out of curiosity, do *you* have soul perception?"

For the first time since Zorian met him, Alanic looked uncomfortable. "Yes. But that's... different."

'Of course it is,' Zorian thought. 'Do as I say, not as I do, just like it always was.'

But he didn't say that. Instead he asked Alanic what exactly he was willing to teach him.

"There are two ways I can see this going," said Alanic, quickly regaining his composure. "Option one is that I teach you how to perform a plethora of protective rituals to foil hostile soul magic. They are, as you say, *cumbersome* – casting times can be up to 2 hours long in some cases, and setting up a ritual isn't easy. They last a long time, though. Weeks if you perform them correctly. The advantage of this path is that you get a way to defend yourself right away – I'm fairly certain you could do the beginning rituals as you are now. Also, some of the rituals will allow you to affect souls other than yours, though none of the rituals I'm willing to teach you can be used on an unwilling target."

“And the disadvantage is that if I’m ever caught unaware by the enemy, I’m screwed because there’s no way to shield myself on a moment’s notice,” finished Zorian.

“Exactly. That’s where option number two comes in. With the help of some meditation exercises and special potions, I can teach you how to ‘feel’ your own soul. If you hone the skill to a required level, this skill will allow you to cast any soul magic that has you as its target. You’ll be able to shield and analyze your soul with invocation spells, and it might even allow you to passively notice when someone is messing with your soul in some fashion.”

“I like that option,” Zorian said.

“I figured you might,” Alanic scoffed. “The problem is that this option isn’t some quick power up. It will take you months to reach useable levels in this skill, and that’s assuming you have the patience and willpower required to perform the exercises every single day for months on end.”

“I do,” said Zorian curtly.

“We’ll see. I should also mention that until you master the skill of sensing your own soul, this option will leave you just as helpless to soul magic as you are currently.”

“Yeah, that’s a little dangerous,” Zorian admitted. Still, the second option sounded way more useful and functional than the first one. Maybe if he wasn’t stuck in the time loop he would blanch at the idea of spending months of his life like that, but right now it was looking like a bargain. “I suppose there is a reason why I can’t learn both at the same time?”

“They’re both demanding skills in their own way, and I don’t trust you to be capable of juggling them both effectively,” Alanic said, his tone brooking no disagreement.

“Fair enough,” Zorian said. He was going to visit the man in future restarts anyway, so he could potentially just pick different options on different restarts. “How about this: you teach me the very basics of the soul rituals, the things I can pick up well enough as I am now, and then we immediately switch to the personal soul awareness project.”

“I suppose I can live with that. You should note that the basics of soul rituals won’t do much for you,” Alanic noted.

“That’s fine. I’m mostly interested in option number two anyway. The reason I want the basics of soul rituals is because I still want to cast that marker tracking ritual you showed me, and modifying it to work with the thing attached to my soul is probably going to require some working knowledge of soul magic.”

“Probably,” Alanic agreed.

“Well. Now we come to the ‘make it or break it’ question,” Zorian sighed, fixing a weary gaze at Alanic. “What exactly are you asking of me in exchange for all this?”

Alanic rolled his eyes. “Don’t be so dramatic, boy. Teaching people how to defend themselves against necromancers and hostile spirits is a part of my calling, as far as I’m concerned. I’d take a whole class to teach if people were actually interested. Unfortunately, such threats are considered something of a minor issue in the aftermath of the Necromancer’s War. So while yes, I do intend to send you on an errand or two, it isn’t going to be anything too onerous. Lukav tells me you can teleport?”

“I can, yes.”

“Excellent. I was thinking of sending you out as a courier from time to time to some of my more distant contacts. Nothing difficult or dangerous – just delivering some letters and packages for free.”

Half an hour later, Zorian had managed to hammer out some kind of agreement with Alanic.

Overall, Zorian felt the priest had been quite generous in his terms – his principal demand was that Zorian had to show dedication, or else Alanic would unceremoniously terminate the lessons and kick him out. Specifically, he had to show up at the temple every evening like clockwork, and show ‘diligence and enthusiasm’ for the lessons. Right. Oh, and there was the whole business with him being a courier from the priest on occasion, which was of little concern to Zorian – he thought of it as teleportation practice more than anything.

“Well then,” Alanic said, leaning back in his chair. “Now that this is all done, we can begin with our first lesson.”

“What, now?” Zorian asked in surprise.

“Is there a reason to postpone things?”

“No, no, I’m just surprised. Most of my previous teachers have been... well, no matter. What are we starting with?”

- break -

Over the next two weeks Zorian continued studying the other disappearances while attending Alanic’s lessons. He absorbed the basics of soul protection rituals in a few days and then moved onto the meditation exercises needed for personal soul sight, only to find out two things. First, the meditation exercises were incredibly, mind-numbingly *boring*. No wonder the man was worried about Zorian’s dedication, he could easily imagine

someone dropping that after only a few days. But no, Zorian was stronger than that... and besides, he really needed that skill.

Secondly, those 'special potions' Alanic mentioned? What the priest hadn't clarified at the time – and indeed, hadn't explained before Zorian actually drank one – was that they were extremely powerful hallucinogens. Almost immediately after downing one, Zorian was assaulted with a cacophony of strange, incomprehensible sights and smells, sounds become distorted and unrecognizable, and his thoughts degenerated into a chaotic mess. It was a profoundly unpleasant experience, and once Zorian finally came to his senses and stopped drooling all over the floor of the temple (the jerk could have at least put a pillow under him!) he felt a powerful desire to punch Alanic in the face. The man had effectively drugged him helpless and was completely unrepentant about it too, claiming that without the help of those potions the entire process could take years. He would have to drink one of those once a week, apparently.

Which was all well and good, but it still didn't explain why the man hadn't warned him what would happen when he drank that potion. Personally, Zorian suspected schadenfreude.

Aside from the whole 'potion incident' thing, there was one tiny little detail he had failed to consider when he decided to accept Alanic as his newest personal tutor.

Alanic was a priest. Priests were, generally speaking, very religious people. It stood to reason, then, that they'd be very bothered by people who don't care much about their own religion or have some gaping holes in their understanding of religious dogma. And with Zorian spending every evening in the temple, it really was too much to expect that Alanic wouldn't notice just how... lacking... Zorian's religious credentials were.

The good news was that Alanic wasn't going to get rid of him because of this. The bad news was that he took it upon himself to correct this glaring deficiency. Thus, not only did Zorian have to suffer through boring meditation sessions every evening, they were now interspersed with longwinded lectures about the gods, angels, spirits, and man's place in the natural order.

Heaven help him. Or not, he supposed. He doubted the angels would have a lot of compassion for someone in his position.

"...and thus, with the evidence that the gods have fallen silent no longer possible to ignore, and the unescapable fact that no more miracles would be forthcoming, the Holy Triumvirate decided to loosen the limitations on soul magic – a decision that did much to soften the blow of the Silence, but one that would have far-reaching negative consequences. But I can see that you are starting to lose focus so we will continue this tomorrow."

Thank the gods. Zorian quickly vacated the temple before the man could have a chance to change his mind.

He was barely out of the temple gates when he realized he was walking into an ambush.

It was a crow that tipped him off. It looked normal enough, though it was curiously brave in not fleeing at his approach. He had, however, gotten into a habit of automatically scanning the minds of every animal he saw as telepathic practice, and the crow in question didn't have any. That immediately raised an alarm in his head and he stopped, expanding his mind sense to maximum range.

In the next second he threw himself to the side, narrowly avoiding a hail of bullets that ripped through his previous location. Almost reflexively, he fired two force missiles in quick succession: one at the undead crow that had taken flight while he dodged – he didn't need that thing pecking his eyes out while he was busy elsewhere – and another one straight into the air, seemingly at nothing. That one was what Taiven called a 'screamer' – a missile that produced a loud, shrill scream as it flew through the air. Zorian hoped that the noise would give pause to the ambushers, at least for a moment, but the real purpose of it was to attract Alanic's attention and tell him there was a fight going on outside of his temple.

You know, just in case the gunshots weren't clear enough on that.

The first bolt collided with the crow, causing it to erupt into a shower of feathers and fleshy bits (but no blood), but the second one didn't have much effect on the attackers. Zorian was forced to immediately erect a shield in front of himself to tank a powerful beam of shining force, and was then pinned in place by a withering hail of bullets. He had to pour half of his mana reserves into strengthening the shield, but it thankfully held.

Also thankfully, the attackers had a piss poor sense of tactics – apparently the entire force wasted their ammo on the initial barrage, and thus couldn't provide any further fire to keep him pinned in place while they reloaded. Zorian promptly took advantage of this to take cover behind a nearby tree, become invisible and then vacate the area as fast as he could without breaking the optical cloak.

It was a good thing he did, because the tree he had been hiding behind soon became a target of a massive fireball that reduced it to charcoal and did horrible things to everything around it.

These people really didn't pull any punches, did they?

Tracking his attackers' movements with his mind sense, Zorian could tell they weren't fooled with his maneuver. They knew he wasn't dead, and they were coming after him. Whelp, time to exercise the better part of valor and teleport away to safety!

A few seconds later, he sighed in resignation. Of course they erected a teleport ward around the area. Well, if that's how they wanted to play then so be it! Closing his eyes, he located the nearest gunman with his mind sense, connected with his mind and then hit him with the best telepathic attack he could manage.

He felt the target stop immediately, but apparently he'd failed to knock the man out. No matter. He disconnected from the man's mind and moved on the next one and repeated the procedure. He grinned nastily when he felt the man's mind shut down from the strain, the gunman falling unconscious.

Then he moved onto the rest of the ambushing force, attacking their minds one by one. Two thirds of them were strong enough to weather the attack, though they would likely be dazed for a while and suffer a nasty headache for the rest of the day, but a full third found Zorian's telepathic attack too much for them. Sadly, the mage that supported them figured out what was happening and shielded his own mind against the tactic. Still, even if he didn't get them all, he succeeded in taking away their momentum and slowing them down.

It cost him, though. His telepathic powers, exotic as they may be, were still magic... and like all magic, they used mana to power themselves. His empathy and mind sense didn't seem to cost him anything that he could detect, and establishing a telepathic link with another was trivial in terms of mana expenditure – even for him, it was so minute as to be unnoticeable. But these telepathic attacks he had been doing? They were incredibly cheap, especially considering their effectiveness, but he had performed a lot of them in quick succession. He was almost spent.

He sure hoped Alanic got off his ass sometime soon, preferably before the mage could rally his forces and come after him again.

Suddenly, just as Zorian was about to start booby-trapping the place like crazy, another group of people teleported in and his heart sank. Well that just wasn't f- wait, they were fighting the first group. Huh. It seemed Alanic had called for the cavalry.

The sound of gunshots and flashes of spellfire filled the air again, but this time Zorian wasn't the target. Zorian wisely decided to sit this one out, being mostly out of mana and not wanting for one of the newcomers to confuse him for an enemy and put a bullet in his head before he had a chance to explain.

Ten minutes later, the noise quieted down and Zorian made his way back to the temple. There he found Alanic talking with a mixed group composed of a four-man group of Guild battlemages and a small contingent of Eldemar soldiers. He was questioned on his role in the battle, but the fact that Alanic vouched for him kept the man in charge of the group from dragging him back to the Guild station for questioning. Apparently Alanic had quite a lot of pull with the Mage Guild.

He was worried the attackers would blab about Zorian's telepathic abilities, but apparently they were under the impression Zorian cast some kind of area-wide knockout spell rather than assaulting their minds directly. The leader of the Guild force even commended him on his restraint when faced with deadly force. Alanic gave him a severe look though. Zorian wasn't sure if he did that because he figured out there was something fishy about the whole story or because he disapproved of Zorian's 'soft' approach. He knew from previous conversations with the man that Alanic firmly believed in tough justice and striking back at threats as effectively as possible, so he might just be annoyed that Zorian had not used something more lethal.

Eventually he was given permission to leave (though warned not to leave his current accommodations in Knyazov Dveri for the foreseeable future) and beat a hasty retreat back to his room.

- break -

When Zorian reached his room, he felt totally drained and wanted to do nothing more than to crawl into his bed and sleep until tomorrow. That had been... intense. He thought he'd have gotten used to having his life targeted and being in life-and-death situations, but he apparently wasn't anywhere near that mindset yet. The questioning that followed wasn't really pleasant either, and he suspected he had overextended his mind a bit with his last stunt because his thoughts felt slightly more sluggish and fuzzy than they should, even taking his tiredness into account.

But no, he couldn't go to sleep yet. Today was significant in that he had finally finished modifying the marker tracking spell with Alanic's help, and he wanted to test it right away. His mana reserves had recovered by now, so he was good for a try. He quickly fished out one of the wakefulness potions he had made over the last week and downed it in one go. His head cleared out almost immediately, and so he promptly started creating the ritual circle with the handful of salt and powdered quartz.

After the circle was made and triple-checked for faults, he slowly went through the ritual, mindful not to mess it up since it would take a large chunk of his mana reserves whether it succeeded or failed.

The moment he spoke the last line of the ritual, Zorian was suddenly given a sense of the location and distance of all markers within the range of the spell.

All two of them. One was in the very center of the search area – that was him, obviously – and the other was far to the south, somewhere along Eldemar's southern border.

Zorian freely admitted he had not expected that. He had expected the ritual to locate either three markers or just one (himself). How can there be just two? Was one of the other time travelers out of range? Did he misunderstand something?

He would have to repeat the ritual at different intervals to see if another marker popped up at some point. On the very beginning of the next restart, certainly. But if the number of markers remained stubbornly at two, then that would mean that at least one of the time travelers didn't *have* the marker. Probably Red Robe, because Zorian was sure that Zach had one. It would explain why Red Robe didn't just make a beeline for Zorian when he realized he existed, and why he felt the need to ask Zorian how many other time travelers there were and who they were.

But that would mean that Red Robe became a time looper through some other mechanism than Zorian did, wouldn't it?

"Nothing can ever be simple about this, can it?" he sighed, rubbing his eyes.

No matter. His immediate goals remained unchanged by this new complication – learn how to protect his soul, become a better fighter, and polish his mind magic into something usable and reliable. His mind drifted to the battle he was caught in today and he nodded to himself. His performance

wasn't flawless, but he got out of it alive and the growth of his skills was undeniable.

Despite all the issues he encountered, he seemed well on his way to achieving his goals.

33. Gateways

Chapter 033 Gateways

Standing still in the empty living room inside Vazen's house, Zorian stared unhappily at the splatter of green gunk in front of him that was currently eating through the floor with an audible sizzle. One could hardly tell that, not too long ago, the acid slime in front of him used to be a stack of important documents stored in Vazen's safe. The merchant *really* didn't want anyone to take a look at these, it seemed.

The operation started well. Everything started well. Not seeing the point of reinventing the wheel, Zorian used his past method of entering Vazen's home, then began dismantling the protections on the safe. Aside from the already familiar explosion trap, he also found a sleep trap which aimed to knock any prospective thieves unconscious the moment they touched the safe. He disabled both traps and, having found no further spellwork protecting the safe, immediately tried to remove the documents.

He promptly triggered a mechanical mechanism that dumped some kind of powerful acidic mixture on top of the safe's contents. The good news was that he managed to avoid getting any of the gunk on his hands – considering what the stuff was doing to the floor at the moment, it would have probably eaten right through his bones before he managed to get it off of him. The bad news was that he failed to salvage any of the safe's contents before the gunk ruined it. He managed to levitate the contents out of the safe, yes, but the gunk was almost like glue in the way it clung to the papers. He was unable to separate it from the surviving documents before it ate through them all and then happily continued to dissolve the floor beneath them.

He shuddered. He was really, really glad he managed to yank his hands away in time to avoid getting any of that stuff on them.

Once again, Zorian was forced to leave Vazen's place empty-handed. He was sorely tempted to rig the entire place to explode in Vazen's face the moment he came back home as revenge, but that would be petty and stupid. A murder of such an influential man would attract a lot of attention, plus Alanic was probably paying very close attention to the man. And he had tried to rob the man after all, so he had no right to be particularly outraged anyway.

Still... Zorian was now absolutely certain that Vazen was involved in some very shady things, and he wasn't talking about tax fraud or industrial espionage. There was no way that Vazen would rig his safe to destroy things like business contracts and production blueprints in the event of discovery – the sheer amount of money he'd lost doing that must have been exorbitant. There had to be something more in there among those papers. Something incredibly illegal and incriminating, to the point where Vazen would rather lose everything than be discovered possessing it.

He was definitely coming back in the next restart. Maybe the man's misdeeds were unconnected to the Ibasan invaders gunning after Cyoria or the group targeting soul mages around Knyazov Dveri, but somehow Zorian doubted it. It cost him nothing to check, in any case.

Well, unless Vazen had even more horrifying surprises waiting for him should he overcome the second layer of his defenses. Next time he was bringing a 10-foot pole with him, because there was no way he was putting his hands into that safe anymore.

- break -

The day after he had survived the failed ambush just outside Alanic's temple, Zorian arrived at his next meditation session feeling more than a little bit apprehensive. And not just about the possibility of another ambush – he did not like the looks Alanic had been giving him when he was giving his statement and Zorian was worried about what that meant for him. However, the lesson that day had been wholly unremarkable – there had been no second ambush, and Alanic gave no indication he was upset or suspicious of him. Thus, he put it out of his mind and decided to follow Alanic's example by carrying on as if nothing happened.

Now, three days later, Zorian could safely say that had been a mistake. Being dragged into the temple courtyard for a 'test of his combat skills' sounded suspiciously like punishment to his ears.

As an aside, why did a temple have a battle arena in its courtyard instead of a nice, peaceful garden or something? Between that and the dungeons in the basement he was starting to get really dubious about this building's spiritual credentials.

"Err, not that I don't appreciate your help in shoring up my modest combat capabilities, but we really should be focusing on getting my inner soul sight functioning," said Zorian, shuffling uncomfortably in place. "You told me yourself that this skill requires total focus from me to master correctly."

Alanic simply continued staring at him, silent and impassive, from his corner of the arena.

And then he gestured with his staff at Zorian and threw a fireball at him.

Zorian was not surprised at the attack. He had been expecting something like that, to be honest. What did throw him for a loop was that he chose that particular spell to open combat with. Fireball wasn't something you threw at a junior mage to test them – it was far too lethal for that! Even a stunted one was capable of killing a human on a direct hit, and a regular shield spell could not protect against it. No matter how powerful, it was still just a disc of force in front of the caster – the expanding sphere of fiery energy would just flow around it and envelop the caster behind it.

The shock lasted for but a moment, however, and then he immediately erected a dome of force around himself – not just a shield, but a full-blown

aegis that protected him from all sides at once. The fireball hit the dome not long after, and Zorian's view was momentarily blanked out by a blanket of fire.

When the fire cleared, he found himself standing in front of Alanic again, the priest as silent and unmoving as he had ever been. His apprehension at the situation dropped slightly. The fireball had been a very weak one. He knew because one of the retired mages he'd helped in his aimless wanderings prior to his arrival in Knyazov Dveri had taught him how to get feedback from his defensive spells, and his aegis had held strong against a spell that should have taxed it to its limit. Zorian was sure the man in front of him could have done much better than that if he had wanted to. The fact he hadn't immediately followed up on his fireball with something to finish him off enforced the idea that this really was some kind of test.

A very messed up, dangerous test, but he was kind of used to such things at this point.

He sent a single magic missile towards Alanic. He could see the man scoff as he lazily raised his arm to block the puny attack, and suppressed a smile. Though it looked like a magic missile spell, the projectile was anything but – it didn't so much smash into things as erupt into a spherical wave of force, much like a fireball that used force instead of fire. A forceball, if you will. Alanic will almost certainly use a regular shield instead of a full aegis against a puny magic missile, and then the forceball will–

The space in front of Alanic suddenly warped and shimmered, and Zorian's forceball promptly winked out of existence. A dispelling wave of some sort, if he guessed correctly. Dammit. Then Alanic decided it was his turn again, and Zorian was too busy dodging bolts of fire and incineration rays to focus on internal cursing.

Zorian quickly learned that Alanic loved fire spells. Even after Zorian switched from all-purpose shields to variants specifically designed to tank fire magic at the expense of performance against other damage types, he persisted in using them. After his initial barrage of weak, fast-casting, numerous fire projectiles failed to overwhelm Zorian, he switched to trying to steamroll him with gigantic, slow-moving spheres of fire that didn't explode and instead simply tried to envelop him in their flames. After Zorian managed to dispel them, he responded with more fireballs – and this time he wasn't holding back.

Zorian tried to counter-attack whenever he spotted an opening, but all of his attacks were neutralized with contemptuous ease. Trying to kick up dust and other visibility obstacles failed because Alanic could somehow cause a gust of wind to disperse such attacks away from him without making a single gesture or visibly exerting himself. Items were useless because he could telekinetically hurl all projectiles away from him with a simple sweeping gesture, and any magical projectiles were blocked, intercepted or dispelled. Even after Zorian started launching projectiles in complicated parabolic, zigzagging or spiral trajectories, the priest seemed to have no problems tracking them and responding.

Finally, Zorian was nearly out of mana and decided to go out with a bang. He put most of his remaining mana into a ray of force that he promptly fired at Alanic's face. The attack would have killed the priest had it really connected, though Zorian knew it would never connect. Sure enough, the man simply side-stepped it and Zorian collapsed on the ground in exhaustion, his arms raised in surrender.

"I give up," he panted. "Whatever point you wanted to make to me, you've done it. Though if this was all for the sake of showing me I'm not the biggest fish in the pond, you needn't have bothered – I'm well aware how screwed I'd be in a face-off against a veteran battle mage."

"The point was seeing how long it would take before you started resorting to lethal moves," Alanic said, walking up to him and offering him a hand. Zorian internally debated the merits of casting the 'shocking grasp' spell and electrocuting the jerk, but in the end decided to be a bigger man and simply accepted his help in getting up. It probably wouldn't have worked, anyway. "I'm rather disappointed it took until you were on your last legs to go for the killing blow."

"Oh screw you, Alanic!" snapped Zorian. "What kind of nutjob tries to kill their opponent in a freaking spar!?"

"You?" Alanic tried, a smirk dancing on his lips. "You did try to kill me at the end, didn't you?"

"That's... I knew it had no chance of actually succeeding"

"Yes, and I'm certain you realized that a minute or two into the test. You should have stopped holding back at that point, or at least followed my lead in what is an acceptable level of force."

"Actually, let's refocus on that issue instead," Zorian said. "What if *you* had ended up killing *me*? Some of those spells you tried to hit me with would have put me into a hospital for months if I hadn't tanked them. Possibly kill me outright! The skills I used to survive your 'test' aren't something you had any right to expect of me!"

"I can control what my fires burn," Alanic said matter-of-factly. Zorian was honestly stumped at that. That kind of thing was possible? "I also have a divine artifact that can heal any burns so long as the victim is still alive. Regardless of how things looked to you, you were in very little danger. Still, you clearly thought I was being excessively aggressive and you *still* held back against me. That kind of hesitation will get you killed some day. As it almost did a few days ago."

"I knew this was about those riflemen I disabled," Zorian mumbled.

"Yes. Disabled. They tried to kill you, with an ambush, no less, and you went out of the way to simply knock them out. There is being merciful and there is being stupid."

"Are you sure you're a priest?" grumbled Zorian.

“A warrior-priest,” Alanic clarified. “Not every religious order is about peace and forgiveness. And even those that are usually make exceptions for self-defense, in practice if not in theory.”

“Fine, fair enough,” Zorian conceded. “But why do you care? Why is this so upsetting to you?”

“That’s a stupid question. I don’t want you to die, that’s why.”

“Um,” Zorian paused, momentarily stumped for a response. What the hell was that supposed to mean? He really wished Alanic wasn’t so utterly unreadable to his empathy. “Look, I’ll be honest with you – I wasn’t really being merciful. You’re misreading the whole thing, I simply attacked them in the best manner I had available.”

“Please,” Alanic scoffed. “I know very well how difficult it would be to take down a group that large non-lethally. Do you really expect me to believe that was the method of attack least dangerous for yourself that you had available?”

“Well, yes,” Zorian said. “I guess it would help to know that I’m a natural mind mage. I sense all minds around me, regardless of physical obstacles or line of sight, and I can launch a crude mental assault on them if I so wish. Using that, I could knock them out outside of their shooting range, before they could pin-point my position. Actually killing them would have entailed entering their attack range so I could cast something more deadly at them. Which I felt was rather suicidal at the time.”

Alanic gave him a curious look. “An interesting ability. I note that not all of the attackers had been disabled by the time the Guild taskforce had arrived. Did you simply not have time to go through them all or...?”

“It’s a weak attack,” said Zorian. “It’s not hard to resist.”

Alanic nodded. Zorian hoped the priest would not question him on the exact mechanics of his ability, as he was not sure he could deceive the man convincingly. Thankfully, it did not seem he would push the issue at the moment.

“What would you have done if no reinforcements had arrived?” Alanic asked.

“Tried to lure them into a mine field,” Zorian shrugged. “So yeah. I was fully prepared to blow them up into tiny pieces if they continued to go after me. There’s a lot you can accuse me of, but being suicidally merciful isn’t one of them. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Alanic grumbled. “But it does seem I have misjudged you somewhat. Walk with me.”

Alanic walked back into the temple proper and Zorian followed him. He soon found himself sitting in a small kitchen that he had never seen before, though that wasn’t saying much. He had never really explored the site, fearful of drawing Alanic’s ire if he stepped foot in some private sanctum that non-clergy were supposed to never witness. Most temples had at least a couple of those as far as Zorian knew.

“Misunderstandings aside, the test was quite real,” said Alanic once they were seated. “I really did want to see what you were capable of combat-wise.”

“And?” asked Zorian curiously.

“You are better than I thought you’d be,” said Alanic. Zorian preened at the praise. Alanic didn’t seem like the sort to hand it out lightly. “But it’s clear to me you’re no legend in the making. I estimate that your natural mana reserves are average at best, perhaps even below-average, and your spells have the feel of a mage who has practiced a lot rather than those of a talented beginner.”

Zorian scowled, his earlier pride forgotten.

“A mage as young as you should not have experience in fighting that extensive,” continued Alanic. Uh oh. “I had suspected it for a while now and now I am certain – you are not some recent graduate going for a round of wandering before settling down. Or a traveling mage who stumbled onto something way over his head. You are someone who actively looks for trouble. Had been looking for trouble for a while now...”

Zorian said nothing. He *was* about to claim that it was trouble that looked for him, not the other way around... but when he really thought about it, that wasn’t really true at the moment. He really *was* looking for trouble right now. It was one of his core goals in Knyazov Dveri. He had a good reason for it, but still.

“I’m not going to ask you to tell me who you are. People who start fighting as young as you must have started to get as good as you are aren’t usually the trusting sort. You’d never tell me, and truthfully I have no reason to push you in that regard. No, what I want to know is what your immediate goal is here. I don’t believe that you really stumbled upon Lukav’s encounter with the boars accidentally, or that the soul marker stamped on your soul is really unconnected to the enemies after our heads. Considering how helpful both me and Lukav have been to you in this past several weeks, I believe we both deserve a little more honesty from you. What is really going on here, Zorian?”

“Regardless of what you may think, my reasons for coming here were exactly as I told them to you,” Zorian said. “I really did get caught in the aftermath of a soul magic spell. I really did come to Lukav, and by extension you, because I wanted to understand what had happened to me. None of those were fabrications. But...”

“Yes?” Alanic prompted.

"I had done some research on the people behind my attack – the original attack that resulted in the marker on my soul, I mean – and uncovered some pretty heavy stuff. They are connected to Cyoria's leadership somehow, and have links to the local branch of the Cult of Dragon. As far as I can see, they are Ibasan in origin. One of the reasons I had for coming here, aside from seeking out your help, was that I wanted to get out of their territory."

"And you think our attackers belong to that group?" surmised Alanic.

"Considering how large and organized the Ibasan group was, I wouldn't be surprised if they had some kind of organization branch here. And the fact both groups make use of undead and soul magic *is* kind of indicative to my eyes. But I don't actually have any proof, and I'm far from certain."

Zorian wasn't comfortable about sharing everything with Alanic. For instance, telling him about the invasion or the primordial 'summoning' plot was out of the question, as Alanic would no doubt insist on notifying the Cyoria authorities about those and that could alert Red Robe about Zorian's whereabouts. He did, however, tell him about a lot of other things... like the other disappearances in the area. His own investigation into them had pretty much stalled for the moment, so he had little to lose by telling him about them at this point.

The tale has been taken without authorization; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

After several exhausting hours of back and forth, Alanic all but threw him out of the temple, claiming he had to think about things. Zorian was glad for that, as he was thoroughly sick of the entire conversation by that point... even if there was a good chance Alanic would want to have nothing to do with him by tomorrow.

Oh well, even if the man refused to see him after this, there was always the next restart. There wasn't that much time left in this restart anyway.

- break -

Zorian was in the process of affixing a left arm to the wooden golem he was building when a human mind suddenly appeared in his room. He would like to say that he reacted immediately and decisively, but the truth was that he was momentarily paralyzed by surprise and fear, spent several moments fumbling for a response, and then realized that his mysterious 'attacker' was actually Alanic.

He glared at the priest that had just teleported into his room without warning, trying to set him on fire with his eyes. Sadly, that ability wasn't one of the things in his repertoire, and Alanic was completely unfazed at his glare.

Note to self: find a spell that lets you set whatever you're looking at on fire.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Alanic?" Zorian snapped. "I could have shot you if I hadn't realized who you were in time."

Alanic glanced at the half-disassembled rifle on Zorian's bed and raised an eyebrow at him.

"Well not with that, obviously," Zorian groused.

"You didn't turn up for your evening lesson," Alanic said with disapproval. "I felt it prudent to check up on you."

"I kind of thought I should give you some time," Zorian said defensively. "You seemed pretty annoyed yesterday."

"I was disturbed, not angry," Alanic said. "I needed some time to think. If I wanted you to skip on your lesson I would have said so." He looked at the half-finished golem and raised his eyebrow at Zorian. "A curious choice of materials for a golem."

"It's a prototype," Zorian said. "I don't expect much from my first golem, so I wanted to make it out of something cheap and easy to work with."

Alanic shook his head. "It doesn't matter, really. I suppose I can give you a day off from lessons for one day. Tell me, though – is there anything else you forgot to mention to me yesterday?"

"Not really, no," said Zorian. Nothing except things he had purposely kept to himself, anyway. "Although I'd like to ask you a question, if I may. As a soul magic expert, do you think it's possible to kill a soul?"

"No," Alanic said immediately. "What kind of question is that? Do I need to read you passages from the Book of Zikel again?"

"No!" Zorian protested. "No, that will not be necessary. Yes, I know that's what the books say, but... the necromancer I told you about, the one who killed my informants?"

Alanic nodded, indicating he knew what Zorian was talking about. In truth he didn't know the half of it. For one thing, Zorian had never explained to the priest that those informants had been giant talking spiders. Still, Zorian had told enough of the story for Alanic to follow along.

"He claimed to have done more than just kill them. He said he killed their very souls to ensure they were never coming back."

"An empty boast. He was just trying to demoralize you," Alanic scoffed. "Souls are unkillable. Corruptible certainly, but you can't destroy them."

"Even if he had effectively unlimited time to figure something out?" Zorian pressed. "He did mention he spent decades within a time dilation field

while he was ranting at me.”

“Necromancers have been trying to destroy a soul for a millennium without much luck,” Alanic said. “Finding a way to crack open the indestructible core of the soul to see what makes them tick and if it can be manipulated and duplicated has been the goal of many a necromancer over the ages. And many of those necromancers spent *centuries* pursuing their grisly work with little regards to morality or pity for the people they experimented upon. I sincerely doubt this one mage can do what a thousand years of necromantic tradition has failed at just because he spent a couple of months in a time dilation chamber. Provided he made use of such facilities at all, that is. Personally, I find it much more likely he’s making things up.”

“What if it’s more than just months, though?” Zorian pressed. “Years, even decades?”

“You mean like that old drivel about Black Rooms that various organizations supposedly have?” asked Alanic. “Those rumors are almost certainly false. They are not impossible in theory, but much harder than they sound in practice. The logistics of time dilation chambers is very complex and requires more than just capability to speed up the passage of time in an area. And that’s especially true for things like necromantic experiments, which require a constant stream of victims to serve as experiment subjects. Unless your boasting necromancer has access to something like the Sovereign Gate, his claims are laughable.”

“Sovereign Gate?” asked Zorian.

“Never heard of that story?” Alanic asked. Zorian shook his head in negative. “Well, do you at least know who Shutur-Tarana Ihilkush was?”

“How could I not?” Zorian scowled. “My history teacher made us all memorize the first three chapters of ‘The 13 Cities of Salaw’ by heart. That would be the last king of Ikos, yes? The man who conquered all of the city states around the Umani-Re river and created the Ikosian Empire. What does he have to do with anything?”

“The Sovereign Gate is an artifact supposedly dating back from his time,” Alanic said. “Like many great rulers, Shutur-Tarana has a great many fanciful stories and grandiose claims associated with him, and this particular one claims he either made or found a doorway into another world. Having found he did not age at all while on the other side, he spent ‘11 lifetimes’ there, learning their secrets and honing his skills. Eventually, he grew homesick and decided to go back home. Once he was back in his own world, however, he found the doors forever barred to him. He stored the Sovereign Gate in his royal vault, there to wait for a worthy successor who would repeat his feat and usher the empire into a new age with the wisdom gained from the other side. Or, well, resurrect it... since it is thoroughly dead at this point.”

“An interesting story,” Zorian said.

“But probably just that – a story,” said Alanic. “It would have probably remained half-forgotten in some decaying tome as one of the many obscure tales surrounding the first emperor, but Eldemar’s royal family is very fond of it, since they claim to have the Sovereign Gate in their possession.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, though in all honesty I’m not the best person to ask about that topic. Personally, I think the whole thing is fabricated drivel which Eldemar royals thought up to give themselves some additional legitimacy. They never mentioned the Gate or any of the other Ikosian artifacts they apparently had until they had their ambitions and reputation dashed in the Splinter Wars. They probably just swiped one of the Bakora gates from somewhere and are trying to pass it off as a genuine Ikosian artifact with fanciful stories. You should probably find an actual historian for a proper discussion on the subject.”

“Fair enough,” said Zorian. “I was just curious. What are Bakora gates, though?”

“Also something you should ask a historian about,” said Alanic. “To put it simply, they are some kind of ancient teleportation network that predates Ikosian civilization by a fair margin. No one knows much about the Bakora, since they only left their gate network and a handful of other artifacts behind, but their reach was vast – the gates can be found all over Miasina, Altazia and even Blantyre. Sadly, the art of actually activating the gates has been lost to the sands of time... or maybe their magic simply broke down a long time ago and they no longer work. Regardless of the truth, they are mostly just historical curiosities now – modern mages have their own teleportation network up and functioning, so most of the interest in the Bakora gates has dried up, at least on the mage side.”

After reminding Zorian not to skip the lesson tomorrow as well, Alanic decided to leave in the same manner he arrived – by teleporting out. Zorian shook his head to clear it of fanciful tales of ancient artifacts and continued working on his golem prototype. He would go ask Vani about the Sovereign Gate and the Bakora gate network tomorrow, though he didn’t expect that to go anywhere. While the story about the first emperor of Ikosia could be sort of interpreted as an account of the time loop, it made no sense that an artifact that was supposedly stored in the capital would cause an effect centered around Zach and Cyoria. Oh well, it hurt him nothing to ask.

It was only half an hour later that Zorian realized that Alanic had teleported inside his room despite the fact he had warded it against teleportation.

Frowning, Zorian wrote down a reminder for himself to tear down his current ward scheme in the coming days and put up something stronger. And a second reminder to ask Alanic how the hell he had done that.

- break -

Zorian had been worried that Vani might not welcome him into his home the way he had the last time they’d spoken in the previous restart. After

all, he hadn't spent the month visibly culling the winter wolf population like he had last time, and that seemed to have had great influence on him.

As it turned out, he need not have worried. The man was as friendly and helpful as ever, though also just as talkative and prone to digressions.

"Ah, Ulquaan Ibasa, the isle of the exiles," said Vani. "A fascinating place and a fascinating topic. I wrote a book on the Necromancer's War, you know? Not an easy topic to write about in an objective manner, since so many are ready to dismiss them as monsters and criminals out of hand..."

Zorian made a sound that could be possibly interpreted as agreement, though really, his opinion of Ibasaans couldn't possibly be lower. Perhaps if he hadn't repeatedly witnessed all the killings and destruction in Cyoria he might have felt some pity for them, but as it was? They really were dangerous scum in his eyes.

Unaware of Zorian's inner musings, Vani launched into a protracted explanation of the causes behind the Necromancer's War. He spoke of succession disputes in several prominent Houses and royal families that developed when their leaders turned themselves into liches and vampires and their heirs realized they would never inherit their birthright because their parents would never die of age alone. He spoke of the common people, who hated necromancers with a passion, and resented being ruled by the undead. And finally, he spoke of Eldemar's desire for supremacy, and how they were all too happy to prove their authority over all of Altazia by getting involved in every dispute they could find in order to place people more sympathetic to them in leadership positions.

Finally, it all came to a head when the kingdom of Sulamnon, back then in a personal union with Eldemar, rose in rebellion against their king supported by Reya and Namassar. When they lost said rebellion, they were forced to issue a blanket ban on necromancy by the king of Eldemar, or else forfeit their lands to the crown. The ban, if enacted, would gut the entire military of Sulamnon, which made great use of undead in their army at the time, as well as force a number of prominent aristocrats to hand over their titles to their children and go into exile.

The necromancers in Sulamnon refused to accept the treaty and raised an army of their own, bolstered by the part of the Sulamnonian military that still felt they had a chance to win if they continued fighting. Soon, they were joined by other forces that resented Eldemar's growing power – the remaining Khusky tribes that still retained some military might, the remains of witch covens, the undead aristocracy of other countries that saw the way wind was blowing and wanted to overrule the precedent that would see them similarly disposed of, as well as a number of opportunistic actors that felt they had more to gain by siding with the necromancers than with the king of Eldemar. The Necromancer's War had begun.

The necromancers soon showed themselves to be cruel and merciless opponents, and the atrocities they committed against captured villages and defeated soldiers shocked the continent. Any sympathies or support they had from neutral parties that wanted to see Eldemar humbled quickly evaporated. Instead of serving as a rallying force against Eldemar domination, they handed the growing kingdom exactly the sort of war they needed to cement their authority and legitimacy. When Eldemar's general Fert Oroklo defeated the necromancer's army led by Quatach-Ichl, thereby destroying them as a coherent force, the continent sighed in relief. The kingdom of Eldemar rewrote the map in their favor, and were seen as heroes for it instead of tyrannical aggressors, and the surviving parts of the necromancer's army fled to the frozen island in the north that would be henceforth known as the isle of the exiles - Ulquaan Ibasa.

The king of Eldemar graciously agreed not to pursue them to their new home. No doubt that was because of his great mercy, rather than unwillingness to send soldiers to some worthless ice-swept land in order to pursue a broken enemy.

Then again, considering it took more than a hundred years before the exiles started making trouble again, Zorian supposed he couldn't blame him for his reasoning. Hell, he still wasn't certain what the Ibasaans hoped to gain with their destruction of Cyoria. He supposed if their leadership was composed out of immortal undead they might have personally participated in the Necromancer's War and were still bitter about it.

"Well, I hate to interrupt such a fascinating story, but I was really hoping to ask you about some historical artifacts," Zorian said when he finally spotted a lull in Vani's 'discussion'.

"Oh?" Vani said, perking up.

"Yes, I'd like to know if you have some sources about the Bakora gates and the Sovereign Gate."

"The Sovereign Gate is nothing," Vani said dismissively. "The royals won't even let anyone see it, much less examine it. I have doubts whether it exists at all. The Bakora gates, though..."

Vani promptly started digging through his stacks of books, and continued to do so for another fifteen minutes or so. Finally, he found what he was looking for in some forgotten corner. He leafed through the book until he found the correct page and then shoved it into Zorian's hands while pointing at the illustration stamped on it.

The Bakora gates did not look anything like Zorian had imagined. When Alanic had described them to Zorian, he figured they were something like stone arches or rings or something like that. Instead, they looked like hollow icosahedrons assembled out of some kind of black bars. Not very gate-like in Zorian's opinion.

"It's hard to study the gates, since no one has witnessed one in actual operation for quite some time, but from the writings found inscribed into their pedestals and preserved written records, we know they function similarly to a teleport platform," Vani said, waving his finger over the illustration for... some reason. "Only they open a dimensional hole that connects one gate to another instead of teleporting people standing inside. It is probably not a good idea to stand inside the gate while it activates."

Zorian gave the man an incredulous look.

"Well, I mean, it could have some kind of safety feature to abort the activation procedure if someone is standing inside," Vani defended himself. "Anyway, the bars are likely stabilizers, making sure the rift stays open long enough for people to step through."

"Hmm. They sound really powerful and exotic. I'm surprised there's so little interest in them," said Zorian.

"Most people think they were not nearly as efficient as modern teleport platforms are, and they are bound to be exorbitantly expensive and difficult to make. The gate spell is almost certainly reverse-engineered from Bakora gates, back when people still knew how to activate them, and it is pretty much the pinnacle of dimensional magic that very few mages can cast safely. Teleportation magic, on the other hand, is relatively accessible and cheap. In the end, it all comes down to the fact they are currently inert and nobody knows how to use them. If, indeed, they can be used at all in modern times. They are the oldest magical artifacts that we are aware of – it is possible they broke down a long time ago."

"How many of them are there?" Zorian asked.

"Hundreds are known," Vani said. "Only gods know how many more remain undiscovered in some distant jungle or mountain peak. The Bakora really loved placing those gates all over the place, it seems. Hmm... I actually think I have a map of all the recorded gates in Altazia."

It took more than half an hour for Vani to find the map in the mess that was his house, but he did produce it in the end. Zorian studied it curiously, immediately noting one particular location.

"Cyoria has a Bakora gate?" he asked incredulously. "How? Where? I've never heard anything about that."

"Oh, that." Vani snorted. "I almost forgot about that. That gate is deep within the lower levels of the Dungeon beneath Cyoria, very far into the dangerous levels. It would be suicide to go there for most mages, so nobody studies that one to my knowledge. Researchers interested in the gates have safer locations to set up camp at."

After studying the map for a while and failing to find anything really notable, Zorian thanked Vani for his time and left. The Bakora gates were kind of interesting, but he didn't see how they could be connected with the time loop.

Another dead end as far as he was concerned, but at least he didn't waste too much time on this one.

- break -

Zorian's eyes abruptly shot open as a sharp pain erupted from his stomach. His whole body convulsed, buckling against the object that fell on him, and suddenly he was wide awake, not a trace of drowsiness in his mind.

"Good morning, brother!" an annoyingly cheerful voice sounded right on top of him. "Morning, morning, *MORNING!!!*"

Zorian gave Kirielle an incredulous look. What? Why was he here? The summer festival was still days away, and the last thing he remembered was peacefully falling to sleep. Did Zach die prematurely again or was he killed in his sleep without even realizing it?

He was broken out of his thoughts when Kirielle kicked him, apparently unhappy that he was ignoring her. He expertly stabbed his finger into her flank, causing her to lose her grip on him with a squeal of indignation, and then took advantage of her moment of weakness to throw her off and rise to his feet.

"I need to cast a spell," he said, looking at her. "Please give me some time alone."

"Can I watch?" she asked.

Zorian raised his eyebrow at her. "Do you think you can keep quiet for ten minutes?"

She placed her palm over her mouth, mimicking the sign of silence.

"Right. Go lock the door then so mother won't be disturbing us," he ordered. "I need utmost concentration for this."

Also, mother would go berserk if she found him pouring salt and quartz dust on the floor, so it was best if she were kept out until he was done. Thankfully, he had both materials available in sufficient quantities, so he would be able to perform the marker tracking spell without delay.

Ten minutes later, Zorian was once again given a sense of where all the marked individuals were in relation to himself. Two of them again – one representing him, and the other one in the direction of Cyoria. Less than a minute later, the other marker abruptly shifted positions to the southeast of where it had originally been, and then shifted south again not long afterwards. Teleportation. The owner of the marker seemed to be in quite a hurry to get away from Cyoria.

There was no third marker.

The other marker was almost certainly Zach, Zorian felt – his classmate definitely began restarts in Cyoria, and it made sense for him to have the marker since Zorian had to have got it from *somewhere*. That left Red Robe, then – either he did not start the time loop in the vicinity of Cirin, managed to teleport outside Zorian's detection radius in the 15 minutes or so it took him to set up the tracking ritual... or he flat out didn't *have* a marker.

He would repeat the detection ritual every couple of days and see if the third marker ever popped up.

“That spell is lame,” Kirielle complained, poking him in the flank and disrupting his concentration. Apparently this was as far as her patience went. “There is nothing to see at all!”

“Here, have a swarm of butterflies,” sighed Zorian, conjuring a tiny swarm of glittery, colorful butterflies. It was actually a pretty hard spell to pull off, despite the totally useless effect – it took a lot of skill and practice to make that many animated, solid illusions and make them half-way convincing. Still, the spell’s ability to distract and fascinate Kirielle was every bit as great as he had hoped it would be – it took her a full minute to realize he had slipped out of the room.

Worth every minute he had spent on learning it.

- break -

“All right,” mumbled Zorian to himself, taking a deep breath to steady himself. “I have temporarily shut down the house’s warding scheme, neutralized both the explosion trap and the sleep one, blocked the acid mechanism and destroyed the alarm beacon disguised as the document seal. This is it. Third time’s the charm”

And with that, Zorian commanded the small wooden golem in front of him to go fetch the papers for him. No way was he going near that safe personally.

The wood golem, version two, slowly stepped forward. Its movements were awkward and jerky, but it did not stumble or sway drunkenly, which was a vast improvement over the wood golem version one. It would be useless in battle, but this task was something he felt his creation might actually pull off. If not, he had a collapsible 10-foot pole in reserve.

Amazingly, the whole thing went off without a hitch – the golem reached into the safe and pulled out a stack of documents without some horrid trap mangling it in the process and then walked up to him and presented him with his prize.

It was only when he tried to take the documents from the golem’s hands that disaster struck – he foolishly assumed that the golem would automatically let go of the paper stack when Zorian tried to yank them out of his hands, but of course the wooden doll had no such instincts. It was too slow to release its grip, and ended unbalanced when Zorian unwittingly yanked it forward. Before Zorian knew it, the entire stack of papers was sent tumbling through the air and ended up strewn all across the floor of Vazen’s living room.

Zorian half-expected the papers to suddenly burst into flames out of sheer spite, but they thankfully remained intact. Just... completely scrambled out of order, probably requiring him to spend hours sorting them out.

“Ah, screw it.” Zorian said, quickly scooping up papers into an unruly pile and stuffing it into his bag. “I’ll just take the whole thing with me and sort it later.”

He picked up his klutz of a golem and teleported out of the house. Minor annoyances aside, the mission was a success and he could finally find out what was so important about these documents.

34. Unreasonable Things

Chapter 034 Unreasonable Things

He didn't bring the papers to his room, of course. He was confident that there was no tracking spell on anything in the stack, but he was also confident that Vazen would try to divine the location of the papers the hard way once he noticed the theft. He might even succeed, in which case Zorian didn't want them to be near anything that would automatically implicate him in the theft. No sense in taking that risk when he could simply store the papers elsewhere.

Elsewhere, in this case, meant outside Knyazov Dveri – that way the papers would be out of range of virtually every divination spell cast from inside the city. Thus, after teleporting around randomly a couple of times to confuse any theoretical trackers, Zorian's last jump took him deep into the forested wilderness to the north of the city, to a location that had a small, convenient cave nearby. He had found the place in an earlier restart, while he had been tracking down ingredients for Silverlake, and he had felt even then that it would be a nice place to set up camp at. It just needed some touch-ups here and there to make it suitable for his purposes.

He conjured a glowing lantern to light his way in the gloom of the cave and got to work. After a quick casting of an area-wide 'spook animals' spell to drive away all the bats and vermin that had taken residence in the cave, he set about using alteration magic to clean the place up and make some shelves and reading surfaces out of the rock. A while later, after he tested things for comfort and stability, he decided that stone chairs perhaps weren't the best idea and instead constructed some basic furniture out of the fallen branches he found in the surrounding forest. There – good enough for his purposes.

"Now comes the hard part," he spoke to himself.

It was time to start constructing the warding scheme for the place.

Three hours later, Zorian had layered every single divination ward that he felt could be useful and a few that he didn't, and had rechecked the whole thing twice to make sure everything was stable and worked correctly. Truthfully... he wasn't satisfied. He had an insufficient collection of different anti-divination spells to set up a proper, iron-tight warding scheme, and too little experience to properly judge what was crucial and what was not. In addition, if it took him this long to set up even this mediocre thing, how long would something more complex take? He really needed to get better at warding...

He shook his head to clear his thoughts. He needed to get better at a lot of things, but he had to prioritize. Defense against soul magic, then combat skills, then aranean mind arts. Those three things were urgent and couldn't be put off. Everything else was secondary for now, even the mystery surrounding Vazen and the documents. If stealing the documents resulted in his early death, despite the many precautions he took... well, he would just have to set the whole thing aside until he was done with his current main goal, wouldn't he?

No, his current defenses would have to be enough for now. He placed the papers he stole from Vazen on the nearby stone table he'd made from the cavern floor, sat down on a chair he'd fabricated from wooden detritus he'd dragged into the cave and began to read...

Hours later, when he was finally done reading and organizing the whole thing, he seriously contemplated burning the whole stack down and scattering the ashes in the wind. Safer that way, and probably more than a little cathartic. He had expected to find something heavily incriminating, but this was something else entirely. Why did the man keep all of his incriminating correspondence in one convenient place, anyway? If it had been Zorian in his shoes, he would have destroyed all the letters once he read them so they couldn't be used against him. Was Vazen keeping them as possible blackmail material or something? If so, that was kind of ballsy of him, considering what kind of person the man was dealing with.

Said person being Sudomir Kandrei, the mayor of Knyazov Dveri. Because *of course* it was the goddamn mayor that was behind everything. No wonder that telling the police about the disappearances never went anywhere – even if somebody had seriously looked into it, they would have been told pretty quickly to drop the case by their superiors. Local governors in peripheral areas such as these were basically tiny tyrants that could do as they pleased, so long as they made sure not to piss off the wrong person or stir up trouble.

Not that knowing who was responsible for the disappearances shed any light on the man's motives. When all was said and done, Vazen was merely the guy supplying Sudomir with various illegal materials and occasionally hiring shady people in Sudomir's place so the mayor couldn't be implicated in the deal. The merchant didn't even know about most of the disappearances as far as Zorian could see. In fact, Vazen's shady dealings with the mayor seemed to have been much more benign until about three months ago, when the man suddenly upped the game and started demanding much riskier merchandise, in far greater quantities, as well as started arranging full-blown assassinations like the ones directed against him and Alanic. One could tell from the letters that Vazen was getting progressively more disturbed and annoyed at his 'customer' for escalating things like that, especially since Sudomir refused to elaborate on what had caused this sudden change. The 'deal' that Vazen made with a company in Cyoria, the one that Gurey was so interested in, was basically a bribe that Sudomir had arranged for Vazen to calm him down and keep him cooperative.

The blueprints and recipes contained in the documents looked kind of interesting, but there was nothing there that Zorian found really notable or sinister. The names of the three businesses that provided the documentation were something he recognized, however – they were run by people that the aranea had identified as members of the Cult of the Dragon.

So. The mayor of Knyazov Dveri had some kind of connection to the Cult of the World Dragon. Significant enough that he could arrange for them to hand over extremely valuable documentation to one of his agents for a mere pittance.

Well, the idea that this whole thing was connected to Ibasan invaders just got a lot more credible with this, though it was not Vazen that had links to them like he originally suspected. Still, the question of why he was after the soul mages around Knyazov Dveri remained. Why bother? What did the Ibasans *get* by doing that? Some of these people could only loosely be described as soul mages to begin with, and most of them weren't a serious threat to the Ibasan force... or anyone really.

He sighed. Like always, every answer he found seemed to bring up two more questions in its wake. He placed the papers on a nearby shelf carved into the walls of the cave, opting not to destroy them just yet, and then went back to his room to get some sleep.

- break -

After he had gotten some sleep and had a chance to think about things, he decided to put off the investigation of Sudomir's activities for some other time. No sense in stirring up the hornet's nest further when he could just wait for some future restart in which he never stole Vazen's documents and nobody knew they were even being threatened by someone.

However, as days passed without incident and nobody ever tracked down the documents to his little forest hideout, he began to relax. He didn't restart the investigation or change any of his plans, but he figured this would be a nice, relaxing restart where nothing of real note happened. He slowly absorbed Alanic's lessons in personal soul sight, fiddled with his wood golem (version three) in his free time, and made sure to cast the marker detection spell at least once per day (no change; the spell never showed anything except two markers).

And then, two weeks into the restart, he woke up in the middle of the night to see a black-clad figure with an obscured face and a knife in their hand standing over his bed.

Later on, he would wonder what had tipped him off that he was in danger, but in that moment he simply reacted. Without bothering to structure the magic into any real spell, he reached out to the blanket covering him and flung it at the assassin in a crude burst of telekinetic force. The man (probably; the build suggested a man) stumbled back as the blanket collided with him, not really hurt but surprised at the maneuver and disoriented by the sudden blindness.

Zorian scrambled to his feet, barely managing to get upright before the assassin succeeded in throwing the flimsy fabric off of him and lunged towards him. Three knife swipes later and Zorian was sporting a deep gash on his arm and a bleeding scratch on his cheek and knew for a fact that he had no chance against the man in a physical confrontation. He frantically searched the room with his eyes, trying to spot something to help himself with, and admitted to himself that sound-proofing the room may have been a slight mistake. Only slight, though, because even if he could scream for help he doubted anyone would be able to reach him before the assassin was done with him. No, the bigger mistake was that he opted to sleep with his rod of magic missiles and shielding bracelets in his desk drawer instead of taking them with him to sleep.

It was official: after this battle, regardless of outcome, he was going to cast magic missile non-stop whenever he had free time and mana to make it fully reflexive. He couldn't afford to be this defenseless when deprived of his tools.

"If I die I will blow us both up!" Zorian yelled, and meant it. The suicide necklace, at least, was always with him. Maybe he should put something other than explosives there for situations like this.

The man hesitated for a second at the proclamation, but then moved to attack again. That second was enough, though – suddenly given a moment to concentrate, Zorian blasted the man's mind with telepathic noise. The assassin flinched, aborting his attack, but he didn't go down.

Not yet, anyway. When Zorian took advantage of his momentary dizziness to smash a nearby paperweight into his face, though, he went down in a spray of blood and didn't get up again.

A minute later, after he had calmed down a little (and confirmed that the assassin, while still alive, wasn't going to get up any time soon) he decided he couldn't go to the police with this. They were effectively the mayor's underlings, and Sudomir was likely the one who ordered the man bleeding on the floor of his room to kill him. Or had someone else arrange it for him, more likely, considering his behavior from Vazen's letters. The fact that the assassin apparently had a key to his room, which was how he had bypassed Zorian's intruder alarm, didn't help his paranoia any. Regardless, he only really knew one person he could go to with this.

Already wincing at the lecture he was going to get, Zorian picked up the assassin's unconscious body and teleported to Alanic's temple.

- break -

Like Zorian hoped, Alanic readily accepted his explanation that the bleeding man he was carrying was an assassin sent to kill him and agreed to take him off his hands. He even gave Zorian a fast-acting healing potion to deal with the cuts and gashes the man inflicted upon him in their brief life-and-death struggle, and those weren't exactly cheap.

Unfortunately, he also decided that Zorian was now going to move permanently into the temple with him. According to Alanic, he had been expecting something like this to happen ever since Zorian stopped his and Lukav's killings earlier in the month and this was all the proof he needed that Zorian wasn't safe out there. Who's to say the attackers won't try again and succeed? No, as far as the warrior priest was concerned, Zorian had to be under constant guard until the situation was resolved.

Zorian really hated that idea, as it meant being effectively under house arrest for the remainder of the restart, but Alanic made it clear there was no way to blow him off without also losing his help in mastering personal soul perception. So that was that.

Despite his misgivings, however, it turned out to be something of a blessing in disguise. Since there was not much to do in a small, boring temple,

Zorian found himself spending most of his time endlessly casting magic missile in an effort to make it faster and more reflexive. He did make a promise to himself, after all. In any case, those efforts attracted Alanic's attention, and he agreed to give Zorian advice on how to improve his combat magic. Admittedly, Alanic couldn't help him much in his self-imposed goal of making magic missile reflexive – that was just a matter of sufficient repetition. Instead, most of his help centered around squeezing the most out of fire spells, which appeared to be his specialty.

Thus, whenever Zorian got sick of repeatedly casting magic missile, he worked on mastering the plethora of minor fire spells whose mastery Alanic claimed would increase his ability to wield fire in combat. One made a thin ring of fire around the caster, making the prospect of melee difficult for enemies unless they were willing to get burned; Alanic claimed a skilled caster could increase and decrease the radius of the ring from moment to moment, cause it to split into several weaker rings for better coverage, as well as move the center of the ring's alignment up and down along the caster's body. The second conjured a small flock of fully autonomous, sparrow-sized birds made out of fire to harass the enemy; that one was supposed to be practice for weaving animation magic into fire spells, as the usefulness of the spell depended entirely on how well animated the birds were. And so on, and on, and on. Alanic knew a lot of minor fire spells.

"Only twenty?" Alanic asked. "Come on, kid, I *know* you can do better..."

Zorian ignored him, patiently herding the twenty marble-sized fire orbs into gentle orbits around himself. Casting the spell itself was super-easy. Controlling the 20 conjured fire orbs simultaneously was not.

"I don't want to tire myself out too quickly," Zorian said, testing his control over the orbs by having a couple of them fly out of formation. He had already given himself a nasty burn the last time he used the spell by accidentally slamming one of the fire orbs into the back of his hand and was not looking forward to a repeat performance. The ability to direct the orbs as you wish was an interesting advantage, but that also meant there was little in the way of safety features inherent in the spell. "I'll run out of mana too quickly if I start summoning 50 fire orbs all at once."

"You shouldn't be casting the spell a lot anyway," Alanic said. "Sustaining the orbs is by far cheaper than constantly recreating them. The point is to take control of them, and recasting the spell doesn't help you with that. You're just letting your fear of getting burnt control you."

"Well yeah, I don't want to accidentally burn my eyes off or something," protested Zorian.

Alanic sighed and shook his head. "You're too tense for this. Take a break and we'll continue this tomorrow."

Zorian immediately dropped the spell in relief. No matter what Alanic said, he did *not* like that spell. Still, Alanic was the fire magic expert here.

"Can I ask you something?" asked Zorian. Alanic casually waved his hand, telling him to get on with it. "Is it true you can selectively burn targets with your spells? That is, flat out exclude people from being damaged by your fireballs and the like?"

"Ah. I suppose Lukav told you about that," Alanic mused. Yeah, sure, let's go with that. "Yes, that is something I can do. More than that, actually. It is nothing you would care to learn, however – it is a difficult skill that requires a lot of specialized training. Years of it. Unless you intend to specialize in fire magic – and you strike me as a generalist mage, to be frank – I would not recommend worrying about it." He smiled. "Besides, by the time you mastered something like that, the 'pocket meteors' spell you are currently struggling with would be a joke to you, so it's hardly a shortcut to not getting hurt with that."

"Figures," Zorian said. "But you know, a simple fire ward would make that spell a lot safer to practice. Why can't I use it on myself before casting the spell again?"

"Danger sharpens the spirit," Alanic said airily. "You'll learn faster and take things more seriously with the threat of horrific burns hanging over your head. But mostly I just wanted to see how long it would take you to remember you can do that."

"Ugh," Zorian grunted. "You're evil."

There were no further attacks for the rest of the restart, and this particular one ended right on schedule instead of being cut short like the previous one was.

The marker detection spell never displayed a third marker in its detection radius, despite Zorian casting it several times a day towards the end.

- break -

For the next three restarts, Zorian deliberately avoided making any ripples and focused on growing his skills. Not a very exciting time, but by the end of it he was finally able to cast magic missile quickly and easily without any external aid. He had also mastered personal soul sensing well enough that Alanic started teaching him his arsenal of protective soul magic. In addition to that, he learned a plethora of new fire spells, made some improvements to the wooden golem design he was exploring, and practiced the rest of his combat arsenal on the monstrous wildlife living in the wilderness.

Unfortunately, Alanic had been becoming ever more suspicious of Zorian as his skills rose with each restart – no doubt the fact that he recognized quite a few of those skills as his own had a big hand in it – and had almost refused to teach Zorian at all in the latest restart. Zorian had eventually managed to talk the man into helping him by promising to tell him everything after the summer festival, but he suspected that pretty soon even that was not going to fly. By his estimation, he had at most two more restarts before Alanic refused to teach him anything without a damn good explanation, which he would be unable to provide.

The tale has been illicitly lifted; should you spot it on Amazon, report the violation.

But that was fine – by the time that happened, Zorian would no longer be defenseless in the face of hostile soul magic so the first of his goals would be achieved. He never really expected Alanic to teach him everything, anyway.

In the next restart, Zorian decided to lift his self-imposed ban of snooping around Sudomir and his activities. As cautiously as possible, he tried to find out more about the man. Sudomir being a well-known and public person, it wasn't hard to get people to talk about him... but most of the information he got was either useless or highly suspect. The most interesting piece of information he found was that the man was often absent from Kniazov Dveri on various 'official errands', and that those errands had become especially frequent in the last few months. This was in line with Vazen's letters, which also claimed the man had changed his patterns radically in the last few months.

When simple questioning failed to produce any new results, Zorian decided to be a little bolder and investigate the link between Vazen and the mayor. He didn't want to deal with Vazen himself, but fortunately there was no need to. Vazen wasn't a one-man operation like Gurey – he had other employees, and those other employees didn't have the same paranoia and level of security that Vazen did. They brought stuff home from work to look over later, left their keys cunningly hidden behind nearby flowerpots, and rarely had any sort of magical defenses. One of them even kept a detailed daily journal with all sorts of interesting tidbits and remarks. Probably the most interesting thing he found out from Vazen's employees was that he regularly sent mysterious packages to a place called 'Iasku Mansion' – a place that his employees were pretty sure didn't actually exist. The place the packages were delivered to didn't exist on the maps, save as a random section of the uninhabited forest far to the north of the city. Further into the wilderness than Zorian ever got, in any case.

After consulting some maps, Zorian realized that he had no idea how long it would take him to reach the spot in question. Weeks? Months? Damn, those two really picked an out-of-the-way spot for their exchanges, didn't they? This was going to be such a chore...

He went to Lukav for help. The transformation specialist was noted to be an outdoorsman type, so he should have some advice on reaching out-of-the-way places like that one. Maybe there was some kind of enhancement potion that could help?

"No, I don't think enhancement potions would be of much help in this," Lukav told him while staring at the map Zorian provided. "They don't last long enough, and it would take you at least two weeks to reach the place on foot. Tricky. Maybe it's just my bias showing, but have you considered simply shapeshifting into a bird and flying there?"

"I haven't," said Zorian, surprised. "The idea never occurred to me. How complicated would that be?"

"Not complicated at all, but perhaps a bit pricy," Lukav admitted. "You would probably need to waste a potion or two to grow accustomed to flying and moving in your new form. Maybe more, depending on how fast of a learner you are. Birds are very different from humans."

He handed Zorian his price chart, and quickly pointed out the bird section.

"I recommend the eagle, personally," Lukav said. "Good flier, excellent eyesight, and big enough that few things will dare attack you. Plus, it's an eagle, what's not to like? Not like you need to be inconspicuous where you're going."

Zorian looked at the price tag attached to the 'eagle transformation' potion. It was... doable. He could buy three of those if he had to, though he hated using up most of his savings like that. Even though he knew they would be back at the beginning of his next restart, it just felt wrong to fritter them away. He spent years saving that money, dammit! Besides, what if he needed those savings later in the restart for some reason?

"I guess I could try that," Zorian said. "Incidentally, do you pay money for some rare animal that can be found deep in the forest?"

"Ha, no. If it can be found in forests around here, I'm more than capable of getting it myself," Lukav said. "Sorry. Though if you are willing to risk your life in the local dungeon, there are a few things I would be interested in paying good money for..."

- break -

Gliding upward on an updraft of warm air, Zorian surveyed the landscape around him with impossibly sharp eyes. The experience was impossible to describe – everything was full of color and detail, like a veil he didn't know he labored under had been lifted off his eyes. It reminded him of the time his parents had brought him to the doctor for an eye checkup and he was told he had to wear glasses. His father had been so disappointed about that, but the moment Zorian had donned the little pieces of glass on his face he knew he never wanted to take them off. This was just like that time, only even more extreme. If he tried, he could discern individual leaves on a tree from a mile away. The houses in the distance that would have been nothing but blurry blocks to his human self were instead rendered with perfect clarity, right down to that old tomcat hiding in the shadow of a chimney on that one house.

Being an eagle, Zorian decided, was awesome. Weird, but awesome.

He flapped his wings a couple of times to change directions, wobbling dangerously for a moment. He still wasn't much of a flier, truth be told, and the less told about his landings the better. Thankfully, big birds like eagles spent most of their time in the air gliding and catching air currents, so he could get by. He fixed his eyes forward, in the direction of where 'Iasku Mansion' was supposed to be, and set off into the wilderness.

Flying over trees got boring pretty fast, though, even with ridiculously enhanced eyesight – the leafy canopy of the forest obscured the surface from scrutiny pretty effectively, so there was nothing to see for the most part. He could see snow-capped mountains in the distance – the infamous Winter Mountains that dominated the landscape of central Altazia, which were said to be the source of all ice and snow by some – an icy, merciless heart of winter that woke up once a year to cover the land in frost until it was inevitably beaten back by the forces of summer, winter

giving way to spring.

Zorian would like to call that superstition, but for all he knew there could actually be a kernel of truth in that, like an insanely-powerful ice elemental living there or something. There was very little known about the mountains, largely because of how dangerous they were – exploring them was about as safe as trying to map lower reaches of the Dungeon, and not nearly as rewarding.

Finally, Zorian approached his destination. He had been worried he would miss the spot, since he didn't have a map and everything sort of looked the same to him from his vantage point, but he needn't have worried. Iasku Mansion was very obvious and easy to spot. It wasn't, like he suspected, some inconspicuous clearing or standing stone that Vazen and Sudomir used as a drop-off point. It was, in fact, an actual mansion.

Zorian circled around the building a few times, trying to comprehend what he was seeing. The mansion gleamed white in a sea of green, somewhat worn down by the ravages of age and nature but clearly livable and cared for. Aside from the mansion, there was also a small warehouse attached. The warehouse appeared to be of much more recent construction, however – it had no moss on the roof, there were no cracks on the walls that his enhanced eyes could see, and it was far blockier and utilitarian in construction.

Zorian had no idea why somebody would build this thing here. If it was a fort or an observation tower, he could understand... but who would want to build a luxury dwelling this isolated and exposed to the dangers of the north? Sadly, his contemplation was interrupted when the crows that dotted the trees around the mansion took exception to his presence and a hundred angry caws filled the air.

Zorian focused on them momentarily. Though the birds were small and distant, the eyes he currently possessed had no problem in discerning their features. They weren't crows. They were larger, and their pitch black feathers had small red decorations and an almost metallic sheen to them.

Iron beaks. The hell-birds of the north. Zorian didn't fancy his chances against one of those in this form, much less against the huge flock stationed around the mansion. Though now that he thought about it, he could probably cast magic missile in this form now, couldn't he? He might be able to bring down a couple of them before the rest tore him apart, then. That wouldn't get him anything, though, so he stopped circling around the mansion and put some distance between himself and the iron beaks until they finally stopped making noise and threatening gestures.

He wondered what he had done to upset them so much. He supposed they just didn't like a large predator circling menacingly around them.

Well no matter. Landing right next to the mansion would have been a poor idea anyway. Very exposed, and probably warded too.

He searched the surrounding area for an open space he could land at without breaking his neck (transfer of injuries between real and shapeshifted forms was weird and inconsistent, but Lukav assured him that being killed in one form means you're definitely dead in the other as well) and finally found a clearing some distance to the west of the mansion. A little bit farther than he had hoped for, but beggars can't be choosers.

After a frankly embarrassing landing that saw him face-plant into the grass, Zorian transformed back into human form and spent several minutes memorizing the place so he could use it as an arrival point for future teleports.

That done, he set off towards the mansion, hoping to get a closer look. He already missed the eagle's awesome eyesight, but some things were better done from the ground and this way he would actually be able to teleport away from danger and make himself invisible. As far as he knew, iron beaks had no magical senses, so an optical cloak should be enough to evade their attention.

He was right – the iron beaks took no notice of him while he inched closer to the mansion, cloaked in an invisibility spell and an aura of silence. Before actually scouting the place, however, a pack of winter wolves burst into the scene, led by a particularly huge specimen. Unlike the rest of the pack, the alpha didn't have a white pelt. His was silver and shiny, and his mind felt different from the rest. Stronger, deeper, more complex. Sapient.

Zorian stood frozen, watching the group with dread. Twenty-two winter wolves led by an unknown super-special sapient variant. Fuck, he just had to push his luck, didn't he? No way would they be fooled by his spells, considering how sensitive canine noses were...

Except... they kind of *were* fooled. At one point the Silver One suddenly stopped and started scanning the tree line, and Zorian's heart skipped when its eyes briefly passed over Zorian's location, but then the moment was gone and the pack moved on and disappeared somewhere on the other side of the mansion.

A minute later, when he was sure they were gone, Zorian slowly retreated into the surrounding forest and teleported away.

- break -

Zorian decided to leave the Iasku Mansion alone for the moment. He was virtually certain they were connected to the Ibasan invaders now, and definitely intended to get to the bottom of that place at some point. However, he had a feeling that investigating the mansion as he was now would probably involve a lot of dying. Plus, he had a hunch that the mayor was a necromancer, and definitely had one under employ even if he wasn't, so losing a battle there might have more serious consequences than a premature restart. No, if he wanted to go there he had to finish Alanic's lessons first and greatly increase his combat skills, *at minimum*.

Instead, now that his time with Alanic was coming to an end, he had to step up his effort to improve his combat magic so he could go talk to the other aranea tribes and learn the secrets of their mind arts. There were a lot of reasons why that was important, but the one that drove him the most was the possibility of unlocking the matriarch's memory packet that still remained in his mind.

The memory packet wouldn't last forever, Zorian knew. It was stable for now, the matriarch having pulled out all the stops to make it as resilient

and durable as possible, but it would unravel and fail in time, and all the memories locked within would be gone. If Zorian wanted to fill in the blanks left in the matriarch's last message and understand what made her reach the decisions she did, he had to gain access to that knowledge.

He had no delusions it was going to be easy. For one thing the other aranean tribes were in no way guaranteed to be friendly, and even if they were, there was no reason for them to actually teach a random human their secrets. And even if he could secure their cooperation, the memories of something as alien as the aranea were bound to be a chore to interpret. And even if he could master that, he still only had one shot at unravelling the memory packet without ruining the content or triggering whatever defenses the matriarch installed to prevent him from doing just that.

But that was a matter for the future – right now he didn't feel very confident walking into a possibly unfriendly aranean hive. Since he didn't feel like testing his mind magic against the masters of the craft, his current plan for dealing with hostile or treacherous aranea basically boiled down to quick-casting 'mind shield' and burning everything in sight via more conventional magic. Better combat skills were a must for that plan to work, though.

As it happened, he had something that should advance his combat skills, as well as make up for the money he lost to Lukav when he bought those two 'eagle transformation' potions – dungeon delving! He had basically ignored the dungeon entrance at Knyazov Dveri due to being sidetracked by the disappearance of local soul mages and Alanic's lessons, but there was no reason to continue to do so anymore. Most of the wildlife around Knyazov Dveri had ceased to be a challenge at this point, anyway.

Thus, two days after his hasty retreat from the Iasku Mansion, Zorian walked over to the official entrance to the dungeons beneath Knyazov Dveri and requested a permit to descend into its depths. It didn't cost any money, thankfully, and it was really nothing more than a formality to make sure you understood what you were getting into.

"Just remember, this part of the dungeon has never been pacified properly," the man behind the counter told him, handing him a permit card that he had to show to the guards to be let through. "It means there are greater riches to be found down there, but also that things are much more dangerous. People disappear down there all the time. Nobody is going to look for you unless you join one of the local delver guilds. Which I personally recommend to young mages such as you."

Zorian gave the man a non-committal hum and left, descending below on a long spiral staircase until he reached a small natural cavern that housed a small town. The inhabitants of the city above called it Delver Village, though officially it was just an extension of Knyazov Dveri. Not many people actually lived here – the buildings consisted mostly of guildhouses and businesses catering to dungeon delvers.

He had no intention of joining any of the guilds. Last time he checked they didn't let new members like him out in the field for at least several months after they joined, which made them pretty much useless to someone in his situation. He did understand the logic of it – you didn't want your new, inexperienced members to get horribly murdered out in the tunnels, and very few mages were particularly capable at his age – but that didn't make them any less useless to him. He also didn't have any money to buy anything from the shops, so he didn't remain in the settlement for long. The people there were jerks anyway, asking for money just to answer basic questions or demanding that he join their guild before they would divulge any 'secrets'. Thank the gods he could just read the answers out of their mind anyway.

- break -

Zorian stared at the patch of glowing mushrooms at the corner of a largish cave he encountered in his wanderings through the cave system under Knyazov Dveri. It appeared to be a normal patch of giant glowing mushrooms, little different from the ones he encountered elsewhere around here, but he knew better. He wasn't fooled. His mind sense clearly told him there was an animal mind behind that mushroom... no wait, the mushroom *itself* had a mind? An illusion? Or some weird intelligent mushroom?

Deciding that it didn't matter, Zorian leveled the combat staff he'd made for himself and fired an incineration ray at the 'mushroom'. If he had learned anything in the two weeks he had spent down here, it was that absolutely everything wanted to kill and eat him – and not necessarily in that order. The rock mites, for instance, wanted to paralyze you and lay their eggs into your still-living body so their larvae could eat you alive from the inside out. Anyway, the point was that striking first was common sense with these things, and he had no intention of getting closer to the mushroom impersonator.

Sure enough, the moment it was hit by the ray of fire, the 'mushroom' immediately unraveled into a large tentacled form of the tunnel octopus. Figures. The ability of those things to mimic both the color and texture of their surroundings was as impressive as it was annoying to deal with. This one was out of luck, though. Caught off guard by the devastating fire attack, it flailed its tentacles about briefly in panic before collapsing dead on the floor of the cave.

Zorian threw a rock at it to make sure it was not faking it, and then relaxed. He would have probably died to one of those by now if he didn't have his mind sense – it was, without a doubt, his main advantage compared to the other dungeon delvers. Thanks to it, he was able to evade the javelin worm ambush sites, tunnel octopuses and other hidden dangers to reach the richer, less exploited lower areas like this one. No wonder Taiven had been so excited about having someone with that ability in her team, back when she had first found out about it.

He instructed the floating spheres of light around him to scatter around the cavern and slowly inspected the walls for any sign of crystal and strange minerals. In general, crystallized mana seemed to be a much better money-maker than hunting creatures for parts, at least if you could access virgin areas like this one. Crystallized mana also had the benefit of being, well, *static*. If he found some in a particular place on this restart, it stood to reason that it should also be there for every subsequent one as well. That meant that, if he could map out where they were over several restarts, he should be able to blitz through a bunch of known sites in just a few hours and get an enormous cash infusion at the beginning of every new restart. Especially if he learned how to filter through Dungeon interference and became able to teleport while inside it.

Sadly, his inspection found nothing in this cavern. Looking at the charred tunnel octopus corpse, Zorian considered the possibility of just harvesting its brain and beak (the most valuable parts of it by far) and returning to the surface. He had already found two large lumps of crystalized mana and several small ones, so this trip was already a smashing success, and continuing further would mean going deeper into the dungeon, with all the danger that implied.

He continued on – not like he was ever really in danger thus far so even if the danger jumped up a notch he should... be...

Zorian rounded a corner and came face-to-face, so to speak, with some kind of floating pink ooze covered with eyes. It glowed, threads of light dancing throughout its smoky, translucent bulk, and its form writhed and shifted chaotically, ripples and pseudopods growing and retracting from moment to moment. For a moment it appeared to have not noticed him, its countless eyes – each its own color and shade – blinking and swiveling in their sockets with no rhyme or reason. But that moment passed quickly and its many eyes turned towards him, some of them extending on pseudopods so the creature could focus them on Zorian properly...

Zorian's eyes abruptly shot open as a sharp pain erupted from his stomach. His whole body convulsed, buckling against the object that fell on him, and suddenly he was wide awake, not a trace of drowsiness in his mind.

“Good morning, brother!” an annoyingly cheerful voice sounded right on top of him. “Morning, morning, *MORNING!!!*”

Zorian looked at his grinning little sister incredulously. What? But he was just-

“Oh come on!” Zorian groaned, burying his face in his hands. “That’s it!? It just *looked* at me and I *died*? What kind of absurd ability is that!?”

“Umm...” Kirielle said.

“Forget I said anything,” Zorian said, giving Kirielle a brief hug before rising to his feet. Kirielle refused to let go, clinging to him like a barnacle, so he just carried her around as he walked to his bookshelf and retrieved his Compendium of Dungeon Denizens, volume four, and began leafing through it. “I was just having a dream, that’s all.”

“What kind of dream?” Kirielle asked curiously.

“I was going to be rich, and then I got killed by an... eyebeast?” Zorian said, as he looked at the description in the book. Even the name was stupid. Ugh.

“Oh,” Kirielle said. “A nice dream that ends in a nightmare. I hate those.”

“Me too, Kirielle. Me too,” Zorian said, snapping the book shut and placing it back on the shelf. The description in the book told him nothing useful about the damn thing. ‘Beware its deadly eyes’ indeed.

He thought about casting the marker detection spell again, but what would be the point? It never detected more than two markers in existence. Or less for that matter. At this point it was obvious that this was all it was ever going to show. Whatever way Red Robe used to get into the time loop obviously wasn’t identical to the one used by Zach and Zorian.

As for Zach, his movements indicated that he always opened the time loop by hightailing out of Cyoria. The direction was not consistent, though, and he seemed to wander randomly around Eldemar during each time loop. He wondered what that was about. Clearly the boy was avoiding Cyoria, just like Zorian was, but beyond that he could not figure out what Zach’s goal was – Zorian had tried placing the locations Zach visited on a map and found no pattern he could see in it.

Whatever. Zach will be Zach. He had his own, more pressing problems to worry about at the moment.

“Right. Kiri, could you perhaps let go of me now?”

35. Mistakes Have Been Made

Chapter 035 Mistakes Have Been Made

‘The beginning of the restart is always the most annoying part of the time loop,’ Zorian mused quietly, standing on one of the arrival platforms in Cirin’s train station. He pulled a watch out of his pocket and inspected it for a minute before putting it back with a sigh. The train was late. The train was *always* late, because this was less than a day into the restart and there hadn’t really been time for anything important to diverge yet.

It was in times like these that he wondered why he even bothered going through this charade in every restart when he could just teleport out of his room at the start of every new loop and be done with it. It would save him hours of frustration and he knew from a couple of previous restarts that nobody threw a manhunt after him if he did that. He’d basically get an extra half a day each restart – that would add up to something significant pretty quickly, wouldn’t it?

But, just as they always did when he considered that option, his thoughts turned to what the reaction of his mother and Kirielle would be at such a move. He never eavesdropped on them during those restarts where he hightailed out of the house at the earliest opportunity, but he couldn’t imagine either of them taking it well. He didn’t get along with mother all that well, but he knew she cared for him in her own infuriating way and Kirielle…

He looked at Kirielle, standing sullenly some distance from him. The downside of his increasing empathy skills was that he knew just how devastated Kirielle was at not getting to come with him to Cyoria. If *that* was so upsetting, he couldn’t even imagine how she would react if he did his disappearing trick immediately after he chased her out of his room. There was no way he could do that to her, no matter how much sense it made. He was feeling guilty enough about her as it was.

He walked up to her and ruffled her hair, which caused her to snap out of her funk temporarily in order to slap his hand away and give him a fierce glare. Or at least what she thought was a fierce glare, anyway.

“Don’t be so gloomy, Kiri,” he said. She said nothing, but the spike of anger and resentment he detected in his empathy was answer enough.

Damn it…

“Look,” he told her. “I’ll bring you with me the next time I go to Cyoria, okay?”

She gave him a startled look as her mind processed what he just said and then looked away with a pout. For a moment he thought she wouldn’t say anything, but then her mind stopped cycling between different emotions and settled on faint, suppressed hope.

“You promise?” she finally mumbled after a few seconds.

“Yes,” he said seriously. “I promise.”

In the back of his mind, Zorian realized he really meant it, too. When he finally decided to go back to Cyoria, he was bringing Kirielle with him. It wasn’t sensible in the least – it would cost him considerable time and attention to keep an eye on her and she would be in far greater danger than if he left her behind – but he was going to do it anyway. Not just for Kirielle’s sake, either. He kind of missed living at Imaya’s place with Kirielle, Kael and Kana…

He had to take a step back to regain his balance when Kirielle rammed into him, wrapping him in a hug and burying her face in his stomach.

“You better not lie,” she said, looking up at him with suspicious, narrowed eyes. “I’ll never forgive you!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Zorian scoffed, pulling at her nose until she let go of him. A loud whistle pierced the air, signifying that the train had finally arrived at the station. “I have to go now. We’ll talk about this when I come back.”

Fifteen minutes later Zorian watched a much happier Kirielle waving enthusiastically at him as the train departed from the station. Zorian responded with a much more restrained wave of his own and smiled. Maybe it hadn’t been the smartest decision to make, but it was the right one nonetheless.

- break -

Zorian spent the entirety of the short train ride to Teshingrad trying to perform a headcount of his fellow passengers using his mind sense – a surprisingly difficult endeavor due to the anti-shaping ward placed on the train. While not remotely able to actually stop him from sensing minds, the minor magical static produced by the ward compounded quickly with distance, effectively cutting his range in half. It was uncannily reminiscent of the similar magical static that suffused the dungeon, which had much the same effect.

Hmm... now that he thought about it, that was probably what had inspired the ward in the first place. Did that mean that practicing magic inside a ward like this one would help him learn how to filter out the Dungeon static? Something to think about, in any case. Making a series of progressively stronger disruption wards to practice on sounded like a lot better idea than his original plan (which mostly consisted of trying to brute force things by practicing teleportation in the Dungeon until he got it right).

Once he disembarked from the train, Zorian teleported to Knyazov Dveri and immediately descended into the local Dungeon, where he proceeded

to pick up every single piece of crystallized mana he had discovered in the previous restart before his unfortunate encounter with the eyebeast. When he tried to cash them in at the Delver Village shop he used for the purpose, however, he ran into... problems.

Apparently, there was a huge difference between going into the dungeon a couple of times and returning with a handful of crystals each time (what he did in the previous restart) and going in there once and returning with an entire bag of crystallized mana after a few hours. Not only did the shop not have enough money on hand to buy the whole batch off of him, the fact he had brought back such wealth after a single foray into the Dungeon caused far more of a stir than Zorian would have ever guessed. After all, you just don't do that kind of stuff unless you have some kind of secret method that is better than everyone else's or you were lucky enough to hit some kind of motherlode. Either possibility automatically made him a person of interest to every dungeon delver in Knyazov Dveri, as well as quite a few other people as well.

Any sort of plan he had for the restart immediately crashed and burned. There was just too much attention focused on him, which made it impossible to pursue tasks discreetly or talk to people as a relative unknown. His divination wards got an extensive field test due to the incessant magical spying he had been subjected to ever since, and while Zorian thought they held up admirably in the face of foreign assault, he couldn't actually be sure they were never bypassed. One enterprising spy actually painted spell formula onto living moths and turned them into semi-autonomous voice recorders – if Zorian hadn't tried to chase them off with telepathy and found it curious they kept getting back towards him regardless he probably would have never noticed. How many others had done similar things without him figuring out what they'd done?

Of course, not everyone went with the cloak and dagger stuff. A lot of people simply wanted to talk to him about their amazing offer and what not, and few of them took his 'no thanks' quietly. At least one group outright attacked him when he told them to get lost, though thankfully they weren't all that good at actual fighting and were sent running easily enough. There was also at least one attempt to break into his room, which ended with a would-be thief electrocuted for his trouble and earned Zorian a stern talking-to by the law enforcement regarding excessively lethal security measures.

Finally, after a week of dodging aggressive recruitment efforts and repelling the myriad magical probes directed at him, Zorian decided to admit defeat and leave Knyazov Dveri. He failed to save Lukav and Alanic anyway, due to all the scrutiny he was under, so there was little reason to stay in the town and every reason to leave. He simply picked up all of his belongings, including a handful of bigger mana crystals he'd never managed to sell, and teleported as far south as he could manage.

Live and learn, he supposed. The next time he tried to pull off that trick, he should sell it outside of Knyazov Dveri and probably not all at once in the same shop. It was probably smartest to go to Korsa and Eldemar, since they were big cities that probably saw far more traffic in mana crystals and had plenty of shops to sell to. Though Cyoria would probably be even better in that regard, once he was ready to go back there – it was not only big, but also the magical center of the whole continent.

But no matter, the restart was still salvageable – there were plenty of things to do outside of Knyazov Dveri. For instance, finding the aranean webs to trade with. He knew they existed all over the continent, but other than the destroyed one under Cyoria, he didn't really know the exact location of any of them. Even if he wasn't ready to actually deal with them properly yet, it wouldn't hurt to spend a restart or two just locating every single web he could find and see just how friendly and receptive to trade each of them was. If Spear of Resolve was to be believed, they were unlikely to attack him outright just for contacting them. Modern aranea were descendants of aranea who grew in power after trading with humans, after all, so most of them should be at least mildly receptive to the idea of doing it again.

New goal set, Zorian teleported to Eldemar, the kingdom's capital, to visit the Cartographer's Society library. As far as map collections went, theirs was without equal, and it was largely free for perusal as well – so long as you never destroyed anything, you only had to pay for maps you wanted the library to copy for you. Zorian had spent a few days there the last time he had visited the capital, just browsing the shelves for any map that caught his fancy, and swore he would visit again when he had the time. This seemed as good an excuse as any.

"I dearly hope that's not one of our maps you are writing on, young sir," the voice behind Zorian's shoulder said. "As far as the library is concerned, that would undisputedly be destruction of our property."

Zorian jumped in surprise at the voice, too absorbed in his research to notice the librarian sneaking up at him. He looked at the map in front of him, heavily annotated and fighting for desk space with several stacks of map cases, travel journals and atlases and then shifted his attention to the old, bearded librarian behind him.

"It's not," he told the man. "It's the cheapest map of Eldemar I could find in a store I found on the way."

"Hmm. Would you object if I ask you what you are working on? It is rare to see such a young man here, especially one who is so absorbed in his research."

"I'm trying to find an aranean colony," said Zorian, not seeing the need to lie.

"And those are?"

"Magical talking spiders."

"Ah. Sounds like an intriguing project," said the old librarian. "I'll leave you to it. As friendly advice, I will note that it would have probably been cheaper to just have the library make a few copies of the maps you were interested in. The Cartographer's Society is not a profit-seeking organization and we try to keep the prices down as much as possible."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Zorian. "Say, since we're on the subject of copies... do you think I could learn how to copy documents like that from

someone? Or is it some big secret of yours?"

"It is no secret," the librarian said. "The official policy of the Society is that maps should be as widely disseminated as possible, and we do not have a monopoly on that type of magic."

"Oh, good," said Zorian. He knew a few ways to magically copy documents, but they relied on animating writing instruments to transcribe the contents. That didn't work all that well on non-textual content, and was slow even for written works. The spell used by the Cartographer's Society made perfect duplicates of any given map, down to every detail and shade, with only a single spell. "So does that mean you're open to teaching me how to cast the spell?"

"I'm afraid that isn't one of the services offered by this library. However, if you visit the main offices of the Cartographer's Society, you can sign up for some basic classes in map-related magic, map making, map handling, and map-related research like you're doing right now," the librarian said. "The prices are very affordable and it would probably help you in your quest to find these 'aranea' as well."

Zorian hummed speculatively.

"I guess I'll check it out," he said. He certainly had no shortage of money, thanks to his ill-considered stunt at the start of the restart, and he was going to have to spend a few days in Eldemar one way or the other.

The librarian soon left Zorian to his own devices again, and he considered the map in front of him. He didn't have anything concrete yet, but he had several likely places to look for an aranean web. Korsa, Jatnik, Gozd and Padina were all large cities that had dungeon access and would be easy to reach from Cyoria, the source of the aranean expansion wave. One of them was bound to have the aranea living close by, and they might be willing to give him the location of nearby webs if he asked nicely (or bribed them sufficiently). Korsa was especially suspicious, since the city had an extensive textile industry, including one dealing in special clothes made out of spider silk. They got most of their raw material from Cyoria – unsurprising, as it produced the lion's share of the stuff – but at least some of it was gathered locally... 'from a mostly harmless breed of giant spiders native to the region'.

Yeah. Totally not an aranean colony.

Zorian made a small note in his notebook to track down every settlement that produced spider silk in any significant amount and decided to end the search for the day.

- break -

Zorian spent five days in Eldemar, though in all honesty he got everything he could about possible aranean sites on day three. The other two days were mostly so he could relax a bit and mentally prepare himself for what was to come. The idea of an impending meeting with another group of aranea left him in a depressed mood, since it reminded him of what happened to the previous group of aranea that had gotten involved with him, and that wasn't exactly the best mindset with which to go and meet a bunch of telepaths. He did his best to distract himself by sight-seeing around the capital and browsing various magical stores he encountered.

He only browsed, though, never actually bought anything – Eldemar was a terribly expensive place to live in, he'd found. Everything, from room and board to already expensive magical reagents had higher prices in the capital than anywhere else Zorian had stayed at. 'Higher quality demands higher payments,' the merchants assured him. What a load of crap. He suspected the average citizen in Eldemar was simply richer than those in the rest of the country and could thus pay more. The large number of theaters, art houses and music halls present in the city certainly indicated that the inhabitants had plenty of money to burn.

That aside, the city was nice. Orderly. The royal quarter was walled in and off-limits to uninvited commoners like him, but that didn't mean that the government left the rest of the city outside their little bubble to rot. There were no obvious slums that Zorian could find – all of the buildings were well cared for and the streets free of trash and decay. Police patrolled everywhere, and were even joined by a group of well-armed soldiers at one point.

Asking around, he found that security was always tight. Eldemar had been a favorite target for saboteurs during the Splinter Wars, at least one of which managed to set the entire city ablaze. The fire consumed many important buildings, including both of Eldemar's magical academies and its central library. By the time the city had recovered and rebuilt, most of the mages and their attendant facilities had already moved to Cyoria, cementing its rise as a magical nexus of the continent. Eldemar's citizens still seemed bitter about that, harboring a fair amount of resentment over the fact. In any case, security was upgraded immensely in the aftermath of the fire, and never really went away. Even their underworld was thoroughly purged and resculpted into something more manageable. Dungeon delving was forbidden within city limits – instead, the royal family sent the army into the depths several times a year to get rid of anything remotely dangerous they could find.

Basically, he could cross Eldemar from the list of possible candidates to have an aranean colony. If it ever existed, it was almost certainly wiped out or chased away at this point. It also helped explain why the invaders targeted Cyoria instead of Eldemar, even though Eldemar contained the royal palace, treasury and most of the government buildings – much juicier targets if one intended to collapse a country and destabilize the continent. The city was too well guarded for such a large-scale attack to take them by surprise.

He ended up taking the classes offered by the Cartographer's Society. More accurately, he paid extra to have an instructor assigned to him for individual lessons, so he could save some time. Zorian was pleasantly surprised by the mage they sent him in response – the young man assigned to him was polite and straightforward in his teaching methods. A welcome reprieve from Zorian's usual luck with teachers. He only attended three sessions with the man, but that was enough to give him a plethora of mapping spells, not all of which dealt with classical paper maps. Zorian's

personal favorite in that bunch was a spell that created a miniature illusionary replica of the caster's surroundings above their palm – that had been fun to play with.

You might be reading a pirated copy. Look for the official release to support the author.

It was tempting to just spend the rest of the restart goofing around with maps and visiting various curiosities in the capital, but he didn't. He had a task to do, and an invisible time limit counting in the background. At the end of the fifth day, he gathered up his things and set off for Korsa to find the aranea.

- break -

Korsa was a big city – the third biggest city in the kingdom, to be precise, right after Cyoria and Eldemar. Even though Zorian was certain the aranea were in there somewhere, he knew it would take him ages to find them if he searched for them by exploring the local Dungeon. So he didn't even try. Instead he approached the textile manufacturer that produced spider silk products and flat out asked him to introduce him to the aranea.

The man refused, claiming he had no idea what Zorian was talking about before throwing him out of his store with a warning to never come back again. Harsh. Still, Zorian never actually expected his request to be granted. He just wanted the man to inform his aranea trading partners that there was this strange kid going around town asking people about them. If the local aranea were anything like those in Cyoria, that would get their attention in a flash. He wouldn't have to look for them because they would be looking for him.

It took less than two days for the aranea to track him down.

It was late in the evening of his second day in Korsa when Zorian felt an aranean signature enter his radius. Considering he was currently sitting on a small hill on the outskirts of Korsa, surrounded with a lot of grass and fields and nothing of any importance whatsoever, he felt confident that it was here for him.

[Greetings,] Zorian sent telepathically. [I am Zorian Kazinski. I have come to trade.]

Aranean minds were still too strange for him to recognize their emotions easily, but he felt sure the aranea was thoroughly shocked when he spoke to her.

[You are Open?] the aranea asked after a few seconds.

[Yes,] Zorian confirmed. He decided not to mention the Cyorian aranea and his connection to them for now – for all he knew they might have been mortal enemies or something. [May I know who I am talking to?]

[I am Seeker of the Eight Universal Paths, of the Sword Divers Web,] the aranea sent. [You can simply call me Seeker.]

[Seeker then. I would like to start by apologizing for the way I attracted your attention, but I didn't know how else to contact you. I hope I haven't caused too much of a stir,] Zorian said. [I hope we can work with each other despite this somewhat rough start.]

[I'm afraid I am not qualified to negotiate on behalf of my web, so I cannot make any firm promises. My task was only to find you and report my findings to the web,] Seeker responded. Translation: she was supposed to trawl through Zorian's memories to see what his deal was, but him being psychic kind of made that impractical. [That said, I'm sure a small incident like this one can be easily smoothed over if you refrain from scaring us like this in the future. Just so I know what to report to the matriarch, what kind of trade are you proposing?]

[I want to trade for knowledge and training,] said Zorian. [Specifically, I want your help in learning how to wield my psychic abilities.]

[You already seem fairly proficient in them, though,] Seeker pointed out. She sent a weak psychic probe to worm its way through Zorian's defenses but promptly retracted it when Zorian harshly slapped it down. [Not many humans can use telepathy so smoothly, and even fewer would have noticed that probe.]

[You flatter me, but we both know I am but a rank beginner when it comes to mind arts,] Zorian said. [I wish to move beyond bare basics in the field. At the very least I want to get a better grasp on telepathic combat and develop memory manipulation abilities.]

Seeker produced a burst of uncertainty and surprise over the link that Zorian didn't quite know how to interpret. Some kind of aranean curse, maybe?

[You are certainly ambitious, young human,] Seeker said. [I hope you realize that this is not really a small thing you are asking for. I don't believe the leadership will be happy with that idea. What exactly do you offer in return?]

[I have a number of magical items that I believe would be very useful to aranea, including one that allows telepathic communication over vast distances. Since I am the inventor and maker of such devices, I am open to requests in regard to their modification to suit your needs better. Since I am also a capable mage in general, I can help you out in any task that would benefit from human-style magic. And finally, I have access to important news that I would rather not discuss at this time, and which I suspect would greatly interest you.]

There was a short pause as the aranea absorbed this, after which it responded with a note of tentative acceptance.

[I see,] said Seeker. [As I said, I am not in a position to agree to any deals, but I shall present your case to the matriarch and we'll see the result. Is there anything else you wish for me to note?]

[Not really, no. I would like to know how I can contact you properly in the future, if you don't mind.]

Seeker was silent for a few moments before sending him a mental map of Korsa's lower sewers with three distinct locations marked with a tiny blue sun.

[You can contact us by going to any one of these three places, but please don't be impatient. It will probably take a couple of days before we're prepared to talk to you again and impatience isn't going to endear you to us.]

[Fair enough.] Zorian said. He had no intention of staying inside Korsa for days while they deliberated on whether to give him the time of the day or not, but fortunately he didn't have to. He could kill two birds with one stone by giving them means of contacting him wherever he may be, while also providing a tangible example of what he was offering to them.

He removed a large wooden disc out of his jacket and placed it on the ground before him.

[This is a telepathic relay,] Zorian told Seeker. [Anyone touching it will be able to get ahold of the person holding the matching pair, regardless of distance. In this particular case, that someone is me. I'm not going to be in Korsa for long so use this to contact me when you've reached your decision.]

[I'm not bringing a possible bomb into the settlement,] Seeker said. [But I guess there is no harm in dragging it off to some forgotten corner where no one will stumble upon it until we come back for it again. Farewell, Zorian Kazinski. Events permitting, we shall meet again in a few days.]

- break -

Zorian wasn't idle while the Sword Divers deliberated whether to accept his offer or not – he left Korsa to continue searching for more aranean colonies. Sadly, none of the other colonies were as easy to find as theirs, despite living beneath much smaller settlements. By the time the Sword Divers contacted him again eight days later, he only found one more colony. Illustrious Gem Collectors lived under a small village near Ticlin and, although perfectly friendly and polite, immediately informed him that they had an exclusive contract with the leaders of the village to only engage in trade with them and none else. Unfortunate. That said, they were perfectly willing to tell Zorian the locations of five other webs in their vicinity that might be more open to the idea, so that was still a win in his book.

Before Zorian had the chance to check out any of them, however, he *finally* received a call from the Sword Divers that they were ready to make a deal. At this point the restart only had a week and a half left in it, so Zorian doubted he would get much out of the agreement, but he went to meet with them regardless.

When he reached the designated meeting place, however, he found only two aranea waiting for him, which was very suspicious. His experience with the aranea, limited as it may be, told him there should have been a minimum of three – one negotiator and two guards. More realistically, it should have been even more of them. The Cyrian matriarch had been fond of carting at least four honor guards along with her, and that was when meeting with little old him that she knew for a fact was no threat to her. Illustrious Gem Collectors sent a total of eight aranea in their greeting party.

His suspicions were confirmed when the two aranea revealed they were just guides, meant to take him where the *real* meeting was to take place. Zorian was instantly alarmed, and his paranoia was not assuaged in the least when the two aranea proceeded to lead him deep, deep into the Dungeon beneath Korsa. Too deep for his liking.

"Okay, we're stopping here. This is as far as I'm willing to go," said Zorian out loud, purposely not bothering to communicate with his guides telepathically. His voice resonated unnervingly in the large cavern they were in, and the two aranea flinched at the harsh sound of his voice.

[Please, be patient,] one of them said nervously. [We're not far from the meeting place. It will only take a little while to reach it.]

"Well, then it shouldn't be too big of a problem for you to go fetch them and tell them to come here," Zorian said. "The exact place shouldn't matter much unless you are trying to lead me into an ambush."

The sudden stiffening of their bodies told Zorian everything he needed to know. He had just enough time to channel mana into the 'mind shield' spell inscribed on the medallion he wore under his shirt for the occasion before two mental attacks slammed into his newly-erected barrier like a pair of sledgehammers. He immediately fired an overpowered magic missile at one of the aranea in front of them, crushing her like a grape. Her mind instantly winked out and disappeared from his mind sense.

The other aranea, realizing it would never batter down his mental shield fast enough, jumped straight at him, fangs bared. It bounced back harmlessly off the shield he erected in front of himself. Zorian drew his spell rod out of his belt and pointed it at her.

"Why do this?" Zorian asked her. "Tell me and maybe I won't just incinerate you on the spot?" Zorian asked her.

She didn't answer. After a second, Zorian realized with some embarrassment she couldn't, seeing how his mind was totally shielded from her at the moment. He dismissed the shield for the moment, but kept the spell rod trained at her.

[Please, I don't know anything!] she mentally whined. Zorian kept alert for any surprises she might send at him over the telepathic link, but she didn't even try. She seemed completely overcome with terror. [I was just supposed to lead you there, nobody told me the reasons! Please don't

kill me, I don't want to die!]

Zorian growled before shoving the suddenly glowing spell rod at her. Her fear spiked for a moment and she let a terrified screech, curling upon itself in preparation for her demise... and then suddenly stopped when all that happened was a bubble of force springing into existence around her.

Just then Zorian felt two additional aranean signatures speeding towards him from the direction his two 'guides' had been leading him to. Then another, and another...

Shit. The two must have sent a warning to the main ambush force. He gave the surviving 'guide' a brief glare, causing her to curl up inside her force cage, and then started running towards the surface. He knew for a fact that humans were way faster than aranea so it should be possible to simply outrun the pursuers and-

There were eight more aranean minds in front of him, blocking off his path of retreat.

Zorian cursed his rotten luck and he skidded to a halt, trying to think of a way out of this. His mind shield wasn't going to last long against... 16 araneas!? No, 18, two were just slow runners apparently.

Six telepathic attacks slammed into his mind shield, failing to break it but causing him to stagger drunkenly as his vision swam and his balance went haywire. He wondered for a moment why only six of them had attacked his mind when so many more of them were in range before he remembered his talks with Novelty about telepathic combat. Battering down mental shields like this one too vigorously could easily destroy the mind underneath.

Seven attacks this time. His mind shield still held, but only just barely, and he collapsed on his knees in response regardless.

They weren't trying to kill him. Of course not – what would have been the point of that? No, they were aiming to capture...

Zorian almost lost consciousness as nine attacks slammed into his mental shield, crushed it like an egg and then ripped straight into his unprotected mind. The pain was excruciating, blanking out all thought and making it impossible to concentrate on anything. There was something he needed to do, he was sure, but for the life of him he couldn't remember what exactly it was...

He felt his muscles lock up as an alien mind seized his motor control away from him and started rooting in his head for facts and memories. He had to do... something... had to...

Suddenly an image flashed before him, of two necklaces hanging from his neck, one of them inscribed with the defensive spell that ultimately failed him and the other that contained...

His mind suddenly snapped back into place, his course of action clear. Activate the suicide rings, that's what he had to do. He felt the alien mind panic as it realized what he was going to do, and felt three more attacks rip through his thoughts. They were far weaker than the ones that broke through his shield, but his mind was unprotected now and they felt like hot knives driven into his brain. He held onto the thought, though, the idea that he had to activate those rings no matter what. He forgot what the rings really did when the mental knives hit, forgot why they mattered or where he was and what he was doing, but he still knew what he had to do. Had to... had to...

A weak, gentle pulse of mana poured into the rings around his neck and the world suddenly became awash in light and heat.

Then there was only darkness.

- break -

Like many times before, Zorian woke up in his room back in Cirin. However, there was no Kirielle jumping on him to wake him up this time, and it was late in the evening instead of early in the morning.

Also, he had a blinding headache. Can't forget about that part.

Suddenly the door cracked open and a familiar head peaked inside tentatively, as if afraid what it would find inside. Zorian squinted, his vision blurry without his glasses, and gave Kirielle a searching look.

Her eyes immediately widened in surprise for some reason. He reached out to her mind in order to understand what was going on and-

"Ow," he croaked painfully. Okay, apparently he wasn't supposed to do that.

"Mother! He's awake! He woke up! He woke up!" Kirielle shouted, thundering down the stairs. Zorian winced at the sound and tried to remember what happened. How the hell did he mess himself up this badly so early in the restart? The last thing he remembered was...

Suddenly his memories came rushing back in, along with a fresh wave of pain, and he remembered everything. Well, not literally *everything* – his memories of everything after he confronted the 'guides' were fuzzy and jumbled out of order – but enough of it to understand what happened to him.

Those treacherous, motherfucking *slimes*!

"Zorian?"

Zorian jerked in surprise at his mother's voice, broken out of his recollection.

"Uh... I'm... sort of fine?" Zorian mumbled. "My head is killing me, but I don't think it's anything serious. Can you hand me my glasses?"

His vision cleared immensely with his glasses on, allowing him to see just how worried mother looked as she stared at him. He winced internally. He was pretty sure he knew what the problem was, but better feign ignorance...

"What happened to me?" he asked.

"You wouldn't wake up," Mother said. "You scared Kirielle like you wouldn't believe – she came running down this morning, bawling her eyes out, saying she killed you. Well, you obviously weren't *dead* but nothing we did could shock you awake either. We summoned a doctor, but he couldn't find anything wrong with you. As far as he could tell, you just suddenly fell into a coma for no reason."

He nodded slowly. That sounded about right. The Sword Divers really did a number on him – wait, what was that first part?

"Killed me?" he asked incredulously.

"I didn't say that!" Kirielle protested, suddenly entering the room and carrying a bowl of soup in her hands. "Mother is just making things up! It's just that I... um..."

"Relax, Kiri," Zorian sighed. "There is no way you jumping on top of me could have caused this."

The silence that followed clued him in that he'd made some sort of mistake. What did he...?

Oh. Oh damn.

"How'd you know I did that?" asked Kirielle.

"Because... that's what you always do?" Zorian tried, his mind still a little fuzzy and unresponsive. Probably why he made that kind of stupid mistake in the first place. "Hey, how about that soup, huh? Is that for me?"

"Not always," Kirielle huffed sullenly, thrusting the bowl at him. Whew, one bullet dodged. Mother was still giving him suspicious looks, though...

Zorian considered things as he practically inhaled the bowl of soup in front of him (the arena may have scoured his mind, but there was nothing wrong with his stomach and he had not eaten for an entire day). This whole restart was probably a bust. The headache was bound to stay with him for weeks, only gradually going away, and he would be pretty useless while it lasted. On top of that, he wasn't sure if mother would even let him go to the Academy after an episode like that, so it might be impossible to leave the house without flat out running away. It might be best to just spend the entire month recovering and making sure his attackers didn't saddle him with any nasty surprises or permanent consequences.

He glanced at mother and Kirielle, who were both still giving him concerned looks, as if expecting him to fall apart at any particular moment, and then the empty soup bowl in his hand.

"So," he said. "You wouldn't happen to have more of this stuff, would you?"

- break -

Like he expected, mother didn't want to even hear about him going back to the academy so soon after his inexplicable coma and insisted he remain at home to recover. However, she and father had arranged for their trip to Koth in three days' time, and she was clearly loath to delay it. Since the last thing Zorian wanted was to spend any more time around his parents than necessary (even though mother had been surprisingly nice to him at the moment, he knew the effect would wear off after a few days), he was fully on board with her going through with their original plans and leaving him alone at home to recover.

In the end, mother and father did not need too much convincing to leave for their extended visit to Daimen. Zorian just had to promise to stay home for at least a month before heading back to the academy, with neighbors occasionally checking up on him to make sure he was keeping to his end of the bargain. Oh, and take Kirielle off their hands, but he no longer considered that such a chore as he once did.

Interestingly, this was the first time since he got stuck in the time loop that he had spoken to his father again. It only took a single snide comment about his 'weak, fainting son' for him to remember why. If he was lucky, this would be the last restart he had to interact with the man.

The month passed in quiet recovery. Kirielle was initially enthusiastic about 'nursing him back to health', but it took her all of two days before she got bored of playing nurse and dumped all of the cooking and household chores in his lap. He was fine with it, really – she meant well, but he wasn't a big fan of burned steak and half-cooked eggs, which was just about the only thing she knew how to make. That seemed to signify to her that he was okay, though, because she began pestering him for magic lessons soon after. Not having anything better to do with his time, he agreed. She showed much more patience for that than she did for cooking, at least.

As the restart gradually dragged to its close, Zorian breathed a sigh of relief. The attack had no lasting consequences he could detect. The headaches were annoying, but thankfully subsided quickly. By the end of the third week, they were completely gone. He had no problems using his powers after the second week or so, and he noticed no holes in his memory – even the memories of the final attack had gradually un-jumbled themselves into a proper timeline by the end of the first week, although the very end was hard to interpret due to his less than coherent state at the

time. The matriarch's memory package was thankfully still whole and intact, waiting for the day he was good enough to open it properly.

He had been lucky. That could have gone far worse for him than it had in the end. Far, far worse. If he hadn't managed to activate his suicide rings in time...

But no matter – live and learn. He would just have to make sure he came better prepared when he visited the other aranea communities in the next restart. He had five other candidates from the Illustrious Gem Collectors, and they can't *all* be treacherous jackasses like the Sword Divers, right? Still, he had every intention of taking better precautions in the future to make sure something like the previous restart could never happen again.

If another group of aranea tried to betray him in the future, he would be ready to show them just how big of a mistake they made in attacking him.

36. A Battle of Minds

Chapter 036 A Battle of Minds

Eventually, the month-long recuperation period came to an end. Zorian spent the last few hours of that restart with Kirielle, attending Cirin's own celebration of the summer festival. Kirielle was very happy with him, because apparently she was never allowed to wander around or stay up so late during the previous festivals. He didn't really reciprocate her excitement, to be honest – Cirin's summer festival was the same as it was every year: incredibly dull. He found himself almost wishing for Ibasan invaders to make an appearance, just to liven the place up a bit.

Okay, no. No, he didn't. The whole thing was still very boring – that's what he meant.

Regardless, with the beginning of the new restart (initiated by the familiar feeling of Kirielle jumping on top of him to wake him up), he was ready to once again tackle the problem of contacting the aranea and getting them to teach him mind magic. It didn't work all too well last time, but he had a whole month to consider what went wrong and how to fix it and he was willing to give it another go. Though not immediately, of course – teleporting to the nearest aranean web right from the start would be stupid. He had no intention of getting anywhere near one until he had already tested some tactics and equipped himself accordingly. Consequently, he started the restart in the same way he had started most of the previous ones: by going to Knyazov Dveri.

He did two things before anything else after entering the town. First, he descended into the local dungeon to pick up all the mana crystals he knew the location of... though he didn't sell a single one in the Delver Village, or even the town above, so hopefully there would be no uproar and spying attempts on him this time around. Secondly, he saved both Alanic and Lukav from the assassins – even though he had no intention of pursuing lessons from Alanic in this restart. One of his reasons was purely emotional – both men had helped him a lot, and it felt wrong to let them die when he was already there, capable of preventing their deaths, even if it was meaningless in the long term – but the other reason was that saving them gave him some relatively non-threatening combat practice. He knew he could defeat the undead boars trying to ambush Lukav and the attack party assaulting Alanic's temple without dying, but they were still life-and-death battles that he had to take seriously.

One of these days, when he finally got some mind magic expertise from the aranea, he was going to capture the two mages involved in the assault on Alanic's temple and trawl through their memories to see if they knew anything important. Maybe some of the gunmen too...

But he was getting ahead of himself. No counting his chickens before they hatch – better worry about actually learning said mind magic before thinking about what he would do once he had it.

The first and most obvious problem he had to tackle was what to do if things went wrong again. No matter what precautions he decided to take, there was always a possibility he would bite off more than he could chew or end up caught off-guard. Technically, he had his suicide rings for that, but there was one thing that struck him about his altercation with the Sword Divers – how slow he had been about activating them. He should have blown himself up the moment it became obvious that the situation had become hopeless, instead of waiting for the last possible moment like he had. He could think up a lot of excuses for himself, but at the end it all came down to one simple fact: he didn't want to die. He had a powerful survival instinct, and it was not easy for him to consciously kill himself... even if he knew, on an intellectual level, that it wouldn't be permanent. Thus, he had waited until he was absolutely *sure* he wasn't getting out of that situation alive and intact, and it had almost cost him everything.

All things considered, Zorian didn't want to become jaded, accustomed to dying and suicide – that seemed a bad attitude to have, especially once he left the time loop. That left two main ways he could see to deal with the problem. One was to set up a bunch of contingencies into his suicide rings, allowing them to activate automatically in certain cases. Another was to have more options to choose from when faced with disaster – something other than 'fight to the death or kill yourself'. A retreat option.

Contingencies sounded like a good idea, and Zorian even had some experience making them thanks to his studying of warding – a discipline that made heavy use of contingencies to determine when it should activate particular defenses. Unfortunately, most warding schemes used relatively easy-to-define triggers such as 'a human touches the object' or 'a living being not keyed into the wards enters the area'... defining a trigger for a contingency that would kill him should his mind be tampered with but wouldn't activate the moment he engaged in telepathic communication of any sort or hit his head or became dizzy or a million other things which were beyond him at the moment. Even if he could make such a thing, he would still have to exhaustively test it to make sure it was reliable... by working with a friendly aranea. Which, uh, kind of made it useless for his current needs.

So he cheated. Instead of creating a nuanced, sophisticated contingency, he made the metaphorical equivalent of a sledgehammer. Specifically, he made a contingency that would kill him the moment he lost consciousness or suffered a sufficiently strong headache... but only if he turned it on. It would normally stay dormant, to cut down on unwanted activations, but he could activate it on a moment's notice if he found himself in a dangerous situation. He wasn't terribly happy with that solution, but it would do for now. He just had to remember to turn it off once the danger had passed, lest he explode the next time he went to sleep. That would be so very embarrassing...

That being done, he turned his attention to the retreat option. He had considered everything from talking to Lukav about transforming into a rock worm or some other tunneling creature, alteration spells that would allow him to create his own paths and sanctuaries underground, phasing magic, haste spells, and more. But ultimately, his mind kept going back to teleportation. It was the ultimate form of mobility magic, and everything else was just a poor substitute. If he could somehow bypass Dungeon interference to teleport away, he could simply avoid ambushes like the ones the Sword Divers had used against him instead of resorting to suicide in order to evade capture.

Fortunately, during the month-long recuperation, Zorian had come up with an idea of how he could side-step his current limitation as far as teleportation was concerned. Which was why, before descending into the dungeon, he turned one of the large stones he found on the outskirts of Knyazov Dveri into a recall anchor.

The recall spell was outright made specifically for quick retreats, and the link forged between the caster and the anchor ensured they could teleport out even from areas warded against teleportation. Well, so long as the wards were basic ones, since those protections simply disrupted the targeting part of the teleport rather than inhibiting dimensional warping as such. Consequently, Zorian had a feeling the spell would work to yank him back to the anchor, even through the Dungeon interference.

He was right... sort of. He had found that past a certain depth, the strain on the link became too much and it snapped. Before that happened, however, the spell worked flawlessly, allowing Zorian to quickly teleport away to the surface. The depth past which it ceased to work was too shallow for his liking, but he was confident he could strengthen the link. Over the next couple of days, he worked to combine several marking spells and his knowledge of spell formula in order to create a stronger anchor for the recall spell – one that would allow it to power through *any* amount of rock and Dungeon interference. He was largely successful in this, though the anchor object had to be pretty large to contain the final spell formula he designed. No matter, there was no need to make the anchor particularly portable for what he had in mind.

Satisfied that both of his projects bore fruit, Zorian spent the rest of the week creating various portable traps and magic items... including a more combat-worthy version of his wooden golem. Golems, having no minds, were almost entirely immune to aranean mind magic, and Zorian intended to bring one with him under the explanation that it was his helper and luggage carrier. Partially true, since the golem he'd made wasn't exactly the mobile wardstone and murder statue that professional war golems were... but in the end it was still a painfully obvious bodyguard construct and Zorian fully expected the aranea to recognize it as such. Having such a guardian trailing behind him was bound to make even the most opportunistic aranea think twice about going after him.

Or at least he hoped so. He also hoped they wouldn't feel *too* threatened by the construct, since they might simply refuse to talk to him at all if it made them too nervous around him...

Well, no matter. He would risk it. Gathering all of his equipment, he teleported himself and his golem to the one aranean colony that had been friendly to him the last time around. It was time to pay the Illustrious Gem Collectors a visit.

- break -

The last time Zorian had visited the aranean web that called itself Illustrious Gem Collectors, he found a colony that specialized in harvesting various precious stones that were abundant in their local underworld and traded them to the nearby human village in exchange for various human-produced goods. They were miners, essentially. They informed him straight away that they had agreed not to trade with any humans except the ones at the village, but gave him the locations of five other webs that might be more willing to help him. Since his main goal had been to locate as many aranean webs as possible and sound them out, Zorian had accepted this explanation at face value and moved on. However, after thinking about it for a while, he realized he had been kind of stupid. Just because they couldn't trade with him didn't mean they couldn't receive gifts. He should have given them one – aside from the fact they may have been even more helpful if he had done so, there was also a chance they immediately alerted the webs they sent him to about his coming. In which case he definitely wanted them to put in a good word for him, which would be far more likely if he were handing out gifts to every group he visited.

Hell, he even had a perfect gift for them. Although he cashed in on a lot of the crystallized mana he found in Knyazov Dveri's local underworld, he left a fair amount for his own tinkering and for situations like this. He was pretty sure the Illustrious Gem Collectors would have no problems accepting a gift of crystallized mana, since they traded similar items to the village all the time and it would not be in the least bit suspicious of them to have a couple of mana crystals in their possession.

Zorian entered the tunnels that held the Gem Collectors' colony and contacted the nearest sentry in the manner shown to him by the web's matriarch during his last visit. If the web found it in any way unusual that a human knew how to properly greet them and ask for audience, they never mentioned it. Instead he was soon presented with the web's matriarch, She Who Eats Fire and Sees Gold, and her escort of 10 other aranea. Huh, two more guards than the last time... apparently having his golem trail after him *did* have an effect. Still, while the matriarch was noticeably more nervous around him this time, she did not act outraged at his addition and she gave him essentially the same speech she had the last time around. They were honored by the visit, but they had prior commitments and agreements and couldn't deal with him so here's a bunch of other webs he could pester for help instead. Only this time they gave him eight names instead of five. Aside from the Rose Labyrinth Dwellers, Yellow Cavern Guardians, Filigree Sages, River Navigators and Luminous Advocates that he'd already known about, she also gave him the location of the Talisman Bearers, Ghost Serpent Acolytes and Silent Doorway Adepts. Strange. Why the extra information this time around?

[Is there something special about those last three webs?] he asked.

[Ah, so you have heard of them then?] the matriarch said, making her own conclusions about his question. [Yes, they are a bit... *shady* in their dealings with others, human and aranea alike. I wouldn't normally send a young mage like you to webs like theirs, but you seem like someone who can take care of himself.]

She gave his golem a significant look.

[He's just my luggage carrier,] Zorian said.

[Of course he is,] the matriarch said, a touch of amusement embedded in her telepathic message. [I'm sure those glyphs on its surface are purely aesthetic too. Leaving that aside, is there anything else we could do for you?]

[You have done more than I could have possibly hoped for, honored matriarch,] Zorian answered honestly.

He beckoned the golem to come closer and pulled out a box from the backpack it was carrying, pointedly ignoring the wave of tension that rippled throughout the assembled aranea at the action. He then opened the box, revealing several pieces of crystalized mana and placed it in front of the matriarch.

[Please,] he said. [Take this as a small token of my appreciation for your help.]

The matriarch stared at the box without a word for several seconds before becoming agitated. No, wait, she was just trying to mimic shaking her head with her entire body.

[I cannot accept this,] she protested.

Zorian frowned. [Surely the village leadership isn't so insistent about your trade agreement as to keep you from accepting gifts?]

[It is not that! Your gift – it is simply too generous,] the matriarch said. [It's too much.]

[I respectfully disagree,] said Zorian firmly. [You were amicable and honest with me, and you told me where to go even if you could not help me yourself. You've most likely saved me months of searching by telling me where I can find more webs. I feel this is the least I can do for wasting your time with this meeting.]

The matriarch remained silent after that. After a while, Zorian figured she was not going to say anything and that this was effectively the end of their meeting.

[In any case, I suppose it's time for me to leave,] Zorian said. [Until we meet a-]

[Wait,] the matriarch said, interrupting his farewell. [One of the webs I told you about. The Luminous Advocates.]

[Yes?] asked Zorian curiously.

[They are a web dedicated to honing our psychic abilities as much as possible, even by aranean standards. Among other things, that means they are intensely interested in studying rare cases, such as aranea with unique talents... or human psychics. They will want to work with you every bit as much as you want to work with them. Always keep that in mind, because they're liable to pretend otherwise when you deal with them.]

[I... see,] Zorian responded. [That is a very useful thing to know about. I thank you for your advice, wise matriarch.]

[Oh, there is no need to flatter me.] She said. [I'm just helping a good, generous soul get forward in life. Besides, the Luminous Advocates are snotty and arrogant, always looking down on us as 'mere miners' and thinking their mastery of the mind arts makes them so much better than everyone else... in my opinion, they deserve to be taken down a bit. But never mind that, I've just realized I've been a terrible host. If you would be willing to follow me deeper into the tunnels, I would love to give you a brief tour of our humble home. We can talk some more while we walk.]

Zorian agreed, but quietly turned on the suicide contingencies before following after her.

Just in case.

- break -

Despite Zorian's concerns, the brief tour of the place offered by the matriarch turned out to be just that. There was no sudden ambush or sinister reveals, just a stroll through the tunnels with some running commentary. Zorian could tell he was only being shown the less interesting, outer parts of the settlement... but the tour was really more of an excuse to have a conversation and exchange some information, so he didn't mention it.

The matriarch gave him a little more information about the other webs. The Rose Labyrinth Dwellers were somewhat unique in the sense that they never visited the surface. Most aranea webs lived underground but were heavily dependent on the surface for their survival. Not so for the Rose Labyrinth Dwellers – they were only active underground, and were rather mysterious even to other aranea. The matriarch didn't know how they would feel about teaching him, but she seemed sure they wouldn't attack. The Yellow Cavern Guardians had apparently found one of the rare underground fungal forests and made it their home – they were fiercely protective of their home, knowing just how tempting a target it was for just about anyone, but the matriarch felt they were worth the visit. The Filigree Sages specialized in 'webcraft', which was basically the aranea equivalent of spell formulas – instead of carving glyphs onto items, they anchored their spells into web constructs for some reason. Zorian didn't understand why they would do that, since web constructs were bound to be far more fragile than glyphs carved into stone and metals, but it seemed to be a thing among the aranea. It was probably a convenience thing – aranean limbs weren't exactly made for carving and chiseling things, so they probably had to use alteration magic any time they wanted to do such things. Easier to just spin some webs. The River Navigators made their homes on the banks of an underground river, and had mastered the skill of making boats and using them to travel down its length and back. This allowed them to range a lot further than most aranea could manage, and thus gather more resources. They were very active in trading with humans, but mostly for material possessions rather than psychic instruction. Finally, there were the Luminous Advocates. Their territory had little in the way of natural resources, so they mostly traded their mind magic expertise to other aranean webs instead of dealing with humans much, but that was due to lack of means rather than wants. The matriarch insisted that the Luminous Advocates were clearly jealous of the Illustrious Gem Collectors' wealth, and otherwise made some snide comments about their character and even sexual potency. She did admit, albeit grudgingly, that they were his best bet if approached correctly.

Zorian was somewhat surprised how relatively advanced the aranea in the local region were with regards to their crafting abilities. The Cyorian web mostly traded with the surface for all their crafting needs and didn't produce anything except silk and processed monster parts. It reminded him of Novelty and her desire to learn 'human construction magic'... and thinking of Novelty promptly made him feel guilty and angry, so he dropped that trail of thought soon enough.

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Of the last three webs, the matriarch knew little beyond generalities. The Talisman Bearers were apparently heavily magic-focused, most of them carrying large metal discs full of spell formulas strapped to their bodies. The Ghost Serpent Acolytes had abandoned the aranean Great Web belief in order to worship some kind of native spirit they found. The Silent Doorway Adepts had either some kind of stealth magic or great teleportation skills, or maybe both, because they had a reputation for getting into inaccessible places and disappearing from them just as easily. All three had a bit of a shady reputation. The Talisman Bearers were known to be very greedy for magic they could use, especially magic items, which could be either very good or very bad for Zorian. The Ghost Serpent Acolytes slavishly followed the guidance of their guardian spirit, and the Ghost Serpent was known to be a little... erratic at times. The Silent Doorway Adepts were thieves, or at least had a reputation for such.

Zorian decided to put all three of them firmly at the bottom of his list of aranean webs to visit.

For his part, Zorian told a little bit about himself to the matriarch - how he was studying magic in Cyoria, and how he had met the aranea there. How they had helped him make sense of his abilities and learn how to control them. How they are all dead now, wiped out in totality.

[So Cyoria changes hands once again, does it?] the matriarch asked rhetorically. [I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. Do you happen to know which web took over?]

[None at the moment,] Zorian said. [It wasn't a rival web that destroyed them. It was... something else. Most likely some monster rising from the deeper section of the dungeon. Cyoria has had a bit of a problem with that recently.]

[I have heard something about that from the night runners,] the matriarch said. [But I didn't know it was that bad. Still, expect a new web to move in soon enough. Cyoria is a tempting prize. Not for us, mind you, the Illustrious Gem Collectors are happy enough with their lot, but plenty of ambitious webs would jump at the chance to claim the place for themselves.]

[Night runners?] asked Zorian.

[A name for aranea that go between different webs to bring news and conduct trade. Don't go looking for them. Night runners generally don't like humans. Their whole existence revolves around crossing over vast stretches of human-controlled land. Many die to mages and guns in the process. They wouldn't appreciate some random human tracking them down, regardless of the reason. The whole point of being a night runner is evading humans, after all, and especially mages.]

[Got it. Don't bother the night runners unless I want a fight,] said Zorian.

[Have you ever gotten in an actual fight with an aranea?] the matriarch asked curiously.

[Um. Sort of,] said Zorian. [It didn't end all that well for me. While we are on that topic, have you ever heard of the Sword Divers web?]

[Can't say that I have. Where are they from?]

[They live under Korsa,] Zorian answered.

[Oh, no wonder, then! Korsa is really far from us. I'm afraid that aranean webs have very little contact with webs outside of our immediate vicinity. Other than the news we get from the night runners and the occasional aranean explorer, we know little of what happens in distant webs. It may be strange to hear this, but we actually have a better picture of what humans are doing at any given point than our own kind. What did you want to know about the Sword Divers anyway?]

[They arranged for a meeting with me and then tried to ambush me when I got there,] Zorian said.

[Ah,] the matriarch said quietly. [I am sorry to hear that. Treacherous webs like that bring a bad name to our kind.]

[So you can't tell me why they did that?] Zorian asked.

[It could be any number of things,] the matriarch said, adding a mental equivalent of a shrug. [Aranea are not nearly as homogenous as humans in term of culture-] Zorian silently boggled at the notion of humans being culturally homogenous. [-since the relative isolation of each web quickly causes webs to develop their own... peculiarities. Perhaps you insulted them somehow. Perhaps it was how they test anyone wanting to meet with their leaders. Perhaps they were simply greedy and decided you would be an easy target. I'd personally assume the latter, but who could possibly tell?]

Soon after that, the conversation died down and he parted ways with the Illustrious Gem Collectors. The matriarch told him to drop by for another chat when he was done scouting out the other webs to tell her how it went, which Zorian interpreted as 'come back again soon with some more expensive gifts', but agreed to anyway. He meant it too – this visit had turned out to be far more productive than he had been hoping, and who knew what else he might learn from the matriarch if he could get her talking again. Stopping by before the restart ended shouldn't be too much of a

hassle.

The next day he set off towards the Rose Labyrinth Dwellers to begin his task in earnest.

- break -

Despite having detailed instructions about where they live, it took Zorian an entire day of searching before he encountered any of their sentries. And an entire day of wandering the lightless tunnels, constantly doubling back after taking wrong turns and fighting the denizens of the Dungeon. That black, fire-breathing beetle whose carapace shrugged off both kinetic force and fire really gave him a scare, but thankfully it was rather slow and freezing it solid finally allowed him to kill it.

The Rose Labyrinth Dwellers really lived up to the 'Labyrinth' part of their name.

[Zorian Kazinski of Cyoria,] the aranean spokesperson began. The local matriarch declined going out to meet him, sending a small greeting party of four aranea instead. They had taken their sweet time considering his offer, silently communicating between themselves for nearly two hours, but it seemed they have finally reached their decision. [We have discussed your request and reached a decision. We agree to teach you in the ways of our Gift, but only if you accept our terms.]

[Those being?] asked Zorian.

[You will live with us for the duration of your lessons. You will eat and sleep in our settlement, hunt with our hunters, patrol our territory with our scouts and otherwise act as a member of our web.]

Zorian balked at the terms. How the hell did they expect him to agree to that!? He knew for a fact that the aranean idea of food was vastly different from the human one, for one thing. But frankly, even ignoring the sheer logistical problems of that idea, it required him to trust them far more than he did. He'd be at their complete mercy all day, every day...

...which, now that he thought about it, was probably what they were going for. That, or they were trying to get rid of him via unreasonable terms.

[There is no negotiating these terms?] asked Zorian.

[No,] the spokesperson responded. [If you are not willing to commit yourself, how can you expect the same of us?]

[...I will have to think about it,] Zorian said. It was a dirty lie, of course, since he had already thought about it and rejected the idea with extreme prejudice. But there was no sense in being impolite. For all he knew, they thought they were being extremely reasonable.

[Take your time,] the spokesperson said. [It is not something to decide on quickly. You know where to find us if you're interested.]

- break -

[I am sorry, but we are going to have to refuse your request,] the aranea said. [Perhaps if you are still interested in a couple of months from now we might be able to help you, but we are currently busy with... the renovation of our settlement and cannot help you. I hope you understand.]

Zorian stared the two aranea in front of him. That the matriarch of the Yellow Cavern Guardians came to greet him with only one guard was already pretty strange, but her nervous, twitchy behaviors did nothing to still his paranoia. Thankfully, it didn't seem she was planning on doing anything to him, she just seemed generally stressed and frightened. In fact, her guard was just as nervous, and so was the sentry he initially contacted. The entire web seemed to be on edge for some reason.

The matriarch returned his stare with one of her own, her body shifting from time to time to switch focus between him and his golem, trying to divine something about them through intense scrutiny.

[I am sorry if I am making you nervous,] Zorian said. [I assure you that the golem is-]

[We are not threatened by your stupid *toy*!] She snapped. [We have far more pressing-]

She suddenly cut herself off and remained silent for a second before reestablishing telepathic communication.

[I am sorry. I let my temper get the better of me. Please, just leave. It is dangerous for you to remain here.]

[You are being threatened by someone,] Zorian guessed. A spike of emotion and images came from the link, hard to interpret but not totally incomprehensible. [Correction, *something*. A monster. A thing from the depths?]

[This talk is over,] the matriarch said icily. [If you don't go away, I will attack you.]

[Perhaps I could help?] Zorian tried.

[No, you cannot,] she said. [You are unwanted here. Leave. Now.]

What else could he do? He left.

[Yes.]

[Yes?] Zorian repeated in surprise. [Just like that?]

Bridge of Moonlight Connecting Ten Thousand Shores, the matriarch of the River Navigators, gave him a searching look. [Was I not supposed to agree? You gave a convincing offer. I could really use those telepathic relays to connect all our outposts together. I've been trying to buy some of those from the Filigree Sages for ages now, but the greedy bastards keep increasing the price.]

Honestly, considering how his previous visits had gone, he'd half-expected the River Navigators to consult the river currents about whether or not they should teach him and then inform him that the river said no. That was just about how his luck worked, apparently. But no, they just patiently listened to his offer and promptly agreed. It was almost anticlimactic, but Zorian wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

[The Filigree Sages have telepathic relays? And here I thought I was being original when I made them...] he complained. Though it kind of did make sense that some of the aranea would try to make something like that. It was probably more unusual that *no one else* had them...

[If it makes you feel any better, they are the only web I know of that have them, and they refuse to share them with the rest of us,] Bridge of Moonlight said. [They won't even sell the finished product to us, lest we figure out how to make them from live examples.]

Ah, of course - the tendency of spellcasters everywhere to jealously hoard their knowledge and share bare scraps with others. A major part of why Ikosian magical tradition was so successful was that it had mechanisms for overcoming that – widely-accessible schools to teach everyone proper basics, state-sponsored libraries to preserve spellbooks and make them available to aspiring mages, legal frameworks for apprenticeships and magical monopolies, and so on. Even with that, there were a lot of cases of mages taking priceless magical knowledge with them to their graves because they had never entrusted anyone with their secrets.

Zorian decided that if he ever managed to escape from the time loop alive, he was going to write a book about psychic powers to make sure people like him don't have to jump through the same hoops he had to in order to master their abilities. He wasn't sure how much of his knowledge would be transmissible through a simple written medium, but he would try.

Three days later, when Zorian provided the first shipment of telepathic relays and proved they worked as advertised (plus warded one of their storage caves against various vermin), they introduced him to Mind Like Fire, his new mind magic teacher.

[Your name is surprisingly short by aranean standards,] he told her.

[The names you hear are simply approximations of their original meaning in aranean mind-speak,] she said. [Our names are all of similar length, but since our languages are so different, it is often hard to translate certain concepts without ending up rather verbose. Though in my opinion, many aranea also enjoy making the translation as grandiose-sounding as possible. Are you ready for your lesson?]

[Yes.]

[Excellent. First, let me tell you what I mean to teach you. Feel free to stop me if you already know something I included in my lesson plan or have any objections.]

Zorian nodded, settling down on the small chair provided for him and glancing at his surroundings. The room they were in was pretty well done for something built and furnished deep in the dungeon by a bunch of giant telepathic spiders – it had a proper table and some chairs, a pair of decorative cabinets (they were completely empty, Zorian got curious and checked when he was left alone at one point), and even a couple of landscape paintings hanging of the walls. Only the lack of any windows and an expensive, clearly magical lamp perched on the table indicated that he was not in some medium-grade hotel on the surface.

He found it interesting that the River Navigators had a room in their settlements that was clearly intended for humans – it meant they received human visitors often enough they felt the need to make a guest room for them. He should probably ask them about that later.

[The first thing I intend to teach you is how to encase your mind in a defensive mental shell. It is one of the simplest and most expensive means of mental defense, but also one of the most effective ones. The name is indicative; much like your exoskeleton protects your soft, squishy insides-] Lady, I don't think you understand how human anatomy works... [-so too does this technique create a form of mental exoskeleton to protect your vulnerable thoughts.]

[So, basically, it is the psychic equivalent of a 'mind shield' spell?] asked Zorian.

[Show me,] she demanded.

Zorian complied. He channeled mana through the amulet hanging around his neck and his mind was instantly encased in a protective magical shell that repelled all mental intrusion.

For a full minute, his teacher remained silent and still, unable to establish telepathic communication with him but also not giving any indication that he should drop the spell. He decided to keep it up until she signaled him somehow, but that moment never arrived. Instead, after about two minutes of nothing happening, her telepathic voice rang in his head again.

Despite the fact the mind shield was still on.

[As I thought,] she said smugly. [The spell is neat in its simplicity, but it ultimately suffers from the same drawbacks common to nearly all human mind magic. Namely, it gives you no feedback whatsoever when attacks start interacting with your defenses. You didn't even feel it when I slipped past it, did you?]

[I do feel it when sufficiently powerful attacks interact with it,] Zorian protested.

[That's not feedback, that's damage leaking through without totally collapsing the whole thing,] she scoffed. [No, while this thing may have served you in the past, it is thoroughly inadequate for my purposes. A *real* mind shell, the sort I will teach you to produce, will be far better than this. It will be many times stronger than what your spell can manage, and infinitely more adaptive and responsive. You will be able to sense probing attacks, too subtle to actually damage your defenses but indicative of what your opponent is planning. You will be able to repair and reinforce your defenses without tearing the whole thing down and starting from scratch. You will be able to strike back without dropping your whole mental shield to do so...]

[Sounds wonderful,] Zorian said. He collapsed the spell, since it clearly wasn't doing anything at the moment. [Though if I may be so rude, I do think there is one thing where human magics generally beat your psychic powers.]

[Oh?]

[They generally require no attention from the caster to keep affecting the target, and they expose the caster to far less risk of mental retaliation by their victims. From what I can tell, that is not true for psychic powers.]

[True,] she acknowledged. [But I think the inflexible nature of those spells is too much of a weakness to make up for those advantages. But we've digressed enough – after you learn how to defend your mind a bit we will move onto attack and retaliation...]

It did not take long for Zorian to realize that Mind Like Fire was *very* serious about her job. Far from teaching him only the bare minimum and meeting him once a week or so like he had assumed she would, she scheduled lessons with him every single day and demanded every shred of effort and patience he could spare. The lessons basically consisted of him lovingly constructing a mental shell around his mind before Mind Like Fire mercilessly took it apart, only backing off when his defenses collapsed from the strain. It was a good thing he had decided not to turn on his suicide contingencies before going into her lessons, because they would have gone off at the end of the very first day due to all the headaches he had suffered in the process.

Still, Zorian couldn't complain. This was basically what he was searching for all this time, wasn't it? True, it was a lot more painful than he had imagined, leaving him bedridden for hours after the lessons ended, but it was also a lot more effective than he had thought it would be. His ability to shield his mind was improving fast, and after the first week Mind Like Fire started bringing 'guest teachers' to give him experience with attacks different from her own.

Not that everything was perfect. For one thing, Mind Like Fire had a Xvim-like obsession with getting the basics right and refused to teach him anything else until he mastered the 'mind shell' technique to her liking, and she had some pretty high standards. For another, the River Navigators spontaneously raised the price of their cooperation twice, first demanding of him another ten relays if he wanted to continue the lessons, and then urging him to help them kill some kind of giant mole monster that was threatening one of their outposts. The mole-thing didn't look particularly dangerous to Zorian, but apparently it was resistant to mind magic and too tough to bring down with their meager magical skills. Though annoyed at the sudden and completely unwarranted demands, Zorian decided to play things their way, easily producing another ten relays and luring the giant mole into a minefield he had set up for it. As tempted as he was to break the whole arrangement on principle, the fact was that Mind Like Fire was simply too good of a teacher to lose.

Before the restart ended, Zorian had once again visited the Illustrious Gem Collectors, gifted them some more crystalized mana (to the matriarch's continued protests that he was being too generous) and told them a little about his experiences. They had nothing new to tell him, however, so his visit was largely pointless in the end.

Upon the start of the next restart he once again teleported to Knyazov Dveri to perform his preparations and then promptly contacted the River Navigators with the offer, deciding not to contact the Illustrious Gem Collectors this time. The River Navigators were just as quick to accept his offer as they had been in the previous restart, and they once again assigned Mind Like Fire as his teacher.

Not particularly surprising, as he soon found out. Now that he showed some pre-existing skill, she actually allowed him to have some breaks during the lessons where she would tell him a little about herself and her web. She was literally their mind magic teacher, and was thus the most logical person for the job. Although she usually taught aranean children, rather than adults...

Maybe Zorian was a little too prideful, but the fact that they had sent their elementary school teacher to conduct his lessons kind of burned.

[Prepare yourself,] Mind Like Fire suddenly stated, and Zorian knew the break was over.

He quickly erected the shell around his mind, a simple blast of telepathic noise washing over it harmlessly. Mind blasts like that one were the simplest form of telepathic attack, one that even Zorian could produce, and they had no chance in hell of punching through a solid defense like he was currently sporting. It was the fastest attack most telepaths could manage, though, and Mind Like Fire always started a battle with one of those to see if she could catch him unprepared with it. That used to actually happen, back when he was still starting and was struggling to call up the mental shell on a moment's notice, but even after it stopped working on him she persisted in doing that at the start of every battle.

Immediately after the blast subsided, he felt pinpricks skittering across his shell, looking for flaws and weaknesses. He had tried to be clever in the past by deliberately creating weak spots and then quickly shoring them up when she committed to an attack, but he quickly learned that was a risky tactic to employ at his level of skill so these days he was more passive and reactive.

Soon enough, once she was convinced there were no obvious flaws in his defense, she tried to create some. Sudden, concentrated mental bursts slammed into his mental shell, seeking to crack it by concentrating all their energy against a specific portion of the shell. He recognized that attack as the one that the Sword Divers had used to smash his 'mind shield' spell and ravage his mind. Not surprising they had used that, he was informed, since that type of attack was specifically designed to punch through mental barriers. 'Mind spike', the aranea called it. Unlike the last time he was faced with this attack mode, however, he had a shiny new mental defense and was facing only one attacker. He felt the spikes hit his shield but it held, and he quickly repaired all the damage and reinforced that part of the shell to withstand future attacks.

Mind Like Fire promptly switched targets, bombarding another, different portion of his mental shell. And when that didn't work, she moved on to the next, and the next, steadily speeding up her attacks until Zorian was straining to hold his mental shell intact. She began mixing in low-powered probing attacks between mind spikes, masking the tiny pinpricks among the sheer intensity of her barrage and looking for any cracks created by her assault. Zorian frantically worked to patch up damage and reinforce the shell in places where he detected her probes, and somehow held on until her attack attenuated.

Success. His shell usually cracked during that last phase. Maybe now she would-

A massive vise of telepathic pressure closed around his mind from all sides, crushing and grinding without mercy or end. The attack, the unimaginatively but appropriately named 'mind crush', closed around his mental shell like an armored fist around a soap bubble. And, weakened as it was from the previous barrage, the shell promptly broke like one too. Zorian experienced a brief flash of blinding pain in his head before Mind Like Fire realized she'd won and let the attack dissipate.

"Motherfucker," Zorian swore loudly, massaging his temples and not even bothering with telepathy to express his displeasure. "Did you really have to finish things off with that attack?"

[Yes.] Mind Like Fire said simply.

"Ugh," Zorian groaned.

[I'll give you five minutes before we go for round two,] she said.

"I take back everything nice I've ever thought about you," Zorian told her. "You're pure evil."

[My other students agree with you. There is a reason why I was named Mind Like Fire, you see,] she said. [Four more minutes left.]

Damn it.

37. Slow Burn

Chapter 037

Slow Burn

As the weeks went by, Zorian became increasingly bored with Mind Like Fire's lessons. While they continued to pay results in terms of his increasing mental combat proficiency, they were also very repetitive and had increasingly marginal results. It didn't help that his mental defenses were by now too good to be casually collapsed by his teacher, which meant that he no longer ended the lessons with a raging headache and an urge to lay down for a few hours. The lessons mostly just taxed his patience now, leaving him a bit tired and frustrated but otherwise ready to do something else.

He decided to do just that. He had never really finished sounding out the rest of the aranea, wanting to get some basics of mental combat from the River Navigators first, but he was becoming increasingly certain that Mind Like Fire was stalling him with her demands at mastery in order to avoid teaching him anything more advanced. His mental defenses were already good enough, in his opinion, so there was no harm in giving the other webs a visit to see what their offer was.

The Luminous Advocates were his first destination. They were, after all, supposed to be very interested in teaching someone like him, as well as hungry for resources he could provide. Unfortunately, that didn't quite work out. Their initial offer was utterly ridiculous, calling for Zorian to pay a simply staggering amount of money and magical artifacts. He didn't agree to that, of course – couldn't, actually, even if he wanted to, since the whole thing would cost twice as much as he had on his person. Even if he gathered all of his savings and sold every single mana crystal he'd found under Knyazov Dveri, it still wouldn't be enough. It took more than 3 weeks to talk them into a more reasonable price, since they seemed to finally realize he was in a hurry. By that time, the restart was already near its end. Undeterred, he tried to approach them again over the next four restarts, varying his approach, but in the end only managed to reduce the negotiation period by a couple of days.

Admittedly, the few lessons he actually managed to finagle out of them really were top-notch. Not only did they give him some crucial advice in regards to strengthening his mental shell that really sped up his progress in Mind Like Fire's lessons, they also helped him hone other aspects of his psychic abilities. For instance, he was now capable of forming two-way telepathic links that allowed non-psychics to talk back to him mentally, as well as form links with multiple people at once. They even taught him how to better handle the information from divination spells which dumped their results directly into the mind of the caster. Some useful information, that. Nonetheless, Zorian decided to give up on seeking their help after the fourth restart. While their help was useful, the sheer amount of time and nerves he lost arranging for said help to actually materialize made the whole thing a poor deal in his mind. It didn't help that they categorically refused to teach him memory manipulation unless he subjected himself to a total memory probe, courtesy of their elders, which made their web a bit of a dead end as far as he was concerned. Because that was basically never going to happen.

Since negotiation with the Luminous Advocates involved a whole lot of waiting for the web to respond to his offers, Zorian had time to approach the Filigree Sages at the same time. They too took a lot of time to convince, although in their case it was because they were a suspicious bunch and also more than a little bit unhappy about him selling telepathic relays to the River Navigators. Thankfully, the first time he managed to convince them to teach him, he immediately found a shortcut that allowed him to drastically cut down on the negotiation time necessary to convince them. All he had to do was demonstrate his proficiency with spell formulas and promise to help them adapt human techniques to their own 'webcraft'. They cared about *that* a lot more than about any material trade goods, and so long as he did so it only took a week of negotiation before they agreed to teach him.

Zorian was more than a little shocked when he was first shown an example of the Filigree Sage's webcraft. He had expected something relatively simple and crude, like a piece of spider silk cloth with familiar Ikosian symbology embedded into it, or perhaps even individual threads woven into the glyphs. Instead, the Filigree Sage crafter he was to work with led him to a rectangular formation of stone pillars, in the middle of which was suspended a complex, multi-layered sphere made out of spider silk. The sphere glowed with pale white light in the darkness of the room, points of brighter lights constantly racing along this or that thread in a complicated dance that Zorian couldn't decipher. Every inch of its surface (as well as every inch of the inner layers too, he would later find out) was covered in glyphs. Unfamiliar, non-Ikosian glyphs. And his guide claimed this was just one of the lesser practice spheres, since they weren't going to bring a potentially-untrustworthy outsider anywhere near the real thing.

He had realized at that point that he had bitten off far more than he could chew. Helping the Filigree Sages refine their webcraft basically required becoming adept in a whole different tradition of making spell formulas. A tradition that descended from the Ikosian one, thus making the job much easier, but still. This was a task that could take *years*. Not something that you could do on the side while focusing on something else.

He still gave it an honest try (mostly by completely giving up on rest and free time for several restarts) and the Filigree Sages seemed pleased by his work, but in the end he decided that he simply couldn't justify the spent effort to himself. While the topic itself was extremely interesting – indeed, many researchers would have quite literally killed to be in his place, studying an otherwise unknown magical tradition – it was ultimately a distraction he, at the moment, didn't need. And really, the actual mind magic instruction he was getting in exchange for his work was little different from what the River Navigators were offering. He did admittedly get to experience a slightly different style of mental combat from the one practiced by River Navigators and most other aranean webs, since the Filigree Sages used methods that revolved around group combat. Not very useful to him, since he didn't have a fellow telepath to use it with, but he did learn some tricks to deal with multiple attackers.

Originally, the Filigree Sages were completely unwilling to teach Zorian any form of memory manipulation. However, after two restarts of studying their webcraft, it became impossible to pretend he was starting from scratch. The next time around, he used an excuse that he'd learned the bare basics from the Cyorian web. He was promptly taken to their matriarch (who had mostly ignored him up until then, preferring to have her underlings interact with him), who seemed very keen on sending an expedition to Cyoria with Zorian's help in order to establish some kind of

contact with the Cyorian web. Not even finding out they had all been killed dampened her enthusiasm for the idea of an expedition to Cyoria – it just meant the focus of the expedition shifted from establishing contact to looting the place down to bedrock. Lovely. Regardless, in exchange for transporting the expedition to Cyoria, protecting them from any threats and transporting them back, Zorian was promised... just about anything, really. Even memory manipulation was on the table.

Aside from the fact that agreeing to such a thing would require Zorian to go back to Cyoria, and the fact that he would be helping a group of aranea loot the remains of his friends, there was the little matter of him not being actually sure that the Cyorian web actually used any webcraft. He suspected they did, and many of the things the matriarch had mentioned in her stories and off-hand comments seemed to indicate so in retrospect, but he wasn't actually certain. It was just an excuse he made up to explain his otherwise inexplicable knowledge.

He should definitely go down into the ruins of Cyoria's web and check to see what's in there before agreeing to any such expeditions.

With the Luminous Advocates and the Filigree Sages essentially eliminated from the list of options, at least for the time being, Zorian was left with only three options to serve as an alternative to the River Navigators. The three 'shady' webs that the Illustrious Gem Collectors had warned him about. Zorian was about to start approaching them when Mind Like Fire finally decided to move on from basic telepathic combat drills.

- break -

When Mind Like Fire declared that Zorian's mental defenses were 'passable' and that they would be switching over to honing his offensive arsenal, he was cautiously optimistic but didn't expect much. Practice would probably become less painful, since Mind Like Fire would be on the receiving end of attacks this time, but he didn't really think his attacks would be very effective. Her mental defenses were bound to be excellent.

But then Mind Like Fire told him to hit her with his best shot and simply stood there, content to passively weather the attack and Zorian decided to oblige her. He dumped a positively huge amount of mana into his next attack, the most he could manage without the entire thing losing cohesion, and slammed it straight into her mental shell.

The results were beyond all of his expectations. Rather than simply bouncing off her mental shell like he had expected, the attack effortlessly blew her defenses away and slammed into her unprotected mind like a battering ram. She screeched in pain, spasming and flailing with her whole body, and, for a brief while, there was pandemonium as other nearby aranea burst into the room to see what the fuss was about. Zorian tried to explain what had happened without the whole thing devolving into a fight. For a moment he was sure he would have to flee and was already clutching the recall rod in his hand to teleport away, but Mind Like Fire recovered in time to defuse the situation.

She also insisted on continuing the lessons as if nothing notable had happened, and proceeded to shoo away all the other aranea that had come to her defense.

[Damnation,] Mind Like Fire grumbled once they were alone again. [Not only did I get taken down by a human rookie, but everyone saw it too. I won't live this one down for a long while.]

[Uh, sorry?] tried Zorian. He wasn't sure what to even tell her, in all honesty.

[Don't be,] she said. [It's my fault, really – your inexperience has automatically put me in the mind of one of our young and I foolishly assumed your attack would be like one of theirs. But while your skills at mental combat leave much to be desired, you are still a qualified mage with plenty of mana to burn and considerable experience in managing it. I should have let you face my best defenses and then lowered the strength afterwards. I should have waited to see what your strongest attack was like instead of making assumptions about how strong my shield needed to be. Let that be a lesson to you as well, should you ever teach someone – it is always unwise to be arrogant and carelessly presumptuous, lest you get taken down by some precocious hatchling.]

He was not a freaking hatchling! He was only a year away from being legally recognized as an adult, and was already one if the time spent in the time loop was factored in!

[I didn't do anything permanent, did I?] Zorian asked instead.

[No, of course not. Why do you think- Ah. I see that in my haste to bring your practical skills to a workable level, I have neglected some crucial bits of theory. Like what happens when an attacker manages to break through the defender's defenses.]

[Bad things?] tried Zorian.

[Yes, but perhaps not quite as bad as you'd think,] she countered. [To grossly simplify things, there are four main things one can do to an unshielded target. The first is to simply assault their mind telepathically, seeking to damage it. This is, in almost every case, simply a way to incapacitate the target for a while. It is very difficult to actually kill people through purely mental attacks – usually such attacks simply cause a lot of pain and make the target lose consciousness for a while. Maybe quite a while, and they may suffer from headaches, confusion and amnesia for a time, but even then they are almost guaranteed to eventually recover.]

[Oh, I didn't know that,] Zorian admitted. He honestly thought that getting hit by a sufficiently powerful telepathic barrage could cripple you permanently. Then again, 'for a while' could perhaps mean months or years, so still not something to take lightly. And he was pretty sure a pain-inducing attack could be easily adapted to an instrument of torture. [So you were never in any permanent danger, then, but you'll probably be hurting for a while.]

[Yes, that is the short of it.]

[And the other three things the attacker could do to the target?] Zorian asked.

[Well, the second possibility is that the attacker extracts information out of the target, either by reading their thoughts or probing their memories. Reading thoughts is the easiest option, of course, but often ineffective. Aranea, mages, and quite a few human civilians as well, have learned to maintain certain discipline over their surface thoughts, making it hard to pluck information out of their minds that way. That leaves deep memory reading, and this is not nearly as easy as it sounds, as most people have quite a lot of memories to sift through and can sense when someone is rooting through their heads and resist. Even non-psychics can resist deep memory scans, if they're strong-willed and the psychic isn't very practiced in the skill...]

Zorian remained silent. He had raised the possibility of being taught memory manipulation plenty of times in the past, and she had always told him he wasn't ready yet. He couldn't imagine her answer would be any different now. At least it wasn't a flat out no, he supposed.

[The third and fourth options are what we aranea call deep and surface manipulations. Surface manipulations consist of temporary manipulations, such as fooling the senses or amplifying a particular emotion in the victim to produce a desired reaction. Deep manipulations, on the other hand, are more... permanent. They consist of things such as modifying someone's memories, blanking out entire sections of their life, instilling lasting compulsions or turning them into unaware sleeper agents. Deep techniques are what a lot of humans associate mind magic with, but they are actually rarely used. Such lasting mental alterations require the attacker to dive deep into the victim's mind and spend a lot of time tweaking things, making them hard and time-consuming to use. This is not something you use in a fight – this is something you do to a foe that has been decisively defeated and cannot strike back at you at all. Even among us aranea it is considered something of a dark art. Few of us are proficient in its use.]

Zorian sighed. "This is all leading up to an explanation about why you don't want to teach me any memory manipulation, isn't it?" he said out loud.

[Yes and no,] Mind Like Fire said carefully.

"So a no couched in flowery language," said Zorian derisively. "Man, that's the third refusal in a row. I'm going to have to find more webs to investigate..."

[Oh, have you gone to other webs with this?] she asked, not in the least bothered by his little outburst. [Sounds like quite a story, you'll have to tell me about it later. But don't write us off yet. While it's true that we are not ready to let you root through our minds, even as practice, that doesn't mean we can't help prepare you for when you do eventually find an aranea brave enough to let you read her memories.]

"And you're going to do that by...?"

[The main problem you are facing when trying to read aranean minds is that our ways of perceiving the world are very different from yours. Our many eyes allow us to see the world in three different ways, only one of which – the one provided by our pair of big, forward-facing eyes – is in any way analogous to human vision. We can also sense vibrations through our legs, and our sense of touch is much more sophisticated than yours. It's how we can navigate through the tunnels so easily with no light to see by.]

"You can't see in the dark?" asked Zorian. Most Dungeon-dwellers could.

[No, we need at least a little light to see,] she said. [We do have excellent low-light vision though. But we're getting off track. What I'm trying to say is that even if you received access to an aranean memory, you probably would not be able to parse it. If you want to be able to read aranean memories, you first need to learn how to process the way we perceive the world. And that is where I *can* help you. I can let you tap into my senses and let you adjust to them. I can even package some of my more inconsequential memories into little packets and send them to you over the telepathic link to help you understand how to deal with memory packages.]

"Oh," Zorian said lamely. Yeah, that did sound useful. Somewhat mollified by her response, he switched back to telepathic communication. [So can we perhaps switch to that right now? I must admit I am getting thoroughly sick of combat drills. I know it's important to practice my mental shields, believe me, but I'm going to go crazy if this continues for much longer.]

[As a matter of fact, yes. I had wanted to wait with such instruction until you could actually break through my mental shields before starting you on that path, but you did succeed with that. Not in a way I had expected or planned for, but fair is fair. We shall start with surface manipulations, since you will need some proficiency with them before you can tap into someone's senses. How much did your other aranean teachers tell you about them?]

[Very little, other than the fact that they exist,] Zorian said. [But surface manipulations are basically mind control, yes? We covered those back in my mage academy. Only theoretically, with an emphasis on identifying the type of mind control and how to fight it, but still.]

[Summarize those lessons for me, please,] Mind Like Fire ordered. [I'd like to see what I'm working with.]

With a wave of his hands, Zorian created a glowing geometric diagram that was informally known as the 'mind control rectangle' among the students and whose official name escaped Zorian at the moment. It was something far too loquacious and complicated for what were basically four words arranged into a simple two-by-two grid – a rectangle divided into four smaller ones, each of the four major methods of manipulating people through mind magic assigned its own corner.

Domination, Suggestion
Puppeteering, Illusion

[Pretty,] Mind Like Fire deadpanned. [But I must confess I have never learned how to read human script, so you'll have to explain to me what that

means.]

Ah. Right. He sometimes forgot that for all that aranea interacted with humans, they were still alien beings with a completely different culture. Ikosians had possessed an almost religious reverence for the written word, and had spread literacy to every place that had fallen under their domination, so literacy was near universal in places they'd once ruled over. Universal literacy most likely made it much easier to train as many people as possible into mages as well, thus providing tangible benefits for the policy. The aranea, on the other hand, had no such tradition, and probably couldn't use human-style writing effectively anyway. He knew that the Cyorian web had a number of aranea that could read and write, but most aranea probably had no need to master such skills.

[Domination and suggestion represent spells that enforce the caster's will upon the target,] said Zorian, pointing at the upper row of the rectangle. [Domination spells involve the caster outright ordering the target to do something and compelling them to do so against their will. Suggestion attempts to present the order as something the target wants on their own. They are will and situation based; depending on the sort of person you cast such spells at and the circumstances they are in, it might be completely impossible to affect them with this sort of mind magic. Most people will resist orders to kill themselves or their loved ones, for instance, and it is next to impossible to convince a patrolling soldier that you are not the person they are looking for if they had been given your picture or someone singled you out to them.] He pointed at the lower row of the rectangle. [Puppeteering and illusions, on the other hand, are not directly affected by the target's personality and circumstances. Puppeteering flat out usurps the target's control over their body and pilots it like a... well, puppet. Illusions manipulate the target's senses in some fashion. Neither can be resisted as such, although puppeteering has to overcome the target's magic resistance first and illusions can be detected and dispelled.]

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Zorian waved his hands again and the illusion split in half, separating the rectangle into left and right halves – domination and puppeteering on the left side, suggestion and illusion on the right side.

[Domination and puppeteering are forceful methods,] he said. [The target knows they are being targeted by a spell, and will usually be furious at the caster when it ends. As such, they are usually used in combat situations, against people who are clear enemies to you. Suggestion and illusion are subtle methods. The target doesn't automatically become aware they have been affected, and in fact the goal is for them to remain unaware as long as possible. They are generally used for criminal and espionage purposes.]

Compulsion spells on the top, hijacking spells on the bottom, forceful spells on the left and subtle spells on the right. Yup, he'd covered everything. He let the illusion evaporate into smoke and settled down to wait for Mind Like Fire's response.

[An interesting breakdown,] she said. [It has a sort of simplistic beauty to it. I'll have to remember that one. The reality is far more complex and less sharply defined... but we'll get to that later, when it's actually relevant. I was never very big on spending time on theory, truth be told. We've wasted enough time on it today and I'd like to get started on something productive.]

The resulting lesson was exceptionally painful, reminding Zorian of his initial lessons with her, several restarts in the past ago... and despite her insistence she was being no harder on him than she was on any of her other students, Zorian knew the sudden ferocity of her lessons was her revenge for catching her off guard.

On the bright side, she calmed down after a week of that. On the less bright side, he would have to piss her off like that on every subsequent restart as well, so he was looking at a week of painful headaches at the start of every restart.

Sometimes you just couldn't win.

- break -

As it turned out, Mind Like Fire's statement about him being unable to understand aranean senses turned out to be not just correct, but a vast understatement. Even after a full month of practice, he couldn't make heads or tails of aranean senses. Even trying to limit his sensory tap into their vision alone left him dizzy and confused, and the less said of their sense of touch, the better. They had a rudimentary sense of taste on their leg hairs! *They tasted the ground they walked on!* Why for the love of all that was holy would a species need to have an ability like that!?

It also put Novelty's habit of touching everything, him included, in an entirely new and unsettling light...

Not that he'd learned nothing during the entire month. Mind Like Fire did manage to teach him how to affect the minds of others in minor ways. Some of these, like the ability to induce spasms and limb failure, he already knew how to produce - but not very consistently before he'd been lectured on the proper way of hijacking other people's nervous systems. Others, like inducing full body paralysis, lightly dampening or amplifying their emotions, subtly redirecting their attention away from things or inducing failure of one or more of their senses were wholly new to him. But while these things were all unquestionably useful, the total lack of progress on the one thing that he really had to master hit him hard.

In the end, he reluctantly decided to consult the Luminous Advocates for help. As much as they annoyed him, they probably had an answer to his problem. He managed to short-circuit the negotiations with them only two weeks into the restart by simply paying their ridiculous price. It required spending day after day on exploration of the lower levels of Knyazov Dveri's dungeon and selling everything of worth he had found there, but he did manage to talk them down to something halfway reasonable and then just pay them off.

According to the Luminous Advocates, his main problem was that he was basically trying to take on too big of a challenge at once. For one thing, he was trying to tap into the senses of another while still retaining his own, forcing his mind to process different perspectives at once. And no, sitting

still with his eyes closed was not nearly enough to get around that. In order to deal with that issue, the Luminous Advocates taught him how to turn his mental abilities inwards and shut off one or more of his senses, leaving only the foreign sensory stream for his mind to process.

Their second suggestion was that he had to practice sensory tap on something easier first. Preferably his fellow humans, as their senses were closest to his own, but some of the more similar animals might also suffice. Only once he'd mastered the art of tapping into the senses of his fellow humans should he bother trying to tap into something as alien as an aranea.

When Zorian tried to do just that by tapping into the senses of a random passerby in a nearby town, he realized they were completely correct. He nearly collapsed from disorientation, even though he was only tapping into familiar human senses this time. It would be a long time before he could move on to something more exotic than a human, it seemed.

Which presented him with something of a problem. While Zorian's mental abilities were currently good enough that he didn't fear discovery every time he used them on some random civilian, he could hardly guarantee that he would never mess up and reveal to his target that he was messing with their heads. And frankly, you could never really be sure that your target really was 'a random civilian' – it was all too possible to step into the mind of some high-ranking mage good at blending in with the crowd, or to encounter a civilian trained to detect such intrusions. And the response of the mage guild to rogue mind mages was *harsh*. He didn't want a guild hunter team after him, even if the time loop would probably shield him from the worst of the consequences.

And that was without even considering the moral dimension of the whole thing. Picking on innocent people for the sake of personal training was not the road he wanted to go on, and dismissing their plight as irrelevant due to the time loop struck him as an unhealthy attitude to have. He might have justified the whole thing to himself if it was just a matter of tapping into their senses, since that was mostly harmless, but the Luminous Advocates made it clear this wasn't the only skill he would have to practice on his fellow humans to get right. He would encounter the exact same issues when he tried to master memory manipulation – even after accounting for their different senses, aranean minds were sufficiently different that he would need to practice on something more similar to himself before he tried to interpret their memories. And practicing memory probes was neither safe, harmless nor inconspicuous.

He needed an acceptable target.

- break -

Zorian walked carefully through the streets of Cyoria, scanning the crowds for any signs of hostility with every sense he had available. He had a feeling his tension and nervousness was very obvious to people around him, but then again he was hardly the only person who was nervous. The random monsters welling up from the dungeon had spooked many a native, and there was a sense of tension in the city that hadn't been there the last time he'd been in the city.

This was his second recent visit to Cyoria, and it was just as uneventful as his first. He had even deliberately walked into some back alleys and more isolated parts of the city to see if Red Robe or one of his agents would confront him once he was out of the public eye, but no such things happened. He wasn't even confronted by a band of rough-looking men trying to steal his belongings, like it usually happened in the trashy adventure novels he read from time to time. Sighing, he twisted the top of the recall rod hanging off his belt and was promptly teleported to the outskirts of the city. The location was totally unremarkable – it wasn't lived in, and had been trapped to hell and back over the course of several weeks – Zorian could come and go as he pleased, but if the ward surrounding the area detected anyone other than him appearing inside, it would unleash a plethora of traps on the interloper – the nastiest and most lethal of traps that he had the capacity to make and install.

He repeated the action three times in quick succession, recalling himself to three additional, similar spots, walked off in a random direction for an hour or so and then finally teleported himself to his real destination.

Two days later, when no one tried to track him down to a small, remote village he'd chosen for his current base (mostly because it was in the middle of nowhere with nothing but fields of wheat for miles in any direction), he finally breathed a sigh of relief... and promptly started planning his next foray into the city. Next time he was checking out the aranea ruins to see if Red Robe had put any tripwires there to alert him of intruders coming there.

When Zorian first got the idea of going back to Cyoria, he had immediately dismissed it as madness. He wasn't ready, and acting prematurely could potentially ruin everything. However, the more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea. Red Robe clearly wasn't trying to locate him anymore – if he had been doing so, Zorian wouldn't have lasted nearly as long as he had, he was quite sure of that. *Why* Red Robe felt no need to locate him, when he clearly wanted to get rid of any rival time travelers, Zorian did not know. He'd feared that the other time traveler had maybe placed tripwires in Cyoria to alert him when he came back, but even that seemed increasingly unlikely at this point – Zorian had been all over Cyoria during his two brief forays into the city, even in parts of the Academy, and nothing of note happened.

That was important, partly because Zorian felt like he was going a little crazy and desperately wanted to see some familiar faces, at least for a short while, but also because Cyoria held some perfect targets for him to practice his growing mind magic skills on. The matriarch solved at least a part of the time loop's mystery by ferreting out information from the heads of Ibasan invaders and their supporters. Why couldn't Zorian do the same? He would not only be advancing his abilities in preparations of opening the matriarch's memory package, he would also be tackling the mystery of the time loop from another direction. Two birds with one stone.

He wasn't going to move back into the city yet. He would continue testing the place for a while still. Try to spend a whole week in there, show up for a class or two. But if Red Robe's response turned out to be as non-existent as this?

His long exile from the city was about to end.

Zorian spent the next three restarts alternating between Mind Like Fire's lessons and making forays into Cyoria. He was never attacked while in Cyoria, not even when he combed through the aranean corpse-filled settlement in one of the restarts. A part of him felt that was highly suspicious, but ultimately it didn't keep him away from the place.

Especially since he was starting to reach the limits of what Mind Like Fire was willing to teach him. His mental defenses were top-notch, and his ability to strike back at hostile minds was nothing to scoff at either – even Mind Like Fire admitted she actually had to take him seriously these days. She had taught him all of the simple tricks and basic techniques she dared give him access to, and he was even getting the hang of tapping into aranean senses – the Luminous Advocates were right, it went a whole lot easier after he had mastered the art of tapping into purely human senses first. If he wanted to get any benefit from her teachings, he would have to spend a few restarts practicing deep memory scans on humans first.

Of course, that would require finding an aranea that was willing to teach him even the basics of such memory scans. Mind Like Fire's reaction to that was a firm refusal, since that would involve lowering all of her defenses and letting Zorian dive deep into her private memories. Even among themselves, the aranea considered such an act to be one of great trust and significance. It didn't help that when Mind Like Fire challenged Zorian to provide similar access to his own memories to *her*, he had little choice but to say no.

He did know that the Filigree Sages were willing to play along if he let them loot the Cyoria settlement, but Zorian had been unable to find much in the way of webcraft when he searched the settlement in one of his brief forays, so he wasn't sure whether that would actually work out at all.

Then, near the end of the last restart, something interesting happened. Zorian had gotten permission from Bridge of Moonlight to stay in the River Navigators' main settlement for a while after he helped them dig up a brand new cavern with alteration spells, and was present in the matriarch's chamber when a messenger from the Yellow Cavern Guardians arrived to plead with the River Navigators' matriarch for help.

The Yellow Cavern Guardians, he had found, were on the verge of extinction. A few days before the start of the time loop, the caverns from which they got their name – and which their survival and prosperity depended on – had been taken over by some huge monster from the deeper levels of the dungeon. The creature was too magic-resistant to be affected with mind magic, extremely tough, and also regenerated. Roughly a week and a half into the restart, the Yellow Cavern Guardians were starting to get desperate. In an attempt to retake their cavern, they had decided to launch an all-out attack, seeking to drive the monster off. It was an utter disaster, and the Yellow Cavern Guardians lost both their matriarch and her two successors/assistants/somethings. Now leaderless as well as desperate, the Yellow Cavern Guardians went into a panic (well, they claimed they 'deliberated things', but Zorian knew how to read between the lines) before begging for help from anyone they thought would listen.

Sadly for them, the River Navigators had no intention of messing around with a creature capable of taking on an entire aranean web and winning. Fortunately for them, Zorian was not nearly so intimidated.

The last time he'd offered aid, he'd been rudely refused. But last time, he'd asked at the start of the restart, when their leadership had still been alive and believed they could handle things. They had probably been more worried about him taking advantage of their momentary weakness and had not felt they needed all the help they could get. Now that their leadership was dead, however, they were not in a position to be nearly as picky.

He didn't even have to ask – the messenger approached him with a plea for help on her own, after Bridge of Moonlight blew the messenger off and she'd realized that Zorian was there.

After hammering out some basic agreement (which could be summarized as 'we'll agree to anything, just give us back our cavern!') Zorian recalled himself and the messenger to the recall stone he had left on the surface and then immediately teleported them to where he knew the Yellow Cavern Guardians were. The messenger seemed shocked he knew where to find them without her guidance, and a bit disoriented from the rapid succession of teleporting, but she recovered quickly and led him to what passed as leadership of their web for the moment.

Several hours later, he found himself at the entrance to a vast cave overgrown with a fungal forest, a pair of Yellow Cavern Guardians 'guards' watching him from deeper into the access tunnel. Supposedly they were ready to intervene if he ran into trouble at any point, but he was pretty sure they were just going to stay on their asses if he got attacked and then, if he lost, mournfully report he had tragically ended up as monster chow before they could do anything. They seemed terrified even to be there.

Zorian created a floating eye out of ectoplasm and sent it deeper into the cave to get some basic sense of its contents and layout. His recent practice with tapping into other people's senses made processing what the eye was sending him child's play, and he no longer had to close his eyes to use it.

He had to admit one thing - the cavern was simply breathtaking. It was huge, and almost entirely covered with a dizzying variety of giant mushrooms. The more familiar umbrella-mushrooms existed between ones that resembled leafless trees and long, fleshy spikes and berries. Looking over them, Zorian even spotted several that appeared to be whitish plants rather than mushrooms, complete with small flowers and atrophied leaves. The largest of them glowed with a faint blue light that suffused the entire cavern with weak, shadowy light.

Underground forests like this one were treasure troves of information and interesting alchemical ingredients, and were highly sought after by both humans and dungeon denizens. And this one was both huge and largely unspoiled. No wonder the Yellow Cavern Guardians were so protective of it.

His appreciation of the view was quickly interrupted, however – the monster wasn't hard to find.

It was right in the center of the cave, sitting like a king in a small, shallow lake situated there. Well, shallow in a relative sense. Zorian could have submerged himself easily in its center, but it was barely a puddle for the monster who towered over the waters. It looked like a giant frog, albeit one whose mother had mated with a troll and which was then raised solely on muscle-growth potions from the day it was born. Knobby, dark green skin covered a creature that was at least five meters tall, even while crouching, and its limbs were thick and practically bursting at the seams from the sheer muscles it was sporting. Oh, and they ended in huge, sharp claws rather than suction cups.

One of the frog-thing's eyes swiveled in its socket to focus on Zorian's ectoplasmic eye, noticing the intruder, but the creature remained motionless and eventually returned to its silent vigil, ignoring the sensor. The monster had knocked down all the fungus surrounding the lake, probably to give itself a better view of its new domain, and was now just standing in the lake in the center, periodically shifting in place so it could stare at the different parts of the cavern.

Zorian dismissed the sensor and turned to the two guards behind him.

"I'm going to need a few days to prepare," he said.

- break -

Three days before the end of the restart, Zorian was ready to try and kill the giant frog monster that had driven the Yellow Cavern Guardians out of their home. His plan was simple: fire.

Lots and lots of fire.

When he finally arrived at the cavern entrance, he first made sure the frog-thing was still where he had last left it (it was) and then carefully lowered an ignition stone into the crate full of highly flammable alchemical bricks he had been levitating behind him. Once that was done, he created an illusion around the crate to make it look like an aranea and sent it floating along the ground towards the monster. He trailed after the crate under the guise of invisibility, a huge, solid steel golem trailing beside him. The golem was fully visible, and mostly served as a big, visible target for the creature's ire if this whole thing went south.

Zorian had considered a number of methods to trick the monster into eating the decoy, but none of them turned out to be necessary. It seemed that the claims of the Yellow Cavern Guardians about how the creature loved eating aranea were spot on, because the creature barely even looked at the disguised crate before attacking. A long, ropy, blood red tongue lashed out at the crate with dizzying speed, reeling it into its wide open maw in the blink of an eye.

The moment the frog thing's mouth snapped shut, Zorian sent a mana burst at the ignition stone in the crate, causing the whole thing to blow up in its mouth.

The resulting scream was quite possibly the most disturbing sound he'd ever heard in his entire life. It wasn't a croak or anything even remotely froglike. It sounded like a whole herd of pigs being slaughtered messily, over and over and over again. The frog thing vomited a stream of fire, blood and bile, trying to expel the offending substance to no avail – Zorian had specifically chosen an alchemical product whose fire clung to the surface like glue, and no matter how hard it tried, it could not remove the burning gunk that covered its insides. Truthfully, its attempt to vomit out the compound was only making things worse. It would have had more luck by keeping its mouth shut and trying to starve the fire of oxygen.

Sadly, after a few more futile attempts, the monster suddenly stopped struggling, noticed Zorian and his golem, and immediately charged towards them.

Zorian silently motioned for his golem to meet the creature's charge with one of its own, not even questioning how the creature knew he was there. Dungeon denizens had all kinds of ridiculous abilities and senses, especially powerful ones like these. He sent a wave of force at the creature's feet, managing to trip it up a bit and allowing his golem to slam its metal fist straight into its face. Though much bigger than his creation, the creature seemed momentarily stunned at the hit and didn't have enough time to dodge when Zorian hit it with a massive fireball.

Annoyingly, it still wasn't dead. It screamed again, scorched from both inside and outside, its eyes reduced to ruined husks by the fireball. But it still found enough strength to tear apart his golem (which he had spent ages crafting and reinforcing) in a flurry of violence. It ripped both of its arms out of their sockets, snapped the main body in half, and flung the pieces into the distance. The armless remains of the upper torso impacted the ground not far from Zorian, but he remained silent and still, hoping to avoid notice.

It would have been nice to say that what followed next was some epic battle where he bravely strode forth to finish the monster once and for all, but in truth, he simply evaded the creature's notice and waited as it rampaged throughout the forest for a while, looking for more targets. The loss of its vision seemed to really hurt it, and it never even came close to detecting his location. At some point it simply stopped and keeled over, finally dead after having succumbed to its many wounds.

Still - a victory was a victory, wasn't it?

His "guards" had fled from their posts at some point in the battle, so Zorian slowly made his way towards the Yellow Cavern Guardians' temporary camp to give them the good news.

- break -

The two Yellow Cavern Guardians that came to check up if he was telling the truth stared silently at the charred corpse of the frog-thing that had nearly ruined them. Zorian tried to be respectful and wait for them come to terms with the fact that he had actually succeeded in killing it, but after

five minutes he was really starting to get impatient. And annoyed – it wasn't *that* unbelievable that he'd succeeded at this, surely?

He cleared his throat, finally getting their attention.

“About my payment...” he began.

- break -

Zorian's eyes abruptly shot open as a sharp pain erupted from his stomach. His whole body convulsed, buckling against the object that fell on him, and suddenly he was wide awake, not a trace of drowsiness in his mind.

“Good morning, brother!” an annoyingly cheerful voice sounded right on top of him. “Morning, morning, *MORNING!!!*”

Zorian sighed. He really wished that not all of his restarts began this way.

“Good morning to you too, Kiri,” he said politely. “Mind getting off me?”

“Hmm...” she pretended to think about it. “Nope! I think I'll stay like this for a while.”

“That's unfortunate,” he said blandly.

“You know you're going back to academy today, right?” she asked him

“How could I forget?” he responded. “The real question is, do you want to come with me?”

Kirielle's eyes expanded comically, like those of a particularly startled cat. “Really!?”

“I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't certain,” Zorian said.

Five minutes later, Zorian managed to distract an ecstatic Kirielle with an illusionary bird and get her to stop babbling and start packing her luggage.

He, on the other hand, was ready. He had learned the basics of deep mental scanning from the Yellow Cavern Guardians last restart, he was certain that simply being in Cyoria wasn't dangerous in itself, and he had a rough plan of where to go from now on.

It was time to visit his old Academy again.

38. Return to Cyoria

Chapter 038 Return to Cyoria

Zorian's previous experiences with riding the train to Cyoria alongside Kirielle hadn't been very encouraging. She always started excited and curious, staring intently at the passing landscape and commenting on anything that caught her interest, but that didn't last very long. There just wasn't all that much to see on the route to Cyoria, so she quickly got bored of looking through the compartment window and turned to the only other source of entertainment left to her – him. And he was hard-pressed to entertain her throughout the entire ride.

That was back when he had been unwilling to use his rising shaping skills to do magic on the train, though. This time he decided he simply didn't care about the risk of discovery. He could find no detection ward on the compartment they were in, and even if they did catch him in the act somehow, they would probably just slap him with a small fine and a lecture. It would be annoying, but better than listening to Kirielle whine about being bored for several hours. Plus, this way he got to practice his spellcasting while inhibited by a shaping disruption ward – something he had already been planning to try.

That was how Zorian found himself levitating a sphere of water in front of him, a ring of pens and erasers orbiting around it in a diffuse, slowly revolving ring. It was hard, despite the seeming triviality of it all. This wasn't just him stacking a bunch of easy beginner spells to get a neat effect – he was performing an act of unstructured magic, treating the whole thing like a very complicated shaping exercise. Between the complexity of the floating construct and the disruption ward throwing off his shaping skills, he was really struggling to maintain control over the sphere and its satellites. He was pretty sure this was his absolute limit in terms of mana shaping skills so he should probably-

"Make a frog!" Kirielle challenged.

Zorian gave Kirielle an annoyed look. She grinned at him, confident that she had won their little game. That she had finally found his limit. He did not deliberately set out to make the complex thing floating in front of him, after all – it had started out as a much smaller sphere with a mere two pens circling around it, and Zorian had fully intended for it to stay that way until Kirielle started challenging him to make it more difficult. After he emptied the entire contents of his water bottle and used up all of the pens and erasers they both had in their possessions, he was certain she would have had to concede his victory...

He broke eye contact with her and focused on the floating construct in front of him. Trying to shape the floating water into anything other than the sphere it was now would be insanely hard. Telekinetically controlling water was far, far harder than doing the same with solid objects, and he would be hard pressed to sculpt it into complex shapes even if he was outside of a disruption ward and had no ring of small objects to serve as an additional distraction.

But he'd be damned if he was just going to roll over and admit defeat to his little sister just because of that. Over the next fifteen minutes, he slowly shaped the blob of water into a sculpture of a frog, as detailed and convincing as he could manage it... in other words, not very. He did have a burst of inspiration half-way through, though, and decided to depict the frog monster he saved the Yellow Cavern Guardians from in the previous restart instead of a normal one. Unfortunately, Kirielle didn't think much of his efforts.

"That's a pretty weird frog," she declared.

"It's a yellow cavern devil frog," said Zorian, shamelessly making things up. He had no idea what that monster was called, or if it even had an official name to begin with. "Huge, vicious things with a penchant for eating little girls."

"That's stupid. You're just making things up," she accused. "Just admit you lost."

"Bah, you asked for a frog and I made one. It's not my fault you are not knowledgeable enough in the diverse and fascinating world of magical amphibians. Let me put this away and then I'll tell you about Sumrak the mage and the story of how he saved a secret society of mages from one of the aforementioned devil frogs..."

Before Kirielle could complain too much, Zorian hurriedly set about dismantling the construct in front of him before his rapidly degrading control unraveled completely, letting the pens and erasers float down on the empty seat beside him and pouring the water back into its bottle. That done, he launched into a somewhat modified account of his battle against the frog monster.

Well okay, *heavily* modified. In Zorian's story, the Yellow Cavern Guardians were a group of reclusive human mages that lived in the far north, practicing 'spider magic', and the adventurer Sumrak confronted the frog monster head on with his awesome magical might instead of resorting to traps and subterfuge. It made for a more impressive story that way. Kirielle seemed skeptical of the story at first, but when Zorian started using detailed illusions to demonstrate the events he was talking about, her suspiciousness melted away and she paid rapt attention to the story.

Zorian didn't know whether to be amused or outraged that she was so entranced by the illusions. They were... well, not quite easy, but nothing special either. The floating ball of water and school supplies he had made earlier on her prompting had taken much more skill and effort to create. He was tempted to chalk it up to her ignorance of what a true display of magical expertise looked like, but he suspected that even if she knew how to judge the difficulty properly, she still likely wouldn't have cared. He had noticed during previous restarts that she loved illusionism the most out of the magical disciplines he had shown her. Maybe it appealed to her inner artist?

The train announcer declared that they were arriving to Korsa, forcing Zorian to cut the story short just before Sumrak succeeded in fighting his

way through the devil frog's innumerable spawn and confronted the monster in the cavernous home to which it had cravenly fled when it lost its last bout with the adventuring mage...

...and of course Kirielle was having none of that. She was fine with waiting while people were streaming into the train and looking into compartments to find a seat, but with everyone now settled down and the train moving again, she demanded he continue with the story. The problem was that Ibery had decided to join them in the compartment in the meantime, and Zorian felt just a tiny bit apprehensive about showcasing his abilities in front of her. An apprehension that Kirielle didn't empathize with in the slightest.

"You can't stop now, not when the story is so near the ending," she complained.

"Well, so long as I refrain from using my, err, *visual aids*..." tried Zorian.

"Nooo!" Kirielle pleaded. "That was the best part of the story!"

Zorian threw a significant glance towards Ibery, hoping that Kirielle would take the message. She did, sort of, though she didn't react to the information the way he hoped she would.

"Oh come on, the nice lady won't snitch on you for doing magic in the train," Kirielle declared out loud. She then turned towards the startled Ibery and gave her the most soulful puppy-eyes look she could muster. "You wouldn't do that, would you?"

"Umm..." Ibery mumbled, fidgeting uncomfortably in her seat. "What? I thought the train had countermeasures to stop spellcasting?"

"It does?" asked Kirielle, surprised.

"It does," Zorian confirmed. No point in playing dumb now. "They just disrupt spellcasting though, not make it impossible. You can work around it if you're good enough."

"And... you're that good?" Ibery asked uncertainly.

Zorian shrugged, offering no other response. To Kirielle's delight, he then proceeded to finish the story he had been telling, pretty illusions included. He noticed that Ibery had set aside her book to listen as well.

She also tried to discreetly cast a few simple spells when she thought he wasn't looking, and then frowned when she failed to overcome the disruption ward. She was probably just curious about the level of skill needed to overcome the ward. He thought about scanning her surface thoughts to find out what she was thinking, but decided not to after giving it some thought. The risk of getting caught in the act was minimal, since Mind Like Fire had taught him how to stealthily test for presence of mental defenses, but getting into the habit of casually invading the minds of everyone around him struck him as a bad idea. He left Ibery to her experiment and focused back to Kirielle and the story he was telling.

Once he was done with the story, Ibery promptly struck up a conversation with the two of them. She admitted that she didn't care much about the story itself, especially since she only caught the tail end of it, but she was very impressed by his ability to overcome the train's wards. Especially once she learned he was only starting his third year at the academy.

Eventually they arrived in Cyoria, however, and went their separate ways. Before they said their goodbyes, however, Ibery nervously told him to drop by the library sometime in the next week in order to discuss... something. Well, whatever – he had intended to raid the library for more spells in this restart anyway, he might as well see what she wanted from him while he was at it.

"I think she likes you," Kirielle said when they were alone.

"Nah, she's head over heels for Fortov," said Zorian.

"What?" Kirielle asked, baffled. "Her and Fortov? No way!"

"Well I didn't say they're *together*," Zorian clarified. "Just that she has a crush on him."

"How do you know that?" Kirielle asked suspiciously.

"Ancient magical secrets?" tried Zorian. Kirielle gave him a deadpan look. "Fine, fine... I'll tell you later, when we arrive at our new lodgings. It's not something we should discuss out in the open."

Even as he conversed with his little sister, Zorian paid attention to what his mind sense was telling him while they moved through the crowds. Even if he was being targeted by someone shielded from mental detection, the absence of a mind in someone would be a huge red flag on its own. He detected no hostile intentions directed at either of them, though, and none of the suspicious people he encountered were invisible to his mind sense. After ten minutes, he breathed a sigh of relief – his fears of walking into a trap with his little sister in tow appeared to have been unfounded.

Hmm, he knew it would rain later on, but he could ward against the rain easily enough... perhaps a little sightseeing around the city to quench Kirielle's curiosity a little?

"Hey," Zorian said, attracting Kirielle's attention. "Do you want to visit the main plaza of the city? They have a pretty nice fountain there that I like to watch sometimes..."

She said yes, of course. He needn't have even asked.

- break -

It had been more than four years since Zorian had started looping, and a lot of things had happened in that period. Keeping track of it all was a major challenge, despite his mage training and his own excellent memory. Being absent from Cyoria for nearly a year and a half in order to escape Red Robe's scrutiny certainly didn't help in this regard, and many of the minor details and specifics of how a 'normal' restart was supposed to go had faded from his mind during his long absence.

It should not be very surprising, then, that he'd totally forgotten what happened the last time he tried to reach the fountain at the beginning of a restart – after all, he hadn't tried it since that very first, fateful restart that got him included into the time loop.

Thus, when the two of them finally stumbled upon the swarm of cephalic rats blocking their path, Zorian was caught just as off-guard by it as he was the previous time. He wasn't as defenseless as he was back then, though, and he nearly burned them all to a crisp before he stopped himself. He was pretty sure that him killing the swarm would put him on the invaders' radar, and therefore on Red Robe's radar as well, so the smartest move would be to simply retreat like he did back in his first restart.

He felt the swarm testing his mental defenses and responded by strengthening his defenses and striking back. The attacks stopped, but his counterattack did very little to the collective mind of the swarm – the group mind was thoroughly unshielded, probably because any mental shell would interfere with its internal telepathic network, but his counterattack merely knocked out a couple of individual rats instead of doing any significant damage. He wondered–

He felt a spike of terror from Kirielle as she finally realized what she was looking at, and realized he really shouldn't be playing around with these things – he was probably immune to anything they may dish out but she wasn't. He fired off a weak flamethrower at the closest part of the swarm to make them back off a little and then immediately turned around, grabbed Kirielle and fled. The rats didn't follow, much like how they didn't follow him the first time he encountered them. They probably didn't want to attract attention any more than he did, though that did raise the question of what the hell they were doing blocking off one of Cyoria's major roads in broad daylight. Something to look into eventually...

While they ran, he idly marveled about how fortunate it was that he'd never replicated that first meeting with the cephalic rats before he had met the aranea – they would have undoubtedly read his mind, and there was a good chance they would have found out about the time loop from his thoughts. Even if they dismissed the time travel stuff as delusion, they would have definitely been interested in him knowing about the invasion...

"Um, can we still go see the fountain?" Kirielle asked once they had retreated sufficiently and she'd had a chance to catch her breath and calm down.

"Yeah, I know an alternative route," said Zorian, pointing towards a nearby park.

Wait, hadn't he tried that in the first restart and encountered some kind of problem? He was pretty sure he had. What kind of– oh! The bicycle girl. He had totally forgotten about her. Oh well, that wasn't really a problem – he would just get her bicycle out of the water really quickly and they would be on their way.

Kirielle got unusually quiet when they encountered the little crying girl and hung back while he talked to her. He got the girl's bike out of the creek with trivial ease, simply placing his hand over the bridge and willing the bike to rise into his grasp – it took more time to calm the girl down a little and get her to tell him what she was upset about than it did to actually retrieve it. He used a couple of spells to dry the bike off and clean all the grime that had accumulated on it, simply because he could and saw no reason not to. He suspected the bike was cleaner now than it was before it had fallen into the creek.

"There," said Zorian proudly. "Your bike is clean, intact and out of the creek. You can stop crying now, okay?"

"Okay," she sniffed, rubbing her eyes. "Um. Thank you."

"Don't mention it," Zorian said. "Well, we should get going now, so take care. I think it's going to rain soon, so you should probably head home as well."

"Come on brother, don't be mean. We can't just leave her here," protested Kirielle suddenly. "We should get her home ourselves, just to be sure."

"He's not mean," the other little girl protested, suddenly snapping out of her daze. "And I can find my way home just fine. I'm not stupid."

Oh, he liked this kid. It wasn't often that someone defended him in preference to Kirielle.

"Well, I'm glad that *someone* is not automatically assuming the worst of me," said Zorian, giving a sideways glance towards Kirielle. She rolled her eyes at him. "I am sure that Kirielle didn't mean anything like that, though – she was just worried for you, since you still looked pretty upset."

"I was just... I only got the bike yesterday and mother told me to be careful with it because they couldn't afford a new one and I..."

"Hey, hey, it's alright," said Zorian quickly, interrupting her story. She looked like she was going to cry again. "You got it back. All's well that ends well. But maybe we really should accompany you home, at least until you calm down a little."

"Yeah!" Kirielle piped in. "We can talk on the way and get to know each other. I just moved in here and it would be nice to have a friend my age. What's your name anyway? I'm Kirielle and this guy here that got your bike out of the river is my brother Zorian."

"Nochka," she said. "But, um, I don't want to make you late."

If you spot this story on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

"We were just going to see the fountain, nothing really important," Kirielle waved her off. "We can do that any time. Come on, show us where you live."

The walk to Nochka's house was a short one – she lived pretty close to the park, which was the reason her parents had let her go there all alone. Still pretty strange for parents to be so hands off about their child's whereabouts, but Zorian's parents were the same with him so he didn't pry. He didn't say much of anything really, but that was okay because Kirielle talked plenty enough for both of them. Nochka herself was shy and nervous, constantly watching her surroundings and jumping at every unusual sound, but she did warm up to Kirielle by the time they had reached her house. She was eight, a year younger than Kirielle, and was also fairly new to Cyoria. Her family had arrived into the city a couple of months ago, and she didn't have any friends her age either. Great. He was pretty sure he knew where this was going...

Zorian once again tried to disengage from the whole situation once they got Nochka to her destination, but failed – Nochka's mother saw them arriving and insisted they come inside, and he didn't want to be impolite. He figured the woman had every right to be curious about a couple of strangers walking around with her daughter in tow, so they should at least allay her fears a little before leaving. Nochka hurriedly gave her an account of the situation the moment they were inside; though in her story the bike didn't end up in the creek, but was instead stuck in a rope trap that happened to be in the park for... some reason. Nochka kind of glossed over that part and moved onto Zorian helping her get it down from the tree.

Yeah, Nochka was a terrible liar. Based on the way her mother was looking at her when she finished her story, Zorian was betting that she would be getting the real story out of Nochka the moment Zorian and Kirielle left the house.

Nochka's mother, who Zorian learned was named Rea, was honestly a little scary to Zorian. She didn't *look* frightening – she had the same jet black hair and dark brown eyes that Nochka did, and the stature and dress of an average housewife – but it took only five minutes for Zorian to decide there was more to her. Her movements were all fluid and precise, she never stuttered or wavered when she spoke, her gaze was frighteningly intense, and she gave off an air of absolute confidence and composure. Frankly, if he had been alone he would have left the place in a hurry, but Kirielle didn't seem nearly as intimidated by the woman and insisted on telling her new friend stories. Such as the one of how they stumbled upon her in the first place.

"Ah yes, the strange brain rats," Rea said when Kirielle told them about their encounter with the cephalic rats. "I've seen a few hanging around the house, but never in such numbers. Disgusting things."

Zorian frowned. Why were the cephalic rats hanging around their house?

"You should be careful," he told her. "They're called cephalic rats and they can read your mind, possibly even memories if left unmolested long enough."

"Hmm... good thing I kill them when I find them, then," Rea said.

"Yes, but don't think that makes you totally safe," Zorian said. "They're a telepathic hive mind, so killing one rat will not erase the information it has gathered on you. What one cephalic rat knows, they all know. I really think you should report this to the city authorities and have them hunt the swarm down, but it's your choice in the end."

"I see," Rea said after staring at him for a few seconds. "I'll talk to my husband about your advice and we'll see what we can do. I must say, you are surprisingly well informed for a fifteen-year-old, mister Kazinski."

"Brother is really smart," said Kirielle.

Oh hush, you flatterer.

"Right - thank you for your hospitality, Mrs. Sashal, but our landlord is expecting us and we really should get going," Zorian said, rising from his seat and motioning for Kirielle to do the same. From what Rea had said earlier, her husband was going to come home from work soon, and he'd rather not get stuck in another round of explanations.

"The rain is rather heavy, though," Rea said, glancing through the window next to her. "You should at least wait for the weather to get better before you go."

"Unfortunately, that doesn't seem like it'll happen for quite some time," said Zorian. "But that's okay, because I can just teleport myself and Kirielle close to our destination and shield us from the rain for the short while we'll be caught in it."

"Can Kirielle come over to play with me some time?" asked Nochka.

"Uh, yeah. Sure," said Zorian. Yes, he was pretty sure Kirielle would be angry if he said no. Though he really didn't want Kirielle in an area

infested with cephalic rats...

Zorian and Kirielle said their goodbyes and left in the direction of Imaya's house.

- break -

The next day, Zorian woke up early and told Imaya he was going to the library, though in truth he did no such thing. Instead, he teleported himself to Knyazov Dveri, where he proceeded to gather crystalized mana. By now he had mapped large portions of the local underworld, and as such couldn't actually pick up every piece of crystalized mana within a single day. He would need another two or three days to clean the place up properly. Oh, and he was also hitting the limits of his memory, it seemed – he had outright forgotten about some of the minor resource locations, and it took him a while to track down others. Annoying.

He wondered what his previous self would say if he knew that in the future he would have so much wealth within reach that he would literally forget about some of it. Probably something rude.

He had only been back at Imaya's place for half an hour or so before Taiven came to speak with him.

"Let me guess, you want me to go into the sewers with you to recover a watch from a bunch of giant spiders," Zorian 'guessed'.

"What? No, I decided not to bother with that job since more lucrative ones have popped up lately," said Taiven. She gave him a strange look. "How the hell do you know about that, anyway? I told maybe two people I was even interested in that job."

Uh, right. The circumstances in Cyoria had changed greatly since the last time he'd been in the city – the mercenaries he hired to confront Red Robe had been soul-killed along with the aranea, and monsters were starting to well up from the Dungeon with no aranea to keep them in check. Nothing could nor should be taken for granted – he had to keep that in mind.

Rather than try to trick her with some poor excuse, he decided to simply ignore her question and ask his own.

"If you're not here for that, why *are* you here, Taiven? You don't exactly have a habit of visiting me for the hell of it..."

Taiven protested that she totally did visit him for the hell of it, and vehemently denied that she had come to ask him for a favor. It was an opportunity, she insisted – an opportunity to earn big money and fame, if only he would cooperate with her.

Well. If nothing else, her new scheme was a lot more tempting than her old one.

Long story short, the monster incursions he read about in the newspapers had started way earlier than Zorian had expected they would. There were a couple of bad ones on the very first day of the restart – a young couple had been heavily injured when a huge abyssal centipede crawled out of the sewers in the middle of a crowded street and a restaurant had to be evacuated when a huge yellow ooze broke into the wine cellar and started consuming everything in sight. Things got worse overnight, and there were a number of fatalities while Zorian had been busy picking up crystalized mana in Knyazov Dveri, causing the city to enact some emergency measures. One of these was issuing large bounties on confirmed monster kills and encouraging various dungeon delvers and mercenary groups to go as deep into Cyoria's dungeon as they dared. The idea was to cull the monster population before they could reach the surface.

As far as Taiven was concerned, this was exactly what she had been waiting for. Already frustrated with the lack of chances to prove her worth, she was eager to take advantage of this new development to make a name for herself by aggressively pursuing bounties and putting down as many dungeon denizens as she could find.

The problem was that her group was too small for her ambitions. Three people do not make a proper hunting party.

"I'm surprised you came to me with this," said Zorian. "This sounds like it requires decent combat skills, and I am only a third year. Surely some of your peers would have been better for this?"

"Well, the thing is, I'm not the only one recruiting... and many of the other recruiters are a lot more prestigious and well-known than little old me. It should get easier once I start getting results, but that could be too late and I can't afford to be too picky right now."

"Can't afford to be picky, huh?" said Zorian flatly. Before the time loop, that phrase right there would have caused him to refuse her offer out of spite. He hated being thought of as second best, never mind a last resort. But years in the time loop had tempered his ego, and he could admit to himself that Taiven's judgement was spot on – considering the information she had on him.

"Okay, bad choice of words," admitted Taiven. "But as you said yourself, you're only a third year. How good are you at combat magic? Do you think you could pull your own weight in a team as you are now?"

Hmm, how much should he reveal here? Taiven could be shockingly oblivious about some things, but she would definitely not ignore him being way stronger than he had any right being. And she was one of the few people who knew his pre-time loop self well enough to make such a judgement call with a fair amount of certainty.

And for that matter, did he even *want* to join Taiven's group? It sounded like a huge time sink, and he had so many other things vying for his attention... maybe it would be better if he were to pretend he was too weak and inexperienced to help her?

Oh to hell with it – he'd give it a chance this time. If nothing else, it would give him a ready-made excuse for a lot of things he intended to do in this restart.

"Absolutely. I have been in the Dungeon before," he admitted. "I have a decent repertoire of combat spells and I'm confident that I won't freeze on the first sign of danger. The biggest problem is my mana reserves – at maximum, I can only cast about 20 magic missiles in a row. And that's after I increased my reserves through constant use – I'm pretty average in terms of mana reserves magnitude."

Taiven stared at him for a few seconds, incredulous. "You've been in the Dungeon before?" she finally asked. "I'm surprised you got permission for that. The Academy sure didn't want to give *me* one before I was well into my fourth year."

"I didn't say anything about asking permission," said Zorian.

"Zorian..."

"What, like you've never done anything like that?" challenged Zorian.

"Well, maybe once or twice," Taiven admitted. "But it doesn't sound like this was an occasional occurrence for you. Getting your mana reserves that high must have involved some pretty intense practice, considering where you started from. That sounds pretty dangerous."

"Sometimes a man has to take chances," Zorian quoted in Taiven's voice. "I do believe you're the one who told me that, Taiven."

"I was talking about romance and you know it," she protested. "Why couldn't you take my advice about *that* instead?"

'I did take your advice,' thought Zorian sourly to himself. 'I got laughed in my face for my trouble.'

"Why are you lecturing me about this? You should be overjoyed your desperate ploy had worked," he said instead. "Do you want me in your damn team or not?"

"I do, I do!" Taiven quickly assured him. She pulled out a sheet of paper from her bag and set it down on the table in front of him. "I guess you're right, this isn't really important right now. Why don't you just fill out this membership form and I'll give you a rundown of what I had planned for tomorrow..."

- break -

Over the next couple of days Zorian went on regular forays into Cyoria's underworld with Taiven, Urik and Oran. He quickly realized that his combat skills weren't really the most valuable thing he brought to the whole operation – the combined might of Taiven and her two old teammates was usually enough to destroy any threat they encountered, with Zorian only called to fight when one of those three ended up low on mana and needed to rest for a while. No, the biggest benefits he brought to the table were a detailed map of a huge chunk of Cyoria's underworld (courtesy of the matriarch's last message) and a decent proficiency in divination that allowed him to scout the areas in front of them and track down any specific target they were pursuing. Without him there to direct the rest of the group, they would have probably spent most of their time wandering aimlessly in search of something to fight. Those three were dangerously overspecialized for direct combat in Zorian's opinion.

While down in the Dungeon, he took the opportunity to scout the invaders' underground bases that he was aware of, trying to see how they were dealing with this kind of increased activity and scrutiny of Cyoria's underworld. Taiven's group was far from the only one that had tried to cash in on the bounties the city was offering, and more groups were expected to get involved soon. What he found was that the invaders had retreated somewhat, abandoning several of their more exposed bases completely and leaving only token forces in many others. That was bound to have a very negative impact on the execution of the invasion...

When he wasn't hunting down dungeon denizens with Taiven, he was tending to the multitude of his other plans and obligations. He finished harvesting crystalized mana under Knyazov Dveri and had started to slowly sell his huge stockpile off to various stores, both in Cyoria and outside. He took Kirielle to see Nochka and stayed around to watch out for any cephalic rats in the area (but thankfully didn't detect any). He ended up meeting Nochka's father this time – a tall, jovial, bearded, muscular fellow named Sauh who loved to laugh and talk and was completely unlike his wife, yet still terrifying in his own way. Zorian was half-convinced that the workshop Sauh insisted on showing him, the one full of hammers and other heavy, dangerous-looking tools, was the man's way of threatening him bodily harm should he hurt his daughter in any way. He also visited the library to see what Ibery wanted from him. To his surprise, he found out that Ibery was interested in getting magical instruction from him. She had been looking to hire someone for additional tutoring outside of the academy, but found most tutors out of her price range, and was hoping a third year like him might be amenable to a spell exchange or something else of that nature. Though the offer was kind of interesting, he had too many things on his plate as it was – so he told her he'd get back to her after the summer festival, if she was still interested. Perhaps in some future restart where he refused Taiven's recruitment pitch.

And, of course, he still had to attend classes. That was a chore, though not quite as big of a one as he had been expecting. His long absence from Cyoria had made him forget many of the details of how classes were supposed to go, and caused him to view others in a completely new perspective. The constant monster incursions into the city had also had an effect on the academy. Jade was gone from the class, pulled out of the academy by her family for safety concerns. Zach was gone too, of course, and since nobody (except Zorian) knew the real reason for his absence, most people assumed he had been similarly pulled out for safety reasons and sent out of Cyoria. Kyron announced during their first lessons that he was running additional combat practice lessons during evenings and Ilsa openly encouraged anyone with significant combat ability to join one of the groups culling the monsters, offering special benefits and exceptions to anyone who did so and achieved results. She pointed out Zorian, Briam, Timmi, Naim and Estin as examples of people in the class who had already done that, thoroughly surprising Zorian – he never would have guessed

so many people in his class had decided they're good enough to get themselves involved in that. Two days later, Kopriva would join that list, while Maya and Iroro were ordered home by their parents until the situation calmed down.

With such large changes in class composition and teacher behavior, Zorian's school experience was relatively novel compared to what he remembered of his pre-exile Cyoria days. He was sure it would all get boring and repetitive again after another restart or two, but for now it was bearable.

- break -

A few more days passed. The number and severity of monster excursions gradually dropped off, and the city stopped behaving like a kicked over anthill and settled into some semblance of normality. There was still a lot of tension in the air, forays into the Dungeon went on still, but things were finally calming down. As such, Zorian started investigating various invaders, cultists and other people related to the invasion that he still remembered from his time with the Cyorian aranea, tracking their movements and activities but launching no attacks for the moment. The furor over the dead mercenaries and monster incursions caused so many changes to the preparations of the invasion that his memories were of limited use, and he didn't want to move until he was reasonably sure he knew when and where to strike.

It was peculiar, though... even accounting for massive divergences due to Red Robe's removal of aranea, the invaders were still strangely ineffective. Less informed. Before, they seemed to know how to bypass certain wards or evade notice of Cyoria's law enforcement – knowledge that they largely lacked in the current restart. He was starting to suspect that Red Robe had a habit of handing over a lot of crucial information to the invaders in previous restarts, even ones where he didn't appear to pay much attention to them afterwards... but that in this one restart he'd chosen not to bother with that at all.

Strange.

The arrival of Kael at Imaya's place reminded Zorian of their deal to help Kael develop his alchemy in exchange for help with soul magic and other stuff. Unfortunately, there was a problem: Zorian had largely forgotten what the contents of Kael's notebook were over the many, many restarts he had been absent from Cyoria. Somehow Kael managed to figure out a few things from the disjointed parts of his notes that Zorian still remembered, which helped convince him that Zorian was telling the truth, but he was essentially starting from scratch.

Zorian knew he had to find a solution to the forgetting problem if that deal was ever going to work. Without constant reinforcement in every restart, he *would* forget again, and the amount of information he had to memorize was only going to increase with each restart, making the task harder. And that wasn't just the issue with Kael's potion recipes, either – he had been having trouble remembering the layout of Knyazov Dveri resource deposits, some of the minor details of previous restarts (such as his meeting with Nochka) had completely slipped from his memory, and he had a feeling that remembering the vast amount of information about invaders in Cyoria he was currently gathering was going to be a major issue in the future.

He needed a better way to remember things, and he needed it soon. He would have to set aside the upcoming weekend to see if he could figure something out.

He knocked on Xvim's door and dutifully waited for the man to invite him in.

"Come in," Xvim called out from inside, and Zorian quickly entered the man's office and sat down when instructed to do so.

"Show me your basic three," Xvim ordered.

Zorian did so – silently, efficiently and without complaint. He had decided before coming here that he would try and see how long it would take for Xvim to get unnerved by him meeting all of his demands without any issue or complaint. It was a long term project, of course – he didn't really think he could baffle the infuriating man in this particular restart – but he was determined to see it through. He would practice whatever stupid exercise Xvim threw at him every single day, restart after restart, until he got them right. Until he got them *all* right, if he was forced to. The man had to run out of shaping exercises at some point, right?

Xvim threw a marble at him. Zorian moved his head lightly to the left, moving out of the marble's flight path without ever meeting the man's eyes. Another two marbles flew at him, but the result was exactly the same.

"Close your eyes," Xvim ordered.

Zorian did. He still dodged every marble Xvim threw at him, a cloud of diffuse mana scattered around him as a detection field. Xvim did not react, unfazed by his improbable skill, but neither did Zorian.

"You can open your eyes again. Here's a box of marbles," said Xvim, reaching beneath his desk to pick up a large bowl full of hated spheres of glass. They came in a wide variety of sizes, and Zorian was silently thankful that Xvim only ever threw the small ones at him – some of the big ones looked like they could knock a man unconscious if they connected. "Levitate as many as you can. Hurry up, we haven't got all day!"

Zorian levitated every single marble in the bowl, but alas – he was too slow. Or at least Xvim thought so, anyway. He made Zorian lift and lower the entire mass of marbles over and over again, wasting an entire hour. Zorian said nothing though, doing his best to meet Xvim's unreasonable demands.

"Levitating them like that in a giant disorganized lump is unsightly. Make it a proper sphere. A ring now. A pyramid. That doesn't look like a pyramid to me – do you need to have your glasses checked, mister Kazinski? Yes, better. But slow – you must be faster. Much faster. Start over

from the sphere again. Again. Again.”

Zorian made the mass of marbles flow from one shape to another as fast as he could, but eventually a disaster struck – he lost control of the exercise and the entire mass went crashing down onto the table. Zorian winced as the marbles bounced off the table, making a huge racket and scattering all over Xvim’s office, his mask of cool detachment breaking for a moment.

Damn it.

Several seconds passed in the aftermath as Zorian and Xvim stared at each other impassively.

“Well?” asked Xvim curiously. “What are you waiting for, mister Kazinski? Hurry up and gather the marbles into the bowl so we can continue where we left off.”

“Yes, sir,” said Zorian, unable to keep a note of sourness out of his voice. “I’ll be right on it.”

It was official: he really hated marbles.

39. Suspicious Coincidences

Chapter 039 Suspicious Coincidences

Zorian stared at his tormentor in silence, as relaxed and impassive as one could be when faced with such a pitiless, unreasonable man. Xvim stared back at him, his face a picture of unshakable, effortless composure that made Zorian's best efforts at stoicism appear laughable in comparison. Still, he wouldn't break. He *didn't* break. He had (eventually) met every ridiculous demand Xvim had given him and had never blown up at the man even once. Of course, that hadn't impressed the man any, even when he'd demonstrated insanely good shaping skills for a third year student, but he'd expected as much.

They continued staring at each other in silence for several seconds.

"That," Xvim finally decided, "was terrible. You are inflexible, slow, yet paradoxically impatient. I see in you a tendency to overreach, mister Kazinski, moving on to advanced fields of study without a healthy foundation to back it up. A common problem with many of your fellow mages, true, but 'everyone else is doing it' was never a valid excuse for anything. We will have to work on that before we tackle anything more substantial."

"Of course, sir," Zorian said calmly. "I'll be sure to practice everything you've shown me back at home."

"Good. I expect a better performance on our second session," said Xvim, leaning back in his chair before making a shooing motion with his hand. "You are dismissed."

Zorian made a solemn nod, slowly rose from his chair and then fled the office as fast as he could without making it obvious he was in a hurry to leave. Only when he shut the door and put some distance from the room did he let himself relax.

That could have ended up badly. Very, very badly. He knew he'd be taking a risk when he tried to read Xvim's mind, but the man had aggravated him so much that he couldn't help himself. Besides, what were the chances of Xvim deciding to shield his mind for a meeting with one of his students? Pretty good, apparently, because Zorian encountered a powerful mental shield when he tried to read his thoughts. He withdrew immediately, terrified that his telepathic probe had been noticed by the man, but whatever defenses Xvim had apparently gave the man too little feedback to notice Zorian's relatively delicate attack. Well, that or he *did* notice but decided not to say anything, but that seemed very unlikely – if that were the case, he would have at least made a snide comment or two about how sloppy Zorian's attempt was, even if he wasn't at all bothered by the attempt itself.

It was very interesting that Xvim had bothered shielding his mind for their meeting, though. Was Xvim one of those mages who kept their mind shielded at all times, or did he somehow know about Zorian's talents? There were a lot of possibilities. Zorian made a mental note to barge into the man's office unannounced at some point in the next week, just to see if Xvim had his mind shielded even when not expecting Zorian to arrive...

His thoughts were still preoccupied with Xvim when he arrived back home, at which point the realization that he could sense the minds of Nochka and her mother in the house pushed the topic of his so-called mentor out of his mind. That was unexpected – there had been no plans for them to visit, as far as he knew. He entered the house and made a beeline towards the kitchen, where he could sense Imaya and Rea were currently situated, and found them seated around the kitchen table, gossiping over some cookies and... plum brandy?

Well, whatever. After exchanging greetings, he tried to ask Rea about her reasons for coming unannounced without sounding rude and accusing. He didn't quite succeed if the dirty look Imaya shot him was any indication, but Rea herself didn't seem to mind.

"Nochka was being impatient about your next visit so I decided to take her to Kirielle instead," she explained. "Besides, it is not fair to make you spend your time on bringing your sister over to my home. You are a student of magic, with many additional obligations aside, I'm told, and I am but a simple housewife with plenty of free time."

"Simple housewife", right. If she really was what she claimed to be, he would... well, he wouldn't do anything crazy, but he'd be shocked. It was possible, but she was too confident and emotionally composed to be some ordinary housewife.

"For myself, I have no complaint about Nochka coming here from time to time," Imaya piped in. "So you need not worry about any complaint from me."

"I see," Zorian said slowly. He looked at Rea, and found her unflinchingly meeting his gaze. Though his empathy detected no hostile intent and she didn't do anything overtly threatening, he found her vaguely unsettling. It was her body language, he realized – though her posture was relaxed, she did not fidget or move at all.

Making a snap decision, Zorian decided to take a risk for the second time in a day and dived into her surface thoughts. He didn't want to get too comfortable with violating the mental sanctity of people around him, but if a person looked like a threat, he felt it was justified. And Rea definitely looked suspicious to him right now.

Rea's mind was not shielded, and she gave no indication that she detected his intrusion. That said, he didn't get anything worthwhile out of it. She was not feeling very introspective at the moment, nor thinking any incriminating thoughts. Mostly, she seemed to be studying *him*, even as he was doing the same to her. Much like Zorian could tell she was not a normal housewife, she too seemed aware that he was anything but a normal

student.

He decided to get her talking about her background and current situation, hopefully guiding her thoughts down the path that would reveal what her deal was. Besides, Imaya seemed to be getting more and more uncomfortable with their silent stare-down so if nothing else he should break the silence to calm her down a little.

“You know, I just realized I never did ask you why you and your family moved into Cyoria,” said Zorian. “I bet it’s a fascinating story...”

Over the next half an hour, Zorian spoke with Rea about her life and recent history, with Imaya occasionally jumping in with her opinion. Despite his efforts, Zorian failed to uncover any deep secret from Rea’s thoughts. Her mind was too focused on what she was saying, with little in the way of internal musings or stray thoughts. The only thing Zorian could tell with certainty was that she hadn’t lied even once while talking to him. Her story about her family moving from a small rural town to Cyoria out of simple desire for a better life in the big city was something she honestly believed in, rather than some clichéd cover story. Her husband wanted a better paying job he could not get in their old home, Rea wanted to get away from their rather unpleasant neighbors who were spreading nasty rumors about her whenever they could get away with it, and they were both unhappy with the poor state of the local school and wanted better for Nochka. So they moved. Simple as that. Currently they were still in the process of setting up in Cyoria, and were thus having some money problems, but Rea seemed unconcerned about that, claiming it to be a temporary issue.

His mind reading did pick up on two interesting things. First, Rea had ridiculously good hearing. Throughout the entire conversation, she was somehow picking up on the conversation Kirielle and Nochka were having in another part of the house, separated from the kitchen by a corridor and two closed doors. Zorian himself could not hear a thing from the two girls, no matter how hard he strained his ears. Secondly, while Rea did not know he was reading her mind, she was pretty good at figuring out people’s moods and motives the old fashioned way – she realized pretty quickly he was suspicious of her and trying to interrogate her.

And she found it amusing. Very, very amusing.

Eventually, Zorian was forced to admit defeat, withdrawing from Rea’s mind and excusing himself so he could leave. At the very least he was mollified that Rea did not seem to have any sinister plan for him and Kirielle, which was really all he cared about in regards to her. She could keep her secrets, so long as they didn’t come back to haunt him later.

“Oh yes, I nearly forgot,” Imaya said as he turned to leave. “Kael said he wanted to talk to you when you get back. He’s in the basement right now, tinkering with his alchemical equipment again.”

Thanking her for the information, Zorian descended into the basement to see what Kael wanted from him. It could be any number of things, really – he had dropped a multitude of bizarre problems on the morlock boy since they’d met in this restart, and he counted himself lucky that Kael was so reasonable and level-headed about what he had learned. He had to admit, with no small amount of embarrassment, that he himself probably wouldn’t have taken it half as well in his place.

Then again, he had the feeling that Kael’s willingness to accept his explanation about the time loop came from greed. He was sure that Kael saw the time loop less as a terrifying anomaly and more as a fantastic opportunity that could catapult his skills and knowledge immensely if he played his cards right, and that doubtlessly influenced how inclined he was to accept Zorian’s story as truthful. Case in point...

“Ah, you’re here,” Kael greeted him. “Did you get the ingredients I asked of you?”

“Yup,” said Zorian, reaching into his bag and withdrawing a wooden box full of alchemical ingredients.

“There were no problems?” Kael asked, accepting the box and promptly opening it to examine the contents. He pulled out one of the bottles from the box, the one full of inky black liquid, and brought it towards the light to check something.

“No. The shopkeeper looked at me strangely for buying so many expensive ingredients, but said nothing in the end. It would still probably be smart to buy the next batch from some other shop, though.”

“Probably,” agreed Kael, putting the bottle back and snapping the box shut.

There was no offer of reimbursing Zorian for his expenses. One of the first demands Kael had of Zorian once he decided the time loop thing had something to it was for Zorian to finance his experiments to the best of his ability. He understood Kael’s demand for what it was – not just a way for the boy to secure more funding, but also a challenge for Zorian to prove he believed what he was saying. After all, if he really believed in his own time loop story, he wouldn’t care at all about spending his money like that, would he?

Kael placed the box on the work table next to him, depositing it among the many other boxes, ceramic bowls, glass bottles and other alchemical instruments that cluttered Kael’s workspace. He seemed to be lost in thought for a moment, his bright blue eyes rapidly scanning the rest of the basement, before he focused back to his conversation with Zorian.

“How often do you think you’ll be able to buy more?” he asked.

“Well... I hesitate to say ‘as often as you need me to’, since I’m sure you can burn through any amount of money I have if you go wild, but I’m pretty loaded right now. Thanks to the time loop I found a very time-efficient way to extract a great deal of crystalized mana from Knyazov Dveri’s underworld, and selling that has given me a huge amount of money to spend,” Zorian explained. “So... two or three boxes like that a day if I had to? Maybe more, but I really think that would be a bad idea, since I don’t think I’d be able to avoid unwelcome attention if I started buying so

much expensive stuff.”

“I... see...” Kael said slowly, clearly more than a little surprised at the information. “That’s a lot of money. Out of curiosity, why did you go to the trouble to get so much? Funds for your own experiments?”

“Partially,” said Zorian. “It certainly makes things a lot easier when you can throw around money like it’s nothing. Saves time. And yes, I know it’s strange for that to be a concern when you’re stuck in an ever-repeating time loop.”

“And the other part?”

“Greed, I guess,” Zorian admitted. “When I finally break out of the time loop I kind of want to have all my monetary concerns taken care of. Probably not the best use of my time but-”

“Don’t worry, I understand you completely,” said Kael, smiling slightly. “I probably wouldn’t have been able to resist doing so myself. In fact, I probably would have done it much sooner, even with the threat of other time travelers and the presence of more pressing problems you’re dealing with. So many problems in my life would have disappeared if I had a million pieces or so...”

“Well, you *are* an alchemist,” Zorian said. “Your profession has always been very expensive to practice, unless you were one of those alchemists who were willing to limit themselves to components they could grow and personally harvest in the wilderness. It makes perfect sense that you’d want to get rich if given a chance.”

“Perhaps. I don’t think I’d be anywhere near as efficient about it as you are, though. Well, not without resorting to theft. The thought of looking for crystalized mana would have never occurred to me. What’s so valuable about it that people are willing to pay so much?”

Zorian gave Kael a curious look. “It’s a bit strange to hear an alchemist ask that. I’m pretty sure that powdered crystalized mana is an important potion ingredient.”

“Not in the kind of potions I’m making,” Kael said, shaking his head.

“Ah. Well, crystalized mana is basically ambient mana in solid form. Harder to make use of than ambient mana, since it first has to be broken down into the more familiar, ethereal form before you can use it to power anything, but it is very convenient as a mana battery. Most mana batteries, such as the ones made with spell formulas, lose all stored mana in a couple of days to a week. Crystalized mana, on the other hand, is completely stable in normal circumstances. That’s very useful if you want to, say, support a powerful magical item or warding scheme independently of ambient mana levels,” explained Zorian.

“Ah, so these are the crystals the new trains use for fuel,” said Kael.

“Yes,” Zorian confirmed. “I heard that use of crystalized mana as train fuel is really driving the prices of it upwards lately, got a bunch of people worried. Very convenient for me, though.”

“Shame it’s only useful for powering items,” Kael said. “Having some kind of personal mana battery would have been a nice way of side stepping your limited mana reserves. Have you looked into making such a thing? Even if it only lasted a few weeks, that should be enough to be useful in your circumstances.”

“Of course I’ve looked into it,” Zorian scoffed. “It’s impossible. Personal mana loses its affinity with its maker rapidly once expended, becoming indistinguishable from ambient mana in a matter of minutes.”

“Ah.”

“Indeed. What about alchemical solutions? Is there a potion that increases your mana regeneration, gives you a momentary mana boost or something like that?”

“I doubt it. I think we would have all heard about such a potion if it was at all available. But it’s possible, I suppose, especially if it has some serious drawbacks that curtails its use. You should probably ask Lukav about that – if anyone knows how to answer that question definitively, it’s him,” Kael said. He squirmed uncomfortably. “And since we’re on the topic of Lukav, I have a bit of a... personal request.”

“I’m listening,” Zorian said curiously.

“Okay...” Kael began. “When I gave you that list of people to consult with in regards to soul magic, I did not exactly give you a list of strangers. We weren’t best friends, but I *knew* these people. We had history between us, we met sometimes to exchange news and the like... to find out that someone had been going around, kidnapping and killing them, was very upsetting to me.”

Zorian winced. Now that it was pointed out to him, he had been really rather callous when he told Kael of the disappearances in Knyazov Dveri, hadn’t he? This wasn’t just another disquieting mystery to Kael, but an outright attack on him and his acquaintances.

“I’m not angry at you,” Kael hurriedly added. “I realize you already have a lot on your plate, and that staying alive and figuring out what is behind the time loop takes precedence over everything else. However, I would really appreciate it if you looked into these killers and figured out a way to stop them for good.”

“Of course,” Zorian immediately agreed. “I had fully intended to do so anyway. I simply delayed that investigation until I had taken care of more pressing problems and gotten somewhat better at magical combat.”

Besides, he had figured that investigating the invasion forces here in Cyoria would automatically bring him closer to solving that particular mystery. The two were clearly connected somehow, perhaps even two different fronts of the exact same operation.

“I see. That takes a load off my chest,” Kael said, exhaling heavily. “If there is anything I can do to help you with this, just let me know. I’m still in the process of asking around, but I think I can get my hands on a couple of truth potion recipes.”

“I already have my own interrogation magic, but I suppose having more options to choose from never hurts,” Zorian said. Truthfully, truth potions might actually be more effective than what he had in mind, at least at the current stage of the investigation, but he really needed to develop his ability to sift through people’s memories so he was reluctant to use them. “Keep in mind that Lukav already knows how to make a truth potion, so if your talks fall through I can just teleport you to his village so you can have a friendly chat with him. Perhaps he is willing to share.”

“He knows how to do that? Sneaky bastard was holding out on me,” Kael grumbled. “Still, that does remind me that Lukav is far from being a helpless victim and neither is his priest friend. It might be a good idea to involve them in the investigation – they might be perfectly capable of taking the killers down on their own if you provide him with sufficient information.”

Now there was an idea. It would be hard to secure Alanic’s cooperation without coming clean about absolutely everything, but the benefits could be immense. He would have to seriously consider it when he started to seriously tackle the problem of Iasku Manor and disappearances around Knyazov Dveri.

“Well,” said Kael after a few seconds of silence, unlocking one of the drawers attached to his work desk and withdrawing a cheap, featureless notebook out of it. “With that out of the way, I’d like to discuss another unpleasant topic with you: your soul marker.”

Zorian straightened his back a little, suddenly alert. Truthfully, when he had told Kael about the soul marker and allowed the morlock boy to perform a scan of his soul, he had not expected much. Kael may have been a necromancer, but he was very much an amateur one. Still, he figured it wouldn’t hurt to put some trust in the other boy – both Lukav and Alanic were rather narrowly specialized when it came to their soul magic expertise, and it was entirely possible that they had missed something that a full-blown necromancer, even a novice one, would find obvious. It seemed that was indeed the case.

“What is it?” he asked with barely hidden excitement.

Kael sighed and pressed the notebook into Zorian’s hand. Leafing through it, however, Zorian realized he didn’t understand anything in it. It was full of unfamiliar diagrams and alien jargon, interspersed with brief paragraphs that meant nothing to one who lacked sufficient context to understand them. He shot Kael an annoyed look.

“I’ll be blunt,” said Kael, ignoring his glare. “Your marker shouldn’t work.” Seeing Zorian’s confused expression, he moved to explain. “I was immediately suspicious when you described how tightly the marker’s entwined with your soul – why would someone make such a deeply embedded marker and then make it a simple unchanging identification stamp like you assumed it was? The desire to make the marker resilient to damage and harder to remove could explain some of it, but it was still excessive – there are less invasive means that would have only failed if the soul was so mangled that the person was effectively dead. Those methods do have a noticeable flaw, though – they are a lot easier to copy than what you have rooted in your soul. That, I felt, was key. The marker was designed to foil attempts at copying it to other people. And in order to do that –“

“It needed to check up on the host’s soul to see whether it has been transplanted to another person,” Zorian interrupted.

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“Yes,” Kael said. He took the notebook out of Zorian’s hands, flipped it to one of the later pages and handed it back to him.

Looking at it again, Zorian could tell that the diagram was supposed to be a crude outline of a human’s body, several circles, triangles and straight lines drawn over it. Below it was a short paragraph talking about ‘essence channels’, ‘feedback nodes’ and ‘transition barriers’. It still didn’t mean much to Zorian, but he could tell this time that it was supposed to represent Zorian’s soul, the marker attached to it and their interaction to one another.

“I do not claim to completely understand the marker,” Kael said. “Or even most of it – it’s an awe-inspiring thing, clearly made by a master soul mage. I especially like how it makes itself inconspicuous to casual soul scans – I’m not surprised I never detected it before being informed it was there. Still, there are some things about its functions that are obvious to me, and one of them is that the marker is designed to consult the soul of its host – the core, unchanging part of it, anyway – and alter its identification tag according to what it detects. Transplanting the marker to another person should result in a totally different identification value.”

“But that’s clearly not how it works,” Zorian protested. “Zach and I have the same damn marker! The tracking spell wouldn’t have worked otherwise!”

“It’s broken,” Kael said calmly. “Your marker, that is. There are parts of it that are totally inert, either because they do not acknowledge you as its rightful host or because they are missing some critical piece that got lost in the transfer. I’m guessing that at least one of those is supposed to send a

signal to the looping mechanism when you die, terminating the loop prematurely – that would neatly explain why you get sent back when Zach dies but he doesn't experience the same when *you* end up dead. He has the intact version of the marker, whereas you don't.”

“But the main part of the thing works?”

“In a sense. It does everything it is supposed to, consulting the core of your soul, but for some reason it is still stuck on the same value it had while it was still inside Zach. It's broken, but it's broken in your favor.”

“Huh,” said Zorian lamely. What was he supposed to say to that? “Honestly? This isn't such a huge surprise. I always suspected that the marker was in some way defective. After all, I highly doubt that its makers intended for someone like me to enter the time loop the way I did. Does this really change anything?”

“Depends how you look at it,” Kael said. “You are in no danger of being suddenly dropped out of the loop, so I suppose from a personal perspective this doesn't change much. But look at it from a wider perspective. If I'm right, then whatever convergence of circumstances aligned to pull you into the time loop along with Zach was a fluke. A fortunate fluke, but a fluke all the same. It is not consistently reproducible.”

Zorian frowned. What was he...

Then it hit him.

“Wait. How did Red Robe end up time looping, then?”

“Yes, that is the question, isn't it?” Kael said, his fingers drumming on his work table impatiently. “I'm afraid I don't know how to answer that question. But he clearly didn't use the same method you did.”

“Yeah,” Zorian agreed. “I had strongly suspected that, but I couldn't be sure. Him having some other method of joining the time loop would explain why he never used his own marker to track *me* down the way I did Zach. He doesn't have the same marker as me and Zach, if he indeed has one at all, so he would have to capture Zach and use him as a key to locate me that way.”

“And if he's indeed a master soul mage like you seem to think, he probably ‘knows’ you could not possibly have an identical marker as Zach, so there is no reason for him to try that in the first place,” Kael said.

They bounced theories and ideas off one another for the next half an hour, but it was all just hollow speculation at the moment. They had no way to confirm or discard any of the possibilities. Kael thought that Red Robe was in some way piggy backing on Zach, either by leaving portions of his mind in Zach the way the Cyorian matriarch did with Zorian, or by having some kind of soul link with Zach. Zorian discarded the possibility of a mind package immediately. The logistics of that kind of setup didn't add up – Red Robe was active within hours of the start of the loop, if his quick arrival to the ruins of the aranea colony in that one restart were any indication, and processing a large amount of memories took more than a day. Not to mention that Zach didn't start every restart by going to the same location, so it was questionable how Red Robe would have even gotten a memory package in every restart. No, Red Robe definitely wasn't using memory packages. And really, Zorian didn't think he was linked to Zach's soul either – if he was, he would have checked Zach's soul for additional connections when he'd read his mind and found out there were additional time travelers running around. Instead, he immediately ran off to confront the aranea. The thought of someone being connected to Zach's soul didn't seem to occur to him.

Personally, Zorian thought Red Robe did have a marker of some sort. It was entirely possible, he felt, that there was a way for people who knew what they were doing to enter the time loop ‘properly’ – to get their own marker and all. Though that did raise a question about why he didn't just off Zach and go on with his life free of interference.

What was so special about Zach?

“Right. I don't think we're getting anywhere with this,” Zorian said. “Anything else I should keep in mind?”

“Nothing that Lukav and his priest friend didn't already warn you about – avoid any magic that could alter your soul substantially. We don't know what caused the marker to get stuck on its current identification value, and there is no telling what will push it off the edge, so take care,” said Kael.

“I was afraid to do that even before now, and for that exact reason too,” Zorian said, leaning back on making a deliberately dramatic sigh. “Pity, though. I guess my dream of turning that stupid grey hunter Silverlake sent me to deal with into my very own familiar or becoming a grey hunter shifter is doomed to remain just a dream...”

“Didn't you know? There is a reason why most shifters are made from normal animals,” Kael warned him. “Being a shifter means you get instincts from the other part of the soul, and magical creatures always have very strong souls... the more magical the creature, the stronger. And they tend to be extremely violent and territorial. With regards to grey hunters, I'm fairly certain they don't tolerate even their own kind, much less anything else. Such an attitude would bleed over to you if you became a grey hunter shifter. And there is also the matter of inheritance to consider - even if you are able to master a grey hunter's soul and not let its urges rule you, there is no guarantee that your children will be similarly strong-willed, especially since they'll have those urges from the day they are born. I'd strongly recommend against that course of action. As for making it your familiar, keep in mind that it takes a long time for the soul link to mature and that you need to be close to it the whole time. There is no guarantee that the creature won't kill you during the process. And if you do manage to slave it to your will, it could still be dangerous to everyone around you who is not protected by the soul bond.”

“There was no need for a lecture. I was just joking,” said Zorian flatly.

“Good.”

“Even if its abilities would have been so very useful...” Zorian said wistfully. “Extreme toughness, speed and magical resistance? Yes, please!”

“Just kill it, chop it up for parts and make an enhancement potion out of them,” suggested Kael. “You can ask Lukav to help you do it, I’m sure he’d jump at the chance. Not many people are crazy enough to go after one of those monsters, after all, so I’m pretty sure he never had a chance to work with grey hunter parts.”

“You know, that actually sounds like an interesting idea...”

“Glad I could help,” Kael said, peering into a slowly bubbling metal pot on the table in front of him and scowling. “Well, my current experiment is not going too well. And I thought I had it this time, too. Time to try batch number four.” He gave Zorian a speculative look. “Say, do you think you can help me out here? Some of the steps are pretty simple, and observing my work will ensure you don’t forget what I talked about as easily as you did last time.”

“Yeah, I’ll help, and holy gods will you stop reminding me of that!?” Zorian whined. “It was more than a year, and I had a lot on my mind; it was natural I would forget a lot of things. Besides, I’m already working on side-stepping my faulty memory somehow.”

“Hmm, I wish you luck about that,” Kael said. “Nonetheless, we both know you’ll remember my work a lot better if you understand what I’m doing instead of just blindly memorizing recipes and dry instructions. Think of this as free alchemical lessons.”

Well. He *did* use a fair amount of alchemy in solving the problems he encountered, so getting some advice in the field might actually be useful.

“Alright. Where do you want me to start?”

- break -

The next day, Zorian decided to make good on his own internal promise to find some solution to the ‘forgetting things’ problem. Well, he had to organize another one of Kirielle’s magic lessons first, but there were no issues with that. Her progress was much faster than it had been in the previous restarts he had tried teaching her, since he had already been through this several times and was therefore getting better at motivating her and explaining the subject matter in a way she intuitively understood. His obligations done for the day, he quickly excused himself and went out for a walk, lest Kael or Imaya find some other job to dump in his lap.

In the long run, Zorian knew he already had a perfectly good solution for remembering things with perfect clarity – he could just make memory packets like those of the Cyorian matriarch, storing them in his mind for future recall. The map of Cyoria’s underworld that the matriarch had left him was still as crystal clear in his mind as it had been the day he had assembled it from the scattered remnants left in the minds of the male survivors of the colony. It served as a shining example of what was possible for one who could master the procedure of creating such things. And it wasn’t like learning how to do that would be an additional time sink, either – learning how to handle memory packets was something he was already working on. It was his current priority, in fact.

The problem was, it would be a while before his effort there bore any fruit. Could be a couple of months, could be a couple of years... well, hopefully not *years*, since the matriarch’s memory package could decay into uselessness by then, but the point remained: it was not a quick solution to his immediate problem. Fortunately, human mages were quite good at making quick solutions to immediate problems, and surely some of them had at one point needed to memorize a map down to the very last detail, or recite a book word for word? Zorian would be shocked if the spell to do such a thing didn’t already exist somewhere out there, it was just a question of whether he could find it.

He decided to try at the academy library first. A bit unimaginative, but it was the best place to start his research and it had been a while since he’d spent some time browsing its shelves. He kind of missed that during his long absence from Cyoria.

Three hours later, he was torn between smiling in satisfaction and the urge to find something flammable to take his frustration out on. The bright side was: he found what he was looking for. There were no less than five different spells that could do what he wanted, mostly by allowing the caster to record what they see and hear for a brief period of time and storing that record in their minds. They differed in details, such as whether it was possible to pause the recording or not, but the core was the same. One even claimed it could form a clear memory retroactively, allowing the caster to remember what they had forgotten.

The bad news was that these spells were only available in the restricted section of the library.

Specifically, the mind magic section of it.

Zorian leaned back in his chair, precariously balancing it on its back two legs and taking his glasses off to massage his eyes. To say that the academy was reluctant to give permission to random students with regards to doing mind magic would be a severe understatement. He needed a better library pass if he wanted to get what he wanted, and there was no way he was going to get it through *legal* means.

He narrowed his eyes while staring at the library ceiling. There was no helping it. He would just have to steal one.

“What has gotten my best student so gloomy on this fine day?”

Zorian jumped in his seat, startled, the poorly balanced chair almost giving up on him and pulling him to the floor. After finally stabilizing himself enough, he turned around to give Ilsa an unamused look.

"Sorry," she said, but her smile and the emotions he felt off of her told Zorian she was not sorry at all. "I didn't think you would react so... explosively."

"You just surprised me a bit," Zorian said. He *had* detected a person passing by him with his mind sense, but that wasn't exactly something unusual in this place. It wasn't like the library was empty, after all. "What can I help you with, Miss Zileti?"

"Nothing, really – I am already done with what I came here for. You didn't notice it because you were so absorbed into your reading, but I had passed through this section twice before now. I just didn't want to interrupt you then, since you looked quite busy. I was just leaving now when I noticed you trying to burn a hole in the ceiling with your eyes, so I wondered if I can help you with whatever is troubling you."

"I appreciate the offer, Miss Zileti," Zorian said. "I really do. But I don't think you can help me with this."

Helpful though she may be, Zorian was pretty sure that asking her to help him with committing a crime was a terrible idea. Amusing, but terrible.

"What are you working on, anyway?" she asked, peering at the open book in front of him. "Memory preservation spells? Why would you need that?"

"I need a way to quickly and flawlessly memorize a notebook or two," Zorian said truthfully.

Ilsa gave him a searching look.

"If this is about class work..."

"No, I think I'm doing quite well in my classes," Zorian said, shaking his head. If anything, he thought he was doing too well – he was at the top of his class in terms of grades, despite his efforts to avoid standing out. "It's personal. All I can say is that I'll be going on a trip soon, and I won't be able to bring anything with me. Anything but my memories, that is. And while my memory is quite good, it is not good enough to memorize, say, a word-for-word transcription of a book of potion recipes."

"Sounds ominous and suspicious," Ilsa noted.

"I'm not planning anything illegal," Zorian assured.

"I'm sure," Ilsa deadpanned. "That's why you're looking up spells that I *know* you're not authorized to learn."

"Hence me being gloomy when you approached me," Zorian countered. "I'd thought I had found a solution to my problem, but it turns out it's beyond my reach at the moment."

"I see," she said. "Out of curiosity, how important is it that you be able to access the information in the book while it is stored inside your mind?"

"I'm not sure I understand," Zorian frowned. "What would be the point of holding a book in your head if you couldn't read it?"

"To create a copy of it, of course," Ilsa smiled. "It's a trick that some alteration experts use if they want to be able to create complex objects without carrying the originals with them. They use a spell to record the blueprint of an object, storing it inside their heads, then simply use that blueprint to create copies of the object whenever it strikes their fancy. Well, provided they have the correct raw materials. In your case, that would be a blank book of similar dimensions to what you're trying to copy and a bottle of ink."

"And... you know how to do this?" asked Zorian hopefully.

Ilsa hummed. "Well, I *am* an alteration expert... but even if I was willing to teach you, this is not exactly an easy spell combination. It requires a great deal of alteration expertise and great shaping control. It would take–"

Zorian concentrated for a second and pulled at the heavy, metal lined book on the shelf next to him with his magic, not bothering to make a single gesture or hand motion. The book smoothly slid out of its shelf and floated in front of Ilsa, startling her. Before she could say anything, the book opened itself and started turning its pages, slowly at first but then speeding up until the last half of it passed in a blur and the book slammed itself shut. His point made, Zorian smoothly slotted the book back to its previous place on the shelf.

"I can't think of a proper way to prove my alteration expertise right now," said Zorian in the resulting silence, "but I'm perfectly capable of restructuring a metal pan into a fully functional metal watch. How much harder would this be compared to that?"

"Not exactly harder," Ilsa admitted, still staring at the book on the shelf with a frown. "But certainly different. You'd have to practice for a few days before you can get it right." She shook her head and tore her eyes away from the book to stare Zorian in the eyes. "We're going to have a talk about this on Monday, mister Kazinski."

"Does that mean you agree to teach it to me?" he asked.

"Not yet. I'll need to run some tests on you to see whether you can handle the spells safely."

Ilsa soon left, leaving Zorian alone to his own thoughts. He closed the book in front of him, setting it aside. Ilsa's spell combination wasn't exactly what he had been looking for when he searched for a quick and dirty solution, but it could work. In fact, it was even better than his original idea in some regards. Much less annoying to use, for instance. Plus, he wouldn't need to painstakingly transcribe the information from his head every time

he wanted to add or change something. He would give Ilsa's method a chance.

But he was going to steal a better library pass anyway.

- break -

Two weeks passed in a blur of activity. Most of it was routine, like him accompanying Taiven and her team to the Dungeon, teaching Kirielle or helping Kael with his alchemy (and having his soul occasionally scanned by the other boy, with little results thus far). It helped that Kirielle actually had a friend her age this time so she monopolized his time a lot less. Whatever dark secret her mother harbored, Zorian had to admit Nocka's presence made Kirielle a lot more manageable than she usually was, so he was definitely going to visit that bridge in future restarts as well.

Two main things stood out from the rest. The first one was that he had managed to learn the spells Ilsa had talked about, and they worked just as she said they would. He was happy that he could finally keep written notes on what happened in the time loop, since he now had a method of effectively transferring his notebooks into the next restart. Kael was happy too, since he could now be much more liberal about the amount of information he was sending over to his future self – he promptly gave Zorian four fully filled-out notebooks to store the blueprints of, with a promise of one more by the end of the restart. Zorian really hoped Kael wouldn't accumulate notebooks so rapidly in future restarts, because Zorian could only hold about 15 blueprints in his mind. The matriarch's memory packet didn't leave much room for anything else, really.

The second interesting thing was that he had all but confirmed that Xvim had his mind shielded at all times. He had barged into the man's office three different times, and the shield had always been active. Sadly, his unannounced visits seemed to have finally provoked the unflappable man somewhat, so now Zorian had 5 different shaping books on his reading list for their next session. Depending on which book Xvim decided to focus on, their next lesson would consist of Zorian making detailed shapes out of sand, telekinetically dismantling a watch without breaking any of its parts, playing around with candles and matches, trying to apply paint on canvas without using any brushes or carving glyphs into stones with his fingers. Or maybe all five if Xvim was feeling particularly vindictive.

But that was all background activity – the real focus of his efforts was tracking the Ibasans and the Cult of the World Dragon, mapping the structure of their organization. Originally he wanted to be cautious, spending most of the restart just observing everything, identifying their members and locations they met and did business in, but... well, he saw his chance and he took it. While the Ibasans were mostly full blown mages and lived deep underground in heavily warded bases crawling with guards, only periodically visiting the surface, most of their allies in the city were far more modestly protected. Zorian followed around cultists and simple mercenaries that worked with the Ibasans, tracking them down to their homes and reading their thoughts as they skulked around. The wards on their houses, if they even had them, were hilariously easy to avoid or break, allowing Zorian to root through their stuff for additional clues and connections with other members of their conspiracy.

He had found out some interesting things. For instance, not all of the Ibasan agents in the city were aware of what they were getting themselves into. The various merchants that smuggled food and other supplies to the invaders seemed entirely ignorant of whom they were really supporting. It was just business to them. Apparently there were numerous secret bases and operations happening in the deep reaches of Cyoria's Dungeon, and most of them were fairly inoffensive – illegal harvesting operations for dangerous substances, secret research facilities by various trading groups, even a government black site of some sort. The merchants thought they were simply supplying one of these many shadowy factions and never pried much into the identity of their customers. A couple of mercenaries knew that the invaders planned to do some kind of terrorist strike during the summer festival, but didn't care about the details so long as they got paid – they didn't seem to be aware of the true scale of the invasion.

Then there was the Cult of the World Dragon, who honestly baffled him. The cult had a very complex, confusing structure, with lots of different ranks and categories of membership, and every rank seemed to have been fed a different story. On top of that, some members seemed to be in it purely for the benefits and had never bought into the Cult's belief system in the first place. They were in it for the money – apparently, being a member of the Cult of Dragon could be pretty profitable if you played your cards right. They knew that the cult planned to release a primordial at the summer festival to ravage the city and everything around it, of course, but didn't believe the primordial in question even existed, so no harm in going along with it, right?

Right.

There was still no evidence that Red Robe was in any way operating among the invasion forces, nor that he had shared even a speck of knowledge with them before running off to do something else, so Zorian decided to be a little more aggressive and start actually practicing his memory reading on acceptable targets. To that end, he identified a small cultist gathering – organized by a trio of magic-wielding members who appeared to be of a slightly higher rank than the usual dregs Zorian encountered thus far – and prepared to subdue them for questioning.

Eight armed cultists, three of whom were magic wielders. His old self would have called him crazy for trying to tackle them all on his lonesome, even from ambush, but they never really stood a chance – he trapped the house they were to meet in before they even got there, having found out about their chosen meeting place several days in advance, and took them down one by one as they came. Mostly by telepathically compelling them into falling asleep, much like the aranea had tried to do to him such a long time ago when he'd first encountered them. The last arrival was a mage who had a mind shield spell formula on a ring and fought his attempt off. Zorian was forced to deal with him via slamming him into a wall a couple of times with some judicious application of the 'force blast' spell.

Once they were all down and tied up, Zorian took a deep breath and concentrated on diving into the memories of his first victim.

Before he got instruction from the Yellow Cavern Guardians, Zorian sort of expected that probing someone's memories would be like one sometimes sees in adventure novels and the like – a walk through some psychedelic mindscape, where the intruder has to navigate deeply symbolical mazes and fight mental representations of the victim's psyche and what not. The reality was nothing like that. Or at least the way aranea did it was nothing like that, and the Yellow Cavern Guardians had seemed more than a little amused when Zorian had described the idea to them.

Instead, memory probes simply consisted of a powerful telepathic probe that punched through the surface layers of the victim's mind and then started branching throughout their inner self in search of whatever the psychic was after.

It was by its very nature a dangerous procedure – unlike lighter, surface manipulations, deep scans like the one he was about to do could permanently ruin a mind. An amateur like Zorian was all but guaranteed to cause irreparable damage on his first try, unless they had spent years doing careful exercises which Zorian had no time for. Thus, he was not terribly surprised when that first man ended up as a mindless husk five minutes later. The convulsions and foaming at the mouth that preceded it were very disturbing, however, and almost made him give up on the whole thing right then and there. He didn't even manage to read anything out of his memories, so his death had been for nothing.

A few minutes later, after he'd had some time to calm down and drown out the little voice in his head telling him he was a monster for killing a defenseless man like that, he continued with victim number two. He decided not to stay so long inside the minds of the rest of them.

Number two, three, four, five and six survived his probes. They could even wake up some day. Well, they could have, if the time loop wasn't so close to its end. The sixth attempt actually yielded some results, too – he didn't find much in the man's memories before he had to withdraw, but he did add a few more names to his list to investigate, so at least *some* good came out of it. The last two suffered only light damage due to his probe. They knew nothing useful that could help him.

Zorian left the house feeling hollow, wondering whether he was really justified in doing this.

He came home to find Kirielle in tears and the entire household in an uproar. Rea and Sauth Sashal had been found dead in their home, brutally murdered by what appeared to be a monster missed by the many extermination squads operating in the city by now.

Of their daughter, there was no trace.

40. Shifting Tracks

Chapter 040 Shifting Tracks

Zorian woke up very early in the morning, roused from his slumber by the faint, incoherent mumbling of Kirielle sleeping beside him. For a moment he wondered why Kirielle was sleeping in his bed instead of being in her own room, but then he snapped out of the confused half-dream state he was in and memories of the previous evening came rushing in to him.

Rea and her husband were dead, their daughter missing. An event that had completely blindsided Zorian, who had never heard of anything like that happening in the previous restarts. Was this something that usually happened and he just never heard of it, or did the many changes in the wake of the aranean destruction somehow cause this? That fact that Rea and Sauh had been killed by a wandering monster seemed to suggest the latter, but Zorian had a hunch there was nothing random about that monster attack. The cephalic rats had been monitoring the Sashal household for a reason, after all, and the invaders were ever so fond of slaving dungeon denizens to their will and using them as their attack dogs.

Kirielle, of course, neither knew nor cared about Zorian's musings on the matter. Unlike him, who was not terribly close to the Sashal family and for whom their deaths would in no way be permanent, Kirielle had gotten very close to Nochka and was devastated to hear about the attack. Not even pointing out that she may still be alive could get her to stop crying. After all, the police said her parents were killed by a dungeon denizen, and those weren't exactly known for kidnapping people and keeping them alive for ransom.

In the end, Kirielle only calmed down and went to sleep when Imaya gave her some 'homemade calming tea' that kicked in suspiciously quickly. Probably a mild opiate. He should have asked for a cup of that himself, in all likelihood – he had already been rather unnerved by his experience of reading the cultists' memories, and was thus ill-equipped to deal with this brand new crisis.

Moving slowly, Zorian carefully extricated himself out of his bed and vacated the room, trying not to wake up Kirielle. He was pretty sure he failed in that regard, as her mental signature abruptly got more active about halfway through his retreat from the room, but since she never said anything and kept her eyes closed, he figured she didn't want to talk to him yet. Or maybe she just wanted to go back to sleep. It was pretty early...

He found everyone else already awake and seated around the table when he entered the kitchen – Imaya, Kael and even Kana.

"Couldn't sleep either, huh?" Kael asked rhetorically.

"Kirielle snuck into my bed in the middle of the night," said Zorian with a sigh. "She's hard to bunk with even in normal circumstances, and considering the recent events..."

"Poor thing," Imaya said. "She was hit the hardest by this, I think. It's a disgrace that something like that could happen in the middle of the city, and after it was already known that monsters were getting unusually aggressive too!"

Imaya spent the next ten minutes or so blaming the city for poor handling of the monster crisis – a subject that she never showed all that much of an interest in before now. It didn't take an empath to figure out that Kirielle wasn't the only one greatly affected by the killings. She had probably formed a friendship with Rea during the many times she had brought Nochka to meet with Kirielle.

Kael and Kana, on the other hand, seemed far less affected. Kael had virtually no interaction with either Nochka or Rea, and had never even met Sauh, so that was understandable. Kana had sometimes joined Nochka and Kirielle in their games, but had been nowhere near as close to Nochka as Kirielle had. She was also very young and probably didn't quite understand what was happening.

Eventually Imaya ran out of steam and fell silent, though Zorian could still feel a lot of frustration coming off her. An uneasy atmosphere descended on the table.

"Oh yes," Imaya said suddenly. "I forgot to tell you yesterday, but the police want to talk to you about... Rea and her family."

"Me?" asked Zorian in surprise. "What would I know about that?"

"You did speak to Rea and her husband relatively recently," pointed out Kael. "They probably want to see if they told you something of importance. Most likely they want to talk to everyone who knew the victim."

"I see," Zorian said, idly drumming his fingers on the table. "Are they going to drop by at some point or should I go visit the police station?"

"Detective Izketeri said he was going to be at the Sashal residence at noon today, and that you should meet him there if possible," Imaya said.

Zorian frowned. Izketeri? That sounded familiar, where did he... oh, his old divination teacher had that last name too, didn't he? And he was a detective, too...

"This detective Izketeri... he wouldn't be named Haslush, would he?" asked Zorian.

"I think that was his name, yes," Imaya said, frowning. "I have to say I don't really remember his introduction all that well. I was too shocked to really pay attention. Why, do you know him?"

"I've heard of him," said Zorian. "It's not really important, I was just curious. I'll go give him a visit later."

At that point Kirielle trudged into the kitchen, apparently having decided not to go back to sleep after all, and they all wordlessly decided to shelve the topic of the Sashal family for the moment.

- break -

The Sashal family home didn't look like a scene of death. That was the first thing Zorian noticed when he approached the house. He had expected to see some kind of damage on the building – broken windows, the door torn off its hinges, maybe a damaged wall section – but the house looked entirely intact. If it weren't for the trio of policemen hanging around the entrance and giving him severe looks as he approached, he would have never guessed the occupants had been killed.

Didn't look much like a monster attack to him. The chance of this being an actual random event kept getting lower and lower.

"I'm here to speak to detective Izketeri," he said to the tall, mustachioed, stern-looking policeman that looked like he was the leader of the group in front of him. "He told me I should look for him here. Is he present?"

"He's inside," the man nodded. "But I'm afraid I can't let you go look for him yourself. If you are willing to wait a little, I will notify him you're here."

"I'm fine with that," said Zorian, though internally he wasn't happy. He had wanted to take a look inside the place to see if he could spot any clues. He doubted the police would be willing to tell him any details about the killings, after all.

Inconvenient. He could just wait until they left the place alone and sneak in then, but that might take several days – most of the clues would have gone cold by then, assuming they hadn't been confiscated by the police as evidence. Besides, there wasn't all that much time left before the end of the restart, so his window of opportunity to conduct an investigation was very small.

Damn it, he so didn't need this right now...

"Wait here, then," the mustachioed policeman said. "What is your name, boy?"

Zorian gave him his name, and the man promptly disappeared through the door to fetch Haslush. After five minutes of waiting in uncomfortable silence while the other two policemen gave him suspicious looks, however, he could tell it would take a while for the man to return.

Zorian shuffled in place uncomfortably, probably looking mightily suspicious to the two policeman scrutinizing his every move. He knew it wasn't entirely rational, but he was profoundly unnerved about being so close to law enforcement. Logically speaking, they had no reason to suspect him of anything and this entire talk was likely just a formality. He'd had bad dealings with the police back in Cirin, though, and he was also dealing with Haslush – his old teacher could be scarily perceptive at times. Zorian wouldn't put it past the man to notice something strange about him and bring him in for more detailed questioning, which would be a gigantic waste of time at best, and at worst would necessitate an early end to the restart via suicide.

He'd prefer to avoid the latter possibility at all costs. Kirielle was already devastated about losing a friend, so having her brother suddenly blow himself up in the police station all of a sudden would be terrible. True, Zorian wouldn't be there to see her anguish, and the restart would end a few days later, but just imagining the possibility made him ill.

Maybe he should read Haslush's mind? Haslush was probably trained in detecting and resisting mental intrusion, being a mage working for law enforcement and all, but Zorian's particular brand of mind magic was very non-standard. He didn't use any obvious chants and gestures, so maybe he could get away with it. It would probably answer a lot of questions and would allow him to avoid any obvious blunders while talking to him...

...but no, that was too much of a risk. Besides, he had a much better target for something like that standing just beside him – he doubted those mundane policemen were trained in dealing with mind magic, beyond maybe being given a few pointers. A secret is only as strong as its weakest links.

He proceeded to worm his way into the two policeman's thoughts. He found out that they were really not as interested in him as he had been imagining, but they also weren't thinking about the Sashal family either – one of them was hungry and thinking of the dinner his wife was making him back home, and the other was fantasizing about some female administrative employee back in the station. Well, that was okay – he would talk to them and lead their thoughts back to the situation at hand.

"So, I don't want to get you gentlemen in trouble or anything, but is there anything you can tell me about what happened here? Sauh and Rea had been friends of mine and I was shocked to hear what happened to them... is there anything you can tell me about all this?"

Zorian didn't really expect them to say much – he fully expected them to give him the silent treatment until Haslush got outside, but simply mentioning the topic was usually enough to get a person to start thinking about it. He didn't expect to be hit by a veritable wave of distrust and derisiveness coming from his link to one of the policemen, though.

[And he looked like such a normal-looking kid, too,] the man thought to himself. [I'd never have guessed he was hanging around a bunch of thieving cat shifters. Just shows you can never trust outward appearances when it comes to magic bullshit...]

Rea was a cat shifter? Huh. That made a lot of sense, actually – explained some things. What he didn't understand at all was that the policeman

seemed to think this made Rea and her family bad people – so much so that Zorian was apparently bad just for associating with them.

Apparently he had physically reacted to this revelation, because the other policeman noticed it and spoke up to forestall any possible unpleasantness. He didn't seem to see Zorian's reaction as any evidence of mind reading, chalking up his reaction to him being able to sense the change in his partner's bearing and facial expression.

"We're just here to look tough and discourage curious neighbors from snooping around, kid," the other policeman said. "We don't know anything more about this than you do, in all likelihood – some sort of dungeon creature made its way into the house and killed the couple inside. For anything more you'll have to wait for officer Kalan to come back with the detective."

The first policeman lightly shook his head before catching himself and stopping. [The creature that killed them simply sauntered in through an unlocked door instead of breaking in and attacked absolutely no one else in this entire crowded neighborhood. If that was an actual monster incursion, I will eat my own shoes,] the man thought to himself. [The kitties probably stuck their noses in some shady business, like usual, and got offed for it when someone took offense. Gods know they got their paws on everything these days...]

Zorian frowned. "What about Nocka? Their daughter? I was told her body was never recovered and that she might still be alive?"

The two policemen suddenly became very uncomfortable. Even the first one, who clearly didn't like cat shifters as a whole, felt bad about the little girl who reminded him of his own daughter. Neither of them thought there was much chance of Nocka ever being found again, but they were unsurprisingly unwilling to tell this to Zorian and instead tried to think of a suitable non-answer they could give him.

They both breathed a sigh of relief when their exchange was interrupted by the arrival of their mustachioed friend who exited the house with Haslush in tow. Haslush, for his part, decided to lead Zorian on a walk away from the house, ruining his plan to keep mind reading the mundane policemen while they talked for additional clues.

It might be for the better, actually – paying attention to two different thought streams at the same time had already been rather hard. Trying to have a conversation with Haslush while doing the same would have probably been impossible.

"So, Zorian... I can call you Zorian, right?" Haslush asked. Zorian nodded, aware that the man had a massive dislike for formality. "Right. I'm guessing Miss Kuroshka has told you what happened back there, but just so we're clear: Rea and Sauh Sashal were found dead in their home yesterday morning, along with the mangled corpses of two giant centipedes. Their daughter was nowhere to be found, and nobody has heard anything about her since. Any of that news to you?"

"Mister Tverinov and Miss Kuroshka already told me most of that, but not the part about the mangled centipedes," said Zorian.

"Yes, well, your younger sibling reacted so badly to the news that I censored myself a little. Called it a monster attack rather than dwelling on the details," Haslush shrugged. "I apologize for upsetting her so much. I'm told I can be a little tactless at times, but it's a hard trait to lose. This line of work tends to make you more than a little bit morbid, and I sometimes forget most people aren't exposed to death and crime every waking moment of their lives."

Zorian thought about assuaging the man's worry and assuring him he didn't hold a grudge about that, but then figured the man would be more willing to share information with him if he appeared guilty, so he remained silent. Instead, he shifted the topic back to the killings.

"So they were killed by giant centipedes?" asked Zorian. "I didn't see any damage outside the house. How did they get in?"

"Through the door. Apparently the occupants had left it unlocked."

Zorian gave Haslush an incredulous look.

"I'm just telling you what we found," Haslush said defensively. "I know this case is strange, it's why we haven't pronounced it closed and moved on. And on that note, is there anything you could tell me about the Sashal family that would explain what happened to them?"

Of course he did – but nothing he could tell the man without getting himself in trouble. He told Haslush everything he had figured out about the apparent cat shifters though his interactions with them, but this was very sketchy information, and based on Haslush's unhappy expression probably wasn't anything new to the detective. Not that surprising – Imaya alone had probably told him everything Zorian just did and then some.

"This wasn't *really* a monster attack, was it?" Zorian asked.

Haslush gave Zorian a piercing look, which Zorian met unflinchingly. After a few seconds, Haslush withdrew a hip flask from his jacket, took a long, deep sip from it and then put it back into his jacket pocket.

"No, probably not," he admitted.

"Why were they targeted and by whom, if you don't mind me asking?" Zorian said, trying his luck. Hey, who knows? Maybe the man would even answer.

"Well now. If I knew that, I wouldn't be speaking to you now, would I?" Haslush pointed out.

"So you have no leads," Zorian concluded.

“I have *too many* leads,” Haslush corrected. “The Sashals... well, how much do you *really* know about them?”

“I presume you’re talking about them being cat shifters?” Zorian guessed.

“Ah, so you *do* know about that. I’ve been wondering about that – the rest of your housemates didn’t seem aware of that fact, but Imaya said you were ‘unreasonably suspicious’ of Rea right from the start. Well, if you know what they are, then you surely know why this could be any number of things...”

“I don’t, actually,” said Zorian shaking his head in denial. “I was suspicious about Rea because she looked suspicious and I am a paranoid person. Them being cat shifters never factored into it, and to be frank I know virtually nothing about them. What’s the deal with cat shifters anyway?”

“Bluntly put, most cat shifters are heavily involved with crime,” Haslush said. “Theft, smuggling and spying, usually, but occasionally even assassination. Their alternate forms are tailor-made for such shady activities, after all. Cats are small, stealthy animals whose presence is hardly ever notable in and of itself. How many new, never-seen-them-before cats do you see in a week?”

“A lot.”

“Right. In a big city like this, unfamiliar cats are ubiquitous. Few things threaten them aside from humans, and most humans don’t hurt cats without reason. And on top of that, shifters get the ability to access traits of their animal form even while they’re human, meaning cat shifters get things like night vision, a sense of smell powerful enough to put most dogs to shame, superior balance and agility, and a whole bunch of other benefits.”

“I’m still a bit surprised this lets them be so active in crime,” said Zorian. “You’d think the sheer flexibility of classical mages employed by the various police forces would allow them to shut down a shifter group operating like that, regardless of their special abilities.”

“Ah, but you’re assuming cat shifters work alone, which is not the case at all. They are hands down the most firmly assimilated shifter type of them all. They live in cities and towns among ordinary people, and are virtually indistinguishable from a normal human on casual inspection. Everything a regular citizen could do, cat shifters can as well – in particular, this means they have no problems in getting classical magic of their own. Hell, their links to crime mean they can get their hands on many things an average mage can’t, like permanent enhancement rituals or illegal spells for evading notice and influencing people....”

“Do you have any evidence that Rea and her family were that type of cat shifter though?” Zorian frowned. “Maybe I’m naïve, but they didn’t look like that to me. Surely there are non-criminal cat shifters?”

“There are,” Haslush nodded. “And every single cat shifter would have you believe they’re one of them. Considering what happened, I don’t think I’m willing to put much stock in the Sashal family being such counter-examples.”

Half an hour later, Haslush decided he’d gotten everything he needed out of Zorian and sent him on his way. Instead of going home, however, Zorian hung back. Once he had confirmed that Haslush was not going back to the scene of the crime, Zorian stealthily went back there in order to do some more fact-finding. There were guards posted in front of the house, but none were inside. Perfect. Zorian didn’t dare enter the house himself, afraid that there was some kind of alarm on the house to notify the police of break-ins, but conjuring an ectoplasmic eyeball and sending it inside didn’t seem to trip any wards so he closed his eyes and had his eyeball spy look around the house.

The bodies of Rea and Sauh were long gone by this time, but it was not hard to figure out where each had died due to all the blood stains. Tragically, Rea seemed to have been killed in front of her daughter’s room, trying to keep the attackers away from Nocka. She didn’t go down without a fight – the bodies of the two giant centipedes, which the police decided to leave in the house for some reason, littered the entire area. They had been quite literally torn to pieces, their bodies sliced into sections by some powerful severing attack. In the end, though, it hadn’t been enough. The door to Nocka’s room was smashed open – the only door in the house to have been dealt with so destructively – her bed flipped over, and Nocka herself nowhere to be found.

Zorian had been harboring a hope that maybe Nocka had turned into a cat when the attack had come and then escaped into the night, but that didn’t seem likely anymore. It was beyond obvious now that Nocka had been taken by the attackers for some reason.

Half an hour later, not having found anything similarly notable, he was ready to call it a day and go home. That’s when he searched the place where Rea had died again, and noticed something interesting on the severed head of one of the centipedes – faintly carved into the chitin of one of the forward sections of the centipede was a very familiar symbol – a circle with an archaic Ikosian pictogram for ‘heart’ inside of it. It wasn’t the official symbol used by the Esoteric Order of the Celestial Dragon, but it was one of the several ‘secret’ signs that their lower order cultists used to signal other members of their membership.

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After inspecting the rest of the centipede parts and failing to find anything else significant, Zorian let the eye dissolve and walked away. So his initial suspicion was right – this wasn’t some shady deal coming back to haunt Rea and her family, it was connected to the invasion somehow. Admittedly, Zorian had no idea *how*, but he knew where he could find that out.

The Cult of the World Dragon was going to get a lot more visits from Zorian in the coming days.

After that day, Zorian's daily schedule changed completely. Kirielle lost all interest in magic and no longer attended the lessons he had organized for her, and he decided to free some more time by dropping his membership in Taiven's group and skipping most of his classes. He spent most of this extra time planning and executing attacks on known members of the Cult of the World Dragon, trying to find out what they did with Nocka. He attacked them incessantly, hitting two or more locations a day, and ruthlessly memory-probed every cultist he disabled in those excursions.

He learned some interesting things doing that. For instance, while Sudomir Kandrei, the mayor of Knyazov Dveri, was indeed a member of the cult, he was a very independent-minded one... to the point that the cult was very annoyed with him. They seemed to have no idea he was killing soul mages around his town, nor did he have any links to the Ibasans as far as they knew – the man promised to give his flocks of iron beaks and hordes of winter wolves to the *Cult of the World Dragon*, not to the invaders as a whole. Zorian supposed he might be in contact with the Ibasans on his own initiative, but it was equally possible that his soul mage killing practices were his own thing. What he hoped to accomplish with that, Zorian could only guess.

He also found some emergency resource caches that the Cult scattered around the city, its underworld, and surrounding villages. They looked very... steal-able. He made himself a note – a real written note, seeing as how he could now effectively take a notebook with him to the next restart – to search through those in some future restart for anything interesting or easy to sell for some quick cash.

When it came to locating Nocka, however, his successes had been underwhelming. He managed to track down the group that kidnapped her, but they had simply been following orders and had long since handed her off to another group. He then tracked down *that* group too, but they no longer had her either and also didn't know who had her now. He had dived deeply and aggressively into their memories, shattering their minds beyond repair, but to no avail – the man they handed Nocka to was a total unknown to them, other than being a high ranking member of the cult, and they had absolutely no idea where she might have ended up in.

Truthfully, Zorian had already suspected that kidnapping Nocka had been the whole point of the attack on the Sashal family, so his findings weren't a huge surprise. The fact that the order had come from the very top of the cult indicated they considered it to be of critical importance. They also told both groups that Nocka had to be delivered alive and unharmed to the transfer point, forbidding abuse under the pain of death, which was also fairly strange. Why? Why did they want Nocka so badly, and why was her continued health so important?

He suspected the answer was something in line with 'she's their sacrifice to the primordial to wake him up'. Demon summoning often involved ritual killings, so it wouldn't surprise him much if unbinding a primordial required the same. Still, why Nocka in particular? Because she was a shifter? The cultists did refer to the primordial as – among other names – He of the Flowing Flesh, which could indicate an ability to change its physical form. There were other shifters in the city, though. Other *cat* shifters, even.

He didn't think he could get to the bottom of this by the end of the restart. If he had another week, maybe, but the restart was near its end and the Cult of the World Dragon was getting more paranoid in the face of his constant assaults on them – they'd already tried to set up an ambush for him the last time he tried to attack a location, and only his ability to read people's surface thoughts kept him from stumbling into it and getting himself killed. He wasn't going to get much from them in the two days he had left before the summer festival.

Although, as horrible as Nocka's kidnapping was, it could prove to actually be a huge opportunity for him, so long as it happened predictably in every restart. If he could place some kind of tracker on Nocka, she could lead him to the highest echelons of the Cult of Dragon, those who had stayed well hidden from him up until now. Also, if she really was intended as a sacrifice like he suspected, she could lead him to the place where the cult intended to perform their unbinding ritual, which could be a key to a lot of mysteries surrounding the Cult's actions - perhaps even the time loop itself.

He would have to wait and see how events would play out in the next restart.

- break -

"Can we talk?"

Zorian looked away from the novel he was reading and glanced towards Kirielle, who was currently standing on the doorway, nervously gripping one of the support beams. Strange. Kirielle had been very subdued and asocial ever since Nocka had disappeared, rarely ever bothering him anymore, so her approaching him like this was quite unexpected.

"Sure," he agreed easily. He wasn't doing anything important at the moment, anyway. He was supposed to be organizing his notebooks so he could store the latest blueprints in his mind, but he just didn't feel like doing that at the moment and was instead procrastinating with some light reading. He could spare some time for his little sister. "What is it?"

She ran up to him and, before he could tell her to stop, hurled herself on top of him. As he was currently lying on his bed, she ended up basically re-enacting what had long become a *very* familiar scene to Zorian.

"Damn it, Kiri, I get enough of that crap at the beginning of each loop!" thought Zorian, but refrained from actually saying it out loud. Kirielle was already shaken up, no need to snap at her when she finally decided to open up a little.

"Where are your shoes?" he asked instead. "Don't tell me you've been walking around the house bare-footed again?"

Kirielle glanced at her feet and gave him a guilty look. "Don't be like Mom, Zorian. It was only one time."

"You're doing it right now, too," Zorian pointed out.

"Okay, two times," she said, pouting.

He put a bookmark into his novel, laid it aside, pushed her off of him and rose in a sitting position. She immediately mimicked him, sitting on the end of his bed beside him. They sat like that in silence for a while, Kirielle dangling her bare feet over the floor and staring at her toes like they were the most fascinating thing in the world.

"I'm sorry," she finally said.

"What are you sorry for?" asked Zorian, surprised.

"For being difficult."

"Difficult?" asked Zorian incredulously. He peered into her mind for a moment and found her thinking about Mother. Ugh. Yeah, that did kind of sound like something their mother would say. She never did like crying much. One of the few things she praised him for was that he rarely cried, even as a young child. "Kiri, you lost your friend. It's okay to be sad about that. You weren't being difficult *at all*."

"But you've been avoiding me all week," she mumbled.

"I wasn't avoiding you," he protested, aghast that she would even think that. "I was just... giving you some space to grieve in peace. You know? And besides, I was..."

She gave him a curious look when he didn't continue. "You were what?"

Should he tell her?

"I was trying to find Nochka," he finally admitted.

Her eyes widened at this. "You were... Is that... you should have told me!"

"I didn't want to get your hopes up," Zorian said.

"I was hoping anyway," she said, gripping the sheets tightly in her little fists.

He put an arm around her shoulder and pulled her into an embrace. She was still tense, but gradually relaxed after a while and returned his hug.

"I didn't find her," he admitted after a while.

"Well, obviously," she said, as if it was the most self-evident thing ever. "But you tried. You knew you probably weren't going to find her, and you still went out and searched for her. You didn't cry and mope around the house all day like I did."

"Kiri, you're nine," Zorian sighed. "What else could you have done? You're being way too hard on yourself."

She didn't say anything to that. Eventually he decided to just spend some time playing cards with her and praising her drawings. Which did cheer her up in the end, so he chalked that up as one of his better ideas. One of these days, once he mastered the alteration spell he was using to transfer notes into subsequent restarts sufficiently, he should gather some of her artwork into an art book of some sort and copy it into the next restart. Showing her the drawings she herself had made in previous restarts was bound to produce some amusing reactions.

- break -

Later that evening, Zorian decided he had given Kael enough time to wrap up his last minute experiments and went down into the basement to retrieve the last of the morlock's promised notebooks. The door was unlocked, so Zorian simply walked in and closed them behind him.

As the door clicked shut, Zorian felt the sounds of the house above them disappear, the privacy portion of the wards placed on the basement engaging and sound-proofing the room. Among many other things. The privacy measures were apparently a standard part of the warding package the academy used to secure their workshops, and thus got added automatically to Imaya's basement when Kael had requested they turn it into a proper alchemical workshop... something that was very convenient in moments like these, since it meant that Zorian didn't have to spend hours securing the room every time he wanted to talk to Kael about some sensitive subject.

"You done yet?" Zorian asked the other boy. Kael ignored him for a moment, staring at some passage in the book in front of him, but then shook his head and pushed it away from him, massaging his eyes.

"Yes, I'm done," he said. He pointed at the notebook placed on top of a large stack of books. "The notebook is there. Everything is ready on your end?"

"Mostly," Zorian said. "I still have to write down some stuff I found out today."

Kael raised an eyebrow at him. "I thought you said you were taking a break from the cult today?"

"I did," Zorian said. "Doesn't mean I did absolutely *nothing*, though."

“Oh?”

“Basically, I was thinking about warding, and how the upper level cultists all lived in warded houses that were a pain to break into and was thinking of how to speed the process up. And then I remembered that there is not only already a type of tool to do that present on the black market, I actually know where to find one for free. The aranea had stolen a ward scanner from one of the invaders a while before the start of the time loop, and the device was surely still in the destroyed colony.”

“You said you don’t like going there,” Kael noted.

“I don’t,” Zorian sighed. “The place is... it has too many bad memories. And the corpses of the aranea are literally scattered all over the place, so it’s hard to go there and not be reminded of that whole fiasco that saw them destroyed.”

“I still think they were somehow ejected from the time loop rather than soul-killed,” Kael said. “I agree with what other people told you – souls are indestructible. There has got to be a trick there.”

“Yes, well, time travel is supposed to be impossible too,” Zorian pointed out. “Though I’ll admit that I’m hoping you’re right. Never mind that for the moment, the point is that I went there to find the ward scanner... and I couldn’t find it.”

“So?” Kael asked.

“So, that means that either somebody already took it or that there is some secret part of the aranean complex that I’m unaware of. And frankly, I think it’s the latter. I mean, once I thought about it a little, the sheer emptiness of the aranean settlement was very suspicious... The Cyorian web was very wealthy and surely had a sizeable treasury. The matriarch often implied they have some kind of storage full of trade items and such. But I never saw anything like that when I checked the settlement out earlier, probably because I was very uncomfortable there and in a hurry to leave.”

“You think there is something important there?”

“Time loop related? No, probably not,” Zorian admitted. “But I need every advantage over Red Robe I can get, and there could be a lot of useful stuff there. Who knows what the aranea have squirrelled away over the years?”

“True,” Kael agreed, rising from his seat and popping his spine. “Well, I’m tired. I think I’ll go to sleep now. Is there anything else we need to talk about?”

“There’s nothing pressing I can think of,” Zorian said, shaking his head.

“I see. Just so you know, I’ll be taking Kana with me on a trip to a nearby village on the day of the summer festival. I don’t really want to be in Cyoria when the invasion comes, and I’m even less enthused about Kana being caught up in the invasion.”

“I understand.”

“I’m glad. If you want, I can take Kirielle with me,” said Kael. “I know you’ve been agonizing about what to do with her for a while now.”

“Yeah,” agreed Zorian. “I don’t want to leave her alone for the invasion, but at the same time I need to be able to move freely if I am to investigate what’s happening with the invasion after all these changes. You think she’ll agree to go with you?”

“I don’t know, that’s up to you,” Kael shrugged. “All I can do is make an offer.”

“Fine, fine, I’ll talk to her,” Zorian sighed. “That’ll be a lovely talk, I can already tell.”

“Notify me what you decided by tomorrow evening,” said Kael.

And just like that, the restart was already almost done. Tomorrow he would see how the invasion of the city proceeded this time around.

- break -

Zorian looked over his things, trying to remember if he had forgotten something crucial in his rush to finish the preparations in time. He couldn’t think of anything, but it would be just like him to forget something blindingly obvious while worrying about the irrelevant minutiae.

He still had several hours to burn until the start of the invasion, however, so he left the preparations alone for a now and left his room to find some quick diversion. Remembering that Imaya kept a whole miniature library of exotic works in her house, he set off to browse its shelves in search of a good time waster. He found Imaya already there, though, staring at her collection with a faraway look.

“Miss Kuroshka?” he asked worriedly. He was getting some worrying feelings from her with his empathy. “Are you alright?”

“Hm?” she mumbled, before her brain rebooted again and she truly focused on his presence. “Oh, Zorian. How long have you been standing there?”

“I only just came here. Been looking for a book to pass the time with, but you looked...”

“Don’t worry,” she sighed. “I’m just disturbed by the sudden quiet in the house. It looks so... lonely.”

"Huh. I thought you'd be glad to have some peace and quiet for a change," Zorian said.

She snorted. "I think you're projecting your own attitude here a little," she said.

"Probably," admitted Zorian. He always did like to have some space from everybody else, and would have probably welcomed a situation like this in her place. "But Kael and the girls are only gone for one day, so it's hardly a big deal. You could have gone with them, you know?"

"I know. But if there really is rioting during the festival, like you said there might be, I don't want to leave my house to the looters. It's... it's the only thing I have left."

"Oh..."

"Sorry, getting a little personal there," she smiled. "Is there any particular book you were looking for?"

There was a loud knock on the front door. Imaya and Zorian both raised their eyebrows at each other – apparently neither of the two knew who might be coming for a visit in this time of day. Most people were getting ready to attend the summer festival somewhere, either at some friend's house or some other venue. Imaya hurried towards the door to see who it was.

There was a brief pause where Imaya had a brief exchange with whoever was at the door, after which Imaya called out at Zorian to join them. "Zorian, your date is here!" she yelled.

"My date?" he asked incredulously, more to himself than to anyone else. How could he have a date when he didn't-

She didn't.

But she totally did. As he came to the front door to see what Imaya was talking about, the frowning face of Akoja greeted him from the doorframe.

"Hello, Ako," Zorian said blandly. "What a surprise to see you here. I suppose Ilsa had something to do with this?"

"I, yes," she fumbled, her composure breaking for a bit. "Miss Zileti told me to accompany you to the dance, since we are both without a partner."

Now wasn't that interesting. How the hell had Ilsa known that? True, Zorian had no date for the dance, and in fact had no intention of attending the academy dance at all, but she shouldn't have been aware of that! Zorian had never told her anything to that effect, nor did he hint at that to anyone except... Imaya. Damn.

He gave his landlord a dirty look before refocusing back on Akoja. This was not part of the plan. He was supposed to roam around the city, observing the invaders in action and noting the changes to their tactics as a result of the various changes arising from the destruction of the aranea and that unfortunate mercenary band he'd hired to participate in the ambush.

Sometimes he hated his empathy. Without it, he would never have known just how much this meant for Akoja and how hard blowing her off to do his own thing would hit her.

"We still have several hours before we have to be at the dance hall. Come inside and wait with Imaya for a bit while I run some urgent errands in the city," he said.

"What?" she stammered, confused, as Zorian squeezed past her through the door and began walking into the city. "Wait, you can't just--"

Zorian quickly cast the teleport spell and let the city's teleport beacon draw him into Cyoria's teleport access point. He had lots of work to do and only so much time to execute it.

- break -

"What were you in such a hurry for, earlier?" Akoja asked as they slowly made their way towards the academy. She was surprisingly calm and polite, all things considered. Zorian had thought she'd be more annoyed at him because of his 'emergency exit' earlier.

"I had something already arranged before you arrived. I had to take care of some things when you came knocking at Imaya's door," Zorian said. "Cancel some things and adjust others."

Specifically, he was placing marker stones in various parts of the city to make scrying easier. Watching the invasion forces move through the city was not quite the same as ambushing isolated battlegroups and rooting through their minds, but at least it was something.

Maybe it was better this way. His original plan was kind of ambitious. Possibly *too* ambitious...

As they talked, Akoja told him a little about how the rest of his classmates handled the changes to the restart. It was mostly just idle chat, though it did remind him that he hadn't paid much attention to his class in this restart. There was just so much to do in this particular restart that interaction with his classmates sort of fell by the wayside. Considering that one of his motivations for coming back to Cyoria had been to see and talk to them again, that was something that should probably be remedied in the near future.

The night proceeded far more smoothly than the last one where he'd had Akoja as his date – she seemed to have far more respect and concern for his wishes this time around, though Zorian couldn't for the life of him figure out why. In some ways he had actually been a bigger jerk now than he had back then. Regardless, once the flares started hitting the city, he snuck away from her and started scrying the city for information.

The initial barrage of artillery spells was different this time around. While the old artillery barrage used by the invaders specifically targeted critical buildings whose destruction was calculated to send the city into chaos and cripple its ability to organize a defense, the new barrage was... uninspired. Oh, they still targeted the central police station, the city hall, and other obvious targets, but things like backup government buildings and armories were left intact. In fact, a lot of the flares seem to have been aimed completely at random, demolishing unremarkable clusters of houses and civilian apartments – something that would admittedly greatly increase the number of deaths in the invasion, but was of questionable strategic benefit. Bizarrely, every single temple in the city was the target of at least one flare – Zorian had no idea what the invaders were trying to accomplish there, and it definitely wasn't something they did in their previous invasion plan.

The fights around the city were far fiercer than they had been in Zorian's previous restarts. Partly it was due to the defenders being in a lot better shape this time around, courtesy of the invasion's poor choice of targets for their initial strike, but there was more to it than that. The invasion forces seemed a lot less coordinated than he remembered them being. They moved a lot less purposefully through the city and often blew off their apparent goals to rampage through the undefended civilian neighborhoods. That happened sometimes in the past as well, but never in such high numbers.

As far as the initial attack on the academy went, the invaders chose their actions there just as poorly as they did elsewhere. The new barrage targeted the academy building directly instead of aiming for the less well defended dormitories and support buildings like the old barrage did. Consequently, the flares simply splashed harmlessly off the heavy wards protecting the main complex, doing minimal damage. With no need to render aid and run damage control in the peripheral part of the academy, the teachers were free to keep their forces concentrated and organize the evacuation of the student body and other non-combatant employees much more competently than they had before.

Funny, he originally thought the academy was massively incompetent for leading the students into massive underground death traps, especially since that involved going over vast swathes of open ground where they would be completely exposed. They didn't look so dumb right now. The evacuation went off without a single problem, and no one attacked them when they were shoved inside the shelters.

Zorian was pretty sure at this point that he was looking at what the invasion was really like – what it would look like had Red Robe never given them any help. When he really thought about it, most of their 'mistakes' could be chalked up to being far less well informed and lacking the ability to bypass every ward and defense they encounter because they've been either keyed into them or knew how to counter it quickly.

It would appear that Red Robe really did abandon the invaders in this restart, right down to the very end. Was this a one-time thing or did Red Robe suddenly decide not to meddle in the invasion anymore?

His musings were interrupted by Ilsa coming to the shelter and demanding that every combat-capable student come with her to defend the academy. Thanks to him participating in monster hunts with Taiven's group, that included him as well, so he got up from his spot on the floor and joined the group of students following her outside. There, he saw what had gotten Ilsa so concerned that she was recruiting students as defenders – the invaders were massing just outside the academy wards, preparing for an all-out assault. Entire regiments of war trolls, winter wolves and skeletons were present there, supported by their mage handlers and thick flocks of razor beaks. More unusually, there were a couple of flying drakes mixed in among the deadly corvids, and two bulky, elephant-sized lizards stalked in front of the miniature army.

"Thunder lizards," Ilsa said distastefully from beside him. "Immensely tough and very destructive. They can breathe arcs of electricity in a straight line in front of them, so try not to fight them from the front if you are forced to engage them at all."

Lovely. He never saw those in any previous restarts. Maybe this was something they never felt like committing to the battlefield because they never felt they needed them?

But the time for considering such things was over. Although clearly not fully assembled for attack, the commander of the monstrous horde urged his forces to charge ahead. Maybe he felt that waiting for the rest of the forces would be a bad move since the academy defenders were busily fortifying their positions, or maybe he was just impatient. Either way, they surged ahead, thunder lizards leading the charge.

Zorian knew he could offer very little by simply pouring some more offensive spells into the attacking horde along with the rest of the defenders, but he had a better idea anyway. Focusing on the two thunder lizards, he felt their simplistic minds and was overjoyed to find out that they were far less magically resistant than he had feared. He suspected that might be the case – the invaders were probably controlling those things with mind magic to begin with, so it would only make sense that they were not all that resistant to it. Regardless, this meant he could manipulate them. Not to the extent of directing them like puppets, but enough to negate their attacks.

Sure enough, when the lizards started approaching the makeshift barricades that the teachers had made out of the ground via alteration spells, the two lizards opened their toothy mouths and tried to blow up the barricades with their thunder attack. Zorian quickly seized control of their movements and made them angle their heads towards one another, their thunder attacks colliding with each other's bodies. A surge of anger flooded the minds of the two thunder lizards, and they halted their charge in favor of roaring at each other, too dumb to realize their actions were caused by outside influence. Zorian seized on this opportunity, amplifying their wrath and urging them to fight each other, and the two of them promptly collided with each other and began fighting to the death.

To their credit, the rest of the invading forces simply flowed around the two battling behemoths, unconcerned with their failure. The battle was joined.

Zorian stared at the battle site full of corpses, more than a little bit dazed. He had been in a fair amount of battles ever since he'd gotten pulled into the time loop, but nothing quite like this. The fight had quickly turned chaotic once the two forces seriously started engaging one another, and even now that it was over Zorian still wasn't sure what exactly happened there.

They won in the end, repulsing the attackers – the mages decided to flee when enough of their monster minions got killed – but they lost far more people in the attack than Zorian had thought they would. Zorian himself was surrounded by a pack of winter wolves at one point and only survived thanks to no less than five blasting rods he had smuggled into the dance hall with him. Well, that and Kyron's timely arrival with reinforcements to drive the attackers back.

He jumped in fright when someone's heavy hand clasped his shoulder suddenly, almost blowing their head off with a reflexive piercer before he realized it was just Kyron.

"You're the one that was messing with the heavy-hitter monsters during the whole fight, aren't you?" his combat teacher asked.

"Yeah," Zorian shrugged. No need to keep it a secret this close to the end. "I felt that was the most effective way of contributing to the battle that I was capable of."

"Well, that flying drake would have roasted poor Nora alive if you hadn't made it plow into the ground suddenly, so thanks for that. Though we're really going to have to talk about how you learned how to do that and what exactly your limits are..."

"Ha," Zorian snorted. "It's far too late for that, I'm afraid."

"Oh?" Kyron asked, a mixture of warning and curiosity in his voice.

"Yes," Zorian confirmed. He consulted his watch to see what time it was. It was 2 hours and 39 minutes after midnight. "I'm afraid this loop is just about to end."

Kyron stared at him blankly for a few seconds before opening his mouth to say something. Before he could utter a single word, though, everything went black and Zorian woke up back in Cirin, ready to start this month anew.

41. Myriad Clashing Motives

Chapter 041 Myriad Clashing Motives

The start of the newest loop differed little from the previous one – he got on the train to Cyoria with Kirielle in tow, entertained her with feats of magic as well as disguised (and more than a little embellished) accounts of his own adventures to stave off boredom, and even talked with Ibery for a bit. Just for a bit, though – she wasn't terribly interested in him this time, since he'd finished telling stories to Kirielle by the time they stopped at Korsa, and didn't demonstrate any amazing spellcasting skills while she was in the compartment.

“Here we are,” said Zorian, stepping off the train and helping Kirielle finagle her luggage through the train wagon door. It was kind of cute how she insisted she would carry her luggage on her own, but he knew from previous restarts that this resolution wouldn’t last very long. Well, whatever, he’d let her live in denial for now. “Welcome to Cyoria, dearest sister.”

“I’m your only sister,” she shot back, curious eyes looking around the massive train station she found herself in.

“You know I’m telling the truth, then,” Zorian said blandly.

Kirielle ignored him in favor of studying the colorful storefronts, the huge clock hanging from the train station ceiling, and the flowing masses of people milling around the place. Truth be told, she handled the sight a lot better than Zorian had when he disembarked in Cyoria for the first time ever.

“Big,” she concluded eventually.

“Cyoria is a big city and an important transport hub,” said Zorian simply. “They get lots of traffic.”

“Do you mind if we look around for a bit?” Kirielle asked.

“You mean browse some stores for interesting trinkets?” Zorian guessed. She pouted at him. “Sure, we can do that. I’m only buying you one souvenir, though, and nothing too ridiculous.”

“What qualifies as ‘too ridiculous’?” she asked, eyeing the storefronts speculatively.

“Use your common sense,” Zorian deadpanned. Like hell was he getting into a definition game with her.

“And if I’m not sure about something?” she prompted.

“Ask,” he immediately fired back.

He could probably buy anything she set her eyes on, especially considering he was about to get a massive cash infusion in a few days, but he didn’t think it a good idea to encourage her excesses like that. Kirielle had never been very keen on restraint to begin with and he shuddered to think what would happen if he decided to pander to her whims too much.

For the next hour and a half, Zorian simply followed Kirielle around as she flitted from one store to another like a drunken butterfly, following no pattern he could discern. Then again, he didn’t really invest much thought into figuring it out – he mostly spent his time practicing his mind sense, trying to process the information he was getting about the crowds around them. Large, closely-packed crowds like the ones at Cyoria’s main train station still tended to ruin his mind sense, reducing the feedback into an incomprehensible, blurry blob of emotions and strange signals. He was getting better at picking specific minds out of that background fog, though. He practiced the procedure by constantly keeping track of Kirielle’s mind, turning her into a sort of a telepathic anchor, and then trying to pick out the minds of random people from the crowd to get a better feel for them. It was slow, annoying work, but he was getting sick of having his empathy and mind sense effectively shut down every time he encountered a crowd.

She picked a snow globe in the end. Admittedly, it was a very nice snow globe – the little house and the trees inside it were incredibly detailed and well done, almost as if someone had literally shrunk a house and its immediate environs and placed them in a glass sphere. Clearly some fairly sophisticated magic had been used to produce the thing, even if the end product was completely non-magical to his senses, and the globe was priced accordingly... but it was better than Zorian had feared so he bought it without complaint. Idly, he wondered if his alteration skills were good enough to produce a globe like that...

With Kirielle’s trinket-hunting done, they set off towards the main plaza and its fountain, just like they had in the previous restart. Unlike the previous restart, Zorian took them through the park right from the start – there was really no need for them to meet the cephalic rat swarm. Quite the contrary, it was an unnecessary and unacceptable risk, as Kirielle’s mind was completely unshielded and there was always a possibility that the rats could figure something important or attention-grabbing from Kirielle’s stray thoughts.

As it turned out, that had been a pretty important change. Having never seen the cephalic rats, Kirielle obviously couldn’t tell Rea about them, so the topic simply never came up. And apparently he greatly underestimated how much he’d disturbed Rea in their previous first meeting, because keeping quiet about the terrifying mind-reading powers of the rats made Rea a lot less on guard around him this time around... as well as much more insistent about them staying for a while. Hmph.

He let Rea and Kirielle 'convince him' to delay their departure. As far as he could tell, this was the best moment to find something out from Rea's mind, before she had time to grow suspicious of him, and he had every intention of using it to the hilt.

"A student of Cyoria's Royal Academy? Pretty prestigious place to study at for a boy hailing from a small rural town, if you don't mind me saying," Rea remarked. "Not that there is anything wrong with being from a small rural town – we're from one ourselves, after all – but doesn't Cyoria's Royal Academy accept only the, ah..."

"Only the very talented or the very well-connected?" guessed Zorian. It was what most people who weren't personally involved with the institution thought, after all. Seeing Rea nod in agreement, he continued. "Not really. The admission process is a combination of how well you do on the entrance exams, whether you receive a recommendation from a member of the academy staff or someone else suitably famous, and whether denying you admission would offend someone particularly powerful and influential. Basically, so long as you can pay the admission fee and do well enough in the entrance exams, you are guaranteed to get in."

"Is that how you got in?" Rea asked curiously.

"I was in the top 50 based on exam results," said Zorian proudly. He was 48th, but he wasn't going to mention *that*.

"Brother is plenty talented," Kirielle said suddenly. "But, um, they probably also accepted him because of our brother Daimen. At least that's what mother said happened."

"What?" asked Zorian flatly.

"Umm..." Kirielle stammered. "Please don't be mad because mother told me not to tell you this because you would get mad at me but mother said you and Fortov were only accepted so easily because Daimen got so big and successful..."

"Daimen had *nothing* to do with it," Zorian said, grinding his teeth in annoyance. "I achieved good enough results that my admission had never been in question! Mother is, like usual, ascribing everything good in the world to Daimen and lumping me with that lout Fortov in order to—"

"I believe you, mister Kazinski," Rea interrupted him. "Calm down. There is no reason to jump down your little sister's throat like that."

"Right, sorry," Zorian said, with a little bit more bitterness than he intended.

There was a short, awkward silence for a few seconds. Great. Real smooth there, Zorian.

Damn it, why did he let this get under his skin like that?

"So, I'm assuming your brother is *that* Daimen Kazinski?" Rea asked finally. "The famous one?"

"Yes," Zorian sighed. "The famous one."

"Wait, your other brother is famous?" Nocka asked Kirielle innocently. "What for?"

"Things," Kirielle shrugged uncomfortably, saying nothing else on the topic. Probably trying not to upset him further by continuing the discussion.

"Daimen is an 'adventuring archeologist,'" Zorian said, doing his best to suppress his annoyance with the whole thing. "He leads expeditions to dangerous areas in search of lost artifacts and ruins. Or even rare plants and magical creatures, even though that should technically be outside the purview of archeology. He has been very successful in this, so he gets a lot of attention from people."

There. It was an incomplete explanation, yes, but not really misleading or anything. Hopefully it would suffice.

"I haven't heard anything about him for more than a year now," Rea remarked.

"He's in Koth," Zorian said. "Apparently he found something very important in the jungle, but he's been very secretive about it. I'm sure you'll hear all about it when he finally deigns to unveil it to the world."

Thankfully, the topic of conversation shifted away from Daimen at that point. Zorian decided to take advantage of the somewhat personal nature of Rea's questions to ask about *their* personal details. Her story was functionally identical to what she told him in the previous restart, but her surface thoughts were far easier to read this time, what with her not being primed to defend her secrets from a swarm of thought-sharing, mind-reading rats.

Her surface thoughts told him an interesting story. For one thing, Sauh was not a cat shifter. Only Rea and Nocka were. Rea had *been* a criminal, but then she met Sauh and decided to leave that life behind to be with him. How... romantic. Except that neither Rea's former associates nor the rest of the townsfolk were willing to let Rea forget what her past was, so the family packed up their things and left to somewhere where nobody knew who they were and where they could start anew. Where Nocka could grow up without her mother's past sabotaging her at every turn.

Damn, he was really starting to get mad about what the Cult of the World Dragon had in store for them... he didn't think he could just coldly watch as Nocka's parents are murdered and she herself kidnapped. Though, thinking about it now, it wasn't such a problem in this particular restart – his memory reading was nowhere near good enough yet to get much out of high-ranking cultists, even if he could track them down by following Nocka's movements. And who said he was even capable of preventing her kidnapping in the first place? It wasn't like he had a fool-

proof plan to stop it, after all – if the kidnapping proceeded under some different schedule than the one in the previous restart, he'd basically have to monitor the Sashal family day and night to intercept it.

He decided to put his original plan on hold for now and see how things developed. Who knows, maybe the last restart was a fluke and kidnapping Nochka wasn't something the cultists routinely did in every loop. He would have to put some kind of tracker on her just in case, though...

By the time they were done talking, the rain had already started falling outside. Rea tried to argue that they should wait for a while until it lessened, but Zorian knew that wasn't happening for quite a while and refused. He enveloped himself and Kirielle in a weather shield to block the rain and bid the Sashal family goodbye.

He considered it a proof of his growing skill and mana reserves that his shield held strong for the entire length of their journey, letting them arrive at Imaya's place completely dry and unwinded.

- break -

The next few days were fairly routine – he went to Knyazov Dveri to get himself plenty of crystalized mana, sold said crystals in various stores in Cyoria for large amounts of cash, accepted Taiven's offer of joining her team in running monster-killing missions and tested whether his stored notebooks had survived the restart (they had).

With the start of classes on Monday, however, Zorian decided to go out of his comfort zone a little and initiate contact with one of his classmates. Specifically, Raynie. He was currently investigating shifters, after all, and she was supposed to be a wolf shifter herself. Maybe she knew some crucial information? It didn't hurt to ask.

There was one big, obvious problem with his idea, however – Raynie got a lot of love confessions and date invitations from her many love-stricken fans, and would probably assume his attempt to talk to her was just more of the same. And she was not interested in love and dating, she made that very clear over the years. How could he ensure his attempt to talk to her wouldn't be misunderstood?

He agonized for an entire day over which method of approach he should use, before deciding he was being stupid. So what if she got the wrong idea when he asked to talk to her? Though she categorically rejected every man who tried to court her, her rejections had always been polite and non-violent to his knowledge... except for that one time she punched a guy in the face, but everyone who was there agreed that guy got a little grabbier than was proper. Bottom line was, he could just approach her directly before class and ask for a talk, and the worst that could happen was that she could tell him to get lost without hearing him out. Hardly the end of the world, and with the time loop in place he would have a chance to try again in the next restart with a different approach.

The worst didn't happen, though. When Zorian asked to talk to her after class, Raynie simply gave a little sigh and spared a lingering glance at the ceiling, as if asking the gods what she had done to deserve this, before agreeing to his request.

The class came and went, and the classroom gradually emptied of people until only Zorian, Raynie and Kiana were left. Why was Kiana there? Hell if Zorian knew, but her presence was clearly not unintended by Raynie so he opted not to say anything. Did Kiana know about her friend being a shifter? If not, then broaching the topic in front of her was probably not something Raynie would appreciate.

How annoying.

"Sorry about this," Raynie said. "I know you probably wanted this to be private, but Kiana insisted on staying behind too, and, well..."

She shrugged helplessly. She sounded honestly apologetic about it, and if he were incapable of sensing people's emotions, he would have probably believed her too. He gave Kiana a glance, and she quickly straightened her posture and fixed a small scowl on her face. Probably trying to look intimidating or something. Her real emotions were a mix of boredom and impatience, though – she probably considered the entire thing a massive chore.

Zorian almost cracked a smile at the whole setup. The funny thing was that if he was going to ask anyone out, it would probably be Kiana, not Raynie. He'd kind of had his eyes on her before he'd gotten stuck in this whole time loop business, in an idle, daydreaming sort of way. If he remembered correctly, Zach caught him staring at her once, in that fateful first restart. A part of him wanted to ask Kiana out right now, just to see how the two of them would react to such a development.

But no, that would only be amusing for a short while and he would have to live with all the created drama for the rest of the month. Besides, his reasons for liking Kiana were extremely shallow and based entirely around her looks – he felt she was just as beautiful as Raynie, and preferred her black hair to Raynie's red. That was it, really. For all he knew, her personality could be absolutely atrocious.

"If you're okay with her presence, then so am I," Zorian said. "That said, do you mind if I erect a privacy bubble around us? Neolu and company are hanging by the door, trying to eavesdrop, and I think we'd all be happier if they did not hear this."

"Ugh," Raynie grunted, rising from her seat and marching off towards the door. "There is no need for that. I'll be back in a moment."

Through his mind sense, Zorian could feel the four mental signatures of their eavesdroppers flee before Raynie's approach. They were already halfway down the corridor by the time she opened the door, and in less than a minute Raynie was back in her seat.

"Well then," she began, "now that the spy brigade is gone, we can finally get this over with. What did you want to talk to me about, Mister Kazinski?"

“Does Kiana know about shifters?” Zorian asked.

Evidently she did, if her shocked reaction was any indication.

“What?” Raynie stammered. “How do you know about that?”

“I asked a scholar named Vani to tell me about shifters and—“

“Vani from Knyazov Dveri?” Raynie asked, interrupting him. “Aren’t you supposed to be from Cirin?”

“I am,” Zorian confirmed. “That doesn’t mean I am forbidden from visiting Knyazov Dveri on occasion. I have friends there.”

“Of course you have,” Raynie sighed. “Look… Zorian. I kept this a secret for a reason.”

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Zorian nodded in agreement. “That’s why I asked whether Kiana knows.”

“I know,” Kiana piped in, crossing her arms in front of her. “And I’ll be charitable and assume you’ll keep it a secret, just as I have, despite being friends with that blabbermouth Benisek. So what exactly do you want from Raynie anyway?”

“I made acquaintances with a couple of cat shifters, and I wanted to hear an opinion of another shifter about some things related to that,” said Zorian. “I figured I’d ask Raynie first and see if she was willing to answer some questions.”

There was a brief silence as both girls digested this.

“I… uh… this is way too heavy of a topic for a free period,” Raynie decided. “Our next class is about to start soon.”

“Well, yes,” agreed Zorian. “It doesn’t have to be *now*. I just want to know if you’re even willing to help me out.”

“I might as well,” Raynie said dismissively. “My main concern about shifter-talk had always been about not wanting people to know I was one to begin with, and the cat is apparently already out of the bag. Besides, if you’re hanging out with the likes of cat shifters, you’re going to need some advice. No offense to your new acquaintances, but cat shifters tend to be unsavory characters.”

“I did hear some rumors about that,” Zorian admitted. “So how is this going to work, then?”

“I don’t know,” Raynie admitted. “I’m going to have to think about it. You’ve ambushed me out of nowhere with this. I’ll get back to you when I figure out a time and place.”

“Don’t contact us, we’ll contact you,” Kiana summarized.

And then they were out of time and ended the meeting in favor of rushing to the next class. Over all, Zorian was pleased with the outcome… even if the looks and whispers of his classmates signified they had noticed the interaction and that the resulting fallout had yet to be determined.

- break -

Raynie didn’t seem to be in a hurry to organize a meeting with him after their talk, but Zorian didn’t hold it against her. It was nothing urgent, and he had plenty of things to busy himself with in the meantime.

Currently, that meant combing the aranea settlement for any hints regarding where they kept their treasury. He wasn’t having much luck yet, but then again he didn’t expect to be lucky so soon – it would be a pretty terrible secret treasury if all it took was a single day of dedicated searching to track it down.

Zorian wandered the tunnels of the settlement, his mind-sense straining in an attempt to detect some surviving aranea hiding somewhere. He didn’t find any. The aranean settlement was a silent tomb, unmoving corpses of giant spiders scattered throughout its expanse and undisturbed by scavengers due to the wards the aranea had placed on it. Occasionally his mind sense detected a mental signature, but it inevitably turned out to be some dungeon denizen trying to sneak past the wards of the settlement or one of the few surviving male aranea.

Not that the latter were wholly useless – though sub-sapient, they were still representative of what the aranea were like, and didn’t have the mental defenses that female aranea did. Zorian made sure to capture each one he encountered so he could read their minds for information about the location of the treasury – more out of desire to practice his memory reading on something related to aranea than out of any real hope that they knew something.

Though he had to say the males were a lot smarter than Zorian had thought they would be, considering what he’d been told by the female aranea – they were actually closer to animals such as ravens and pigs than something dumb like a horse or a dog. Three of them even worked together in order to ambush him, and Zorian only narrowly avoided getting bitten by the one of them.

The aranea were only weakly venomous, according to what he’d been told by them, but he would still rather not tempt fate like that.

“Damn,” Zorian swore. Nothing, not even a clue as to where he should look next. “That’s it, I’m done with this for today. Kael, you done with your examination yet?”

Kael shifted his attention from the curled, motionless corpse of some unfortunate aranea towards him, his mind slowly switching gears from his focused work state into something capable of holding a conversation.

“Hmm? Oh, that,” Kael mumbled. “Yes, I checked them over for soul magic ages ago. I can find no traces of any soul magic being performed on them. None whatsoever, and it’s honestly freaking me out. If you hadn’t told me what really happened, I’d have assumed these bodies to be very sophisticated meat puppets devoid of souls to begin with, not sapient creatures whose souls have somehow been removed. I’ve just finished a more comprehensive medical scan, however, and there is no way these bodies are meat puppets. I’m baffled. This doesn’t look like the aftermath of any soul spell I know of.”

Damn. He had really been hoping Kael would be able to find something.

“You really can’t tell me anything else?” Zorian urged. “Anything?”

“No. Well, maybe,” Kael said, hesitating. Zorian urged him to continue. “While my medical scans show these spiders indeed died on the first day of the restart, they died somewhere after two in the morning.”

“Ah, I see where you’re going with that,” Zorian said after a brief pause. “That implies that the time loop starts almost six hours before I wake up.”

“Yes,” Kael agreed. “I’m not sure how useful that is to you, but it’s interesting.”

“Very,” Zorian agreed. “Especially if I can somehow force myself to wake up at the start of the time loop as opposed to when I usually do.”

Kael nodded and before suddenly checking on his pocket watch. “Ah, I didn’t even realize so much time has passed. I promised Kana I would take her to the park today, do you think we could—”

“Yes,” Zorian preemptively agreed. “That’s why I interrupted you in the first place. I’ve had enough of this place for one day. Just gather your things and I’ll recall us back to the basement.”

Five minutes later Kael and Zorian were teleported back to Imaya’s basement – or rather, the large stone that served as an anchor for Zorian’s recall spell. The recall spell was quickly becoming one of Zorian’s favorites, due to its ability to cut through many forms of magical interference and anti-teleportation wards. It would be even better if maintaining a recall link with each anchor stone didn’t incur a running mana cost, but you can’t have everything, he supposed. He bid goodbye to Kael, who had his own duties to attend to, and went out to seek out Kirielle.

He found her in the kitchen, telling stories to Imaya and playing with the miniature golem he’d made for her. Amusingly, no one in the house seemed to realize just how much money and skill it took to create that thing – it was just a fancy magical doll to them, and they barely gave it a second’s thought. To Zorian, though, that little golem was very special for one simple reason: he had created the blueprint for it in the previous restart.

Although Zorian had spent a lot of time in the restarts messing with spell formula and magic item creation, the truth was that he had been somewhat reluctant to truly sink a lot of his time into the field because he had to effectively recreate his designs purely from memory with every restart. While that was good in a sense, as it forced him to re-evaluate and refine his designs each time instead of relying on tried-and-true designs, the fact of the matter was that it slowed things down to a crawl whenever he was forced to recreate everything from scratch over and over again. He had effectively been limited to fairly simple projects, but now that he could actually transfer notebooks across restarts, he was freed of these limitations and could truly start advancing in the field.

He greeted Imaya, announcing his return, and then turned to his little sister.

“Hello, Kiri,” he greeted. “Are you ready for your magic lesson?”

“Yes!” she agreed enthusiastically.

“So does that mean you read the first three chapters of that book I gave you?” Zorian asked.

“Err, yeah,” she agreed, much less enthusiastically than before. “I, uh, may have skipped a few parts.”

Zorian gave her a knowing look. He had a feeling that if he quizzed her on what she read, he would find she skipped far more than ‘a few parts’.

“Alright,” he said, putting a small black cube on the table in front of them. “This here is the mana absorption cube. Its function is very simple – it will absorb any mana you let out, after which the carved lines you see on its surface will begin to glow. It sounds useless, but beginner mages like yourself have trouble sensing their own mana flow, and thus cannot really determine whether their efforts are achieving any results. This will help keep you on target. Later, when you start extruding mana out of your body reliably, we can move onto purposely feeding mana into the cube in order to build greater control...”

Kirielle took the cube carefully into her hands, as if afraid it was going to bite her, and started tracing the lines carved into its surface with her fingers.

"Did you also learn using one of those things?" she asked. "I thought that was done using those one of those glass balls you brought home after your second year?"

"I did, but I discovered those things aren't really the best tool for the job," Zorian said. "They're mass produced, with an eye for price instead of maximum effectiveness. That cube you're holding in your hand is a bit better than that."

"Oh," she said, giving him a surprised look. "Was it... expensive?"

Well, technically Zorian had produced that cube on his own, but the materials he used weren't exactly cheap...

"Yes, but don't worry about it," he said dismissively. "I don't mind spending money on this, so long as you actually take your lessons seriously. And Kirielle?"

"Yeah?" she asked curiously.

"You really need to actually read those three chapters for our next lesson, and I'd appreciate if you didn't lie to me like that in the future," he said.

At least she had the decency to blush in response.

- break -

The first week of the restart was a pretty big success in Zorian's eyes. True, he never did manage to find the aranean treasury, but everything else was going along nicely.

Red Robe had once again neglected to give any information to the invaders, so they were stumbling around just as badly as they had in the previous restart. This was the second time in a row that he had done that, and that was taking into account just the restarts that Zorian knew about – it had probably started way earlier than this. Did Red Robe completely give up on supporting the invasion after their confrontation? That was more than a little strange, considering how dedicated he'd been about helping them out before. Maybe he supported the invasion primarily as a way to keep Zach busy with something and mask the aftershocks of his own actions? If so, the fact that he revealed himself to Zach would kind of make such trickery pointless...

Regardless of the reason, Red Robe's absence made things very convenient for Zorian. The moment he realized Red Robe was once again ignoring the invaders, he immediately launched a series of raids on the known invaders and their cultist allies. He found nothing new yet, but every memory dive he did made him one step closer to opening the matriarch's memory packet so he considered himself successful there regardless. He also scouted a couple of the emergency resource caches that he'd found in the last restart, and even looted a particularly badly defended one. That particular cache held nothing except a large quantity of unlabeled potion bottles, which was slightly disappointing. He handed them off to Kael to see if he could figure out what they were and find a use for them. He'd feel bad about taking advantage of the morlock boy so much, except that Kael actually seemed enthusiastic about all the work Zorian was sending his way, so Zorian figured it was okay.

His monster hunts with Taiven were more successful this time around as well, since he had knowledge of where the monster nests and main migration routes were from his previous restarts. Taiven was ecstatic at their results, though Zorian had noticed her giving him some strange looks when she thought he wasn't paying attention. Did she somehow realize how improbable his claim of divining the locations of the monsters was? Well, no matter – since she never actually confronted him about it, he decided to continue using his foreknowledge to improve results of the hunts and deal with the fallout when (and if) it came.

His quest for getting himself a better library pass was also going along nicely, even though it was still in the beginning stages. The method he chose was extremely simple: he hung around the library entrance during its busiest hours and covertly scanned the minds of everyone who entered and left, looking for people with higher passes who weren't regular visitors of the library. After all, while the academy was stingy about giving higher authorizations to its *students*, actual holders of higher authorizations weren't exactly rare. Plenty of mages had them, and few of them were using them with any degree of regularity. If he chose his target correctly, they would never even realize their library pass had gone missing. And hopefully, the library would also never realize the holder of the card was not the same person whose name was printed on it.

The crowning achievement of this week, however, was the session with Xvim he was currently attending. Xvim was usually extremely punctual about their sessions, ending them at exactly their mandated time – no more, no less. Today, however, Zorian had been so good about meeting his ridiculous demands that Xvim decided to quietly extend their session beyond their allotted time. Zorian said nothing, simply continuing his endless repetition of the tasks Xvim gave him, but internally he was smiling. Even if Xvim retained his stony facade, the fact he decided to break off from his usual routine told Zorian that he was definitely making progress in unnerving his annoying mentor.

Unfortunately, as much as he'd like to see how long Xvim intended to keep him here if he did not complain, Zorian had other obligations to fulfill today.

"A training session with someone else, you say," Xvim asked curiously. "And what, pray tell, is this training session about, to trump the meeting with your mentor in importance?"

"It's something Professor Zileti arranged for me," Zorian said, invoking the authority of another teacher. "I'm meeting another student so we can practice our mind magic together."

Xvim stared at him for a second. If Zorian had expected some kind of shock at his admission, or a request at confirmation that, yes, he indeed meant 'mind magic'... he was disappointed. Xvim just stared at him for a bit, tapped his finger on the table once, and then reached some kind of

decision.

“Why have you not notified me of this sooner?” he asked.

“I meant no offense, sir,” Zorian assured him smoothly. “It’s just that this was our first meeting, and you immediately had me start with shaping exercises when I entered the room. I felt it would be imprudent to interrupt your lesson for such an ultimately irrelevant detail.”

“Hmph. And you say you’re practicing with another student? The blind teaching the blind...” Xvim said, shaking his head in disapproval. He then made a dismissive gesture with his hand, shooing him away. “Well, then. Go. I’m not going to keep you from your duties.”

“Thank you, sir,” Zorian said, rising from his seat. “I am to see you on next Friday, then?”

“No, come see me on Monday after classes,” Xvim said. “I need to see this mind magic of yours in action before I can plan for our next session.”

Huh. Now this he did not expect. Was Xvim implying he could help him develop his mind magic somehow? He did have a very good mental shield, admittedly, but Zorian was still skeptical that the man could help him in that regard. And he was also more than a little baffled that Xvim was even willing to help with that, even if it did turn out that he was some kind of mind magic expert... he thought the man was all about the shaping exercises and other basics?

Deciding he was going to have to wait till Monday to see what Xvim had in mind, Zorian left the man’s office and went off to meet Tinami for their mind magic practice.

Well, he technically did not know he was meeting Tinami in particular, but considering that the setup was largely the same as it was the last time around (he told Ilsa about his mind magic and requested a practice partner), he didn’t think the identity of the other student was that much of a mystery. And indeed, when he arrived at the assigned classroom, he found Tinami already there, waiting for him.

“You are the other mind mage?” Tinami asked incredulously.

[Yes,] he answered telepathically, causing her to flinch in shock. She narrowed her eyes at him in response.

“You’re late,” she complained.

“Sorry,” he apologized. “Xvim unexpectedly decided to extend our tutoring session beyond bounds. I only managed to get out of it a few minutes ago.”

“You chose Xvim as your mentor?” Tinami asked. “Why?”

“I live in Cirin,” Zorian explained. “That’s pretty far from Cyoria. By the time Ilsa managed to get to me, all the other mentors had filled their quotas and Xvim was the only one left.”

“Is he as bad as they say?” she asked.

“He had me do shaping exercises for two hours straight today.”

“Ouch. Okay, I guess that justifies being a few minutes late,” she admitted. “We should probably reschedule our future meetings, just in case this keeps happening.”

“Probably,” Zorian agreed. Not even he knew what Xvim would choose to do next, and he had lived through this month many, many times by now. “Anything important I should know before we start?”

Just like the last time they did this, Tinami was largely interested in practicing her telepathy and ability to read surface thoughts. She was rather bad at it by Zorian’s standards, but she improved rapidly under his direction. As for himself, he mostly practiced tapping into other people’s senses with her. He could access the senses of other humans quite easily at this point, but trying to actually function while getting two sets of sensory inputs was a massive challenge. Especially if he and Tinami were looking in completely different directions and such.

Truthfully, there was very little that practicing with Tinami could offer him that he could not also do with Kirielle, Kael or some random stranger... but this way he got to talk to one of his classmates, which was one of his resolutions for this restart. It didn’t hurt that cooperating with Tinami could be potentially quite useful, considering who her family was. Also quite dangerous, since they were known to dabble in mind magic and necromancy, but he was willing to take that chance. It was too bad he was essentially starting from scratch with her, though – the last time he’d done this with Tinami, he had introduced her to the aranea and they’d overshadowed him in her eyes by quite a margin. Because of that, they’d interacted very little outside their practice sessions. Then again, considering he had simply viewed her as a mind magic practice dummy back then and never even tried to get to know her, he had no right to complain. Now, though, there was no convenient nearby aranea to introduce her to, even if he wanted to... he would have to catch her attention in some other way.

“Okay, I’ve just got to ask – where on earth did you learn how to perform mind magic so well?” Tinami asked. “I’ve been learning these things for years, under some very good tutors, and you’re just effortlessly one-upping me in every application of it I can think of. How come?”

“It’s a secret,” Zorian said bluntly. “Ask me later when we get to know each other better.”

She quirked her eyebrow at him. “When, huh?”

“When, if, whatever suits your fancy. The point is that we don’t know each other well enough for me to reveal something that personal to you.”

“That’s fair enough,” she sighed, leaning back in her chair. “It’s really annoying, though. I know I’m not exactly a genius in the field but—“

There was a knock on the door. Zorian and Tinami both looked at each other and shrugged, mystified about who could be knocking on an empty classroom door at this time of day.

“I’ll go check,” Zorian said, rising from his seat. Chances were that it was someone looking for one of them, and knowing his luck that meant they were looking for him.

He opened the door, only to find Kiana standing behind it.

“Um, hi?” Zorian said uncertainly.

“Hi,” Kiana said, sticking her head inside the classroom quickly in order to see if they were alone. She did a double-take when she saw Tinami and gave him an incredulous look.

“It’s private,” Zorian said crankily, preempting any sort of question. He stepped out of the classroom and closed the door behind him so they could have some semblance of privacy while they talked.

“I didn’t say anything,” she said, raising her hands in front of her defensively. “I just came to tell you that Raynie has finally decided to meet with you again. It’s at ten in the morning tomorrow, at this address.” She pushed a folded piece of paper into his hands. “I shouldn’t have to tell you this, but don’t spread this around, okay?”

“Like I’d feed the rumor mill like that,” Zorian scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Will you be there too, standing guard again?”

“No, but the owner of that restaurant is a friend of Raynie so don’t get any funny ideas,” she said. “Oh, that reminds me – Raynie wants you to know that this is *definitely* not a date. Even though it’s a private meeting in a restaurant between two teenagers...”

She smiled mischievously at him.

“Hey, aren’t you supposed to be on your friend’s side?” he complained.

“I was just joking,” she sighed. “Gods, you’re just as humorless as she is. Heavens help us if you two really do end up getting together in the end... see you around, Zorian.”

And then she just turned and left without even waiting for his response. She... wasn’t really how he’d imagined her to be. Shaking his head, he stuffed the paper with the address in his pocket and went back to the classroom.

“Sorry for the interruption,” he told Tinami. “It was a small personal matter I had to- why are you looking at me like that?”

“No way,” she mumbled. “I heard you were going after Raynie, but to think you got her to agree to it... how ever did you do *that*? I thought that was impossible!”

“I don’t have a date with Raynie, Tinami,” Zorian calmly assured her. “You are jumping to conclusions.”

“Unless... of course!” she exclaimed. “Of course a mind reader could figure out her weak spot!”

“Hey!” he protested. “Now that’s just insulting. I would never violate the privacy of her thoughts like that!”

“Why not?” Tinami asked curiously. “I would, in your place.”

“Are... are you sure you want to admit so readily to something like that?” Zorian asked incredulously.

“Please. I don’t believe for one second you are being perfectly moral and responsible with your mind magic,” Tinami accused. “You’re far too good at it to have developed your powers the legal way.”

“This topic is over as far as I’m concerned,” Zorian stated. “Why don’t we go back to practicing mind magic? You know, the thing we’re *supposed* to be doing?”

“I have to ask though, what is it that you people see in that girl?” Tinami asked, completely ignoring him. “What does she have that I don’t? Is it the red hair? It’s the red hair, isn’t it?”

Zorian let his face fall into his hands. And it had been shaping up to be such a nice day, too.

42. Sum of its Parts

Chapter 042 Sum of its Parts

Not far from the restaurant where he was supposed to meet Raynie, Zorian sat on a bench and waited. There was no sign of her yet, but that was in no way unusual – he had misjudged the amount of time it would take him to find the place, and was thus a little early. He didn’t let it bother him, choosing instead to pass the time by experimenting with his mind sense on the passing crowds, tapping into the eyes of pigeons flying overhead and practicing his shaping skills on the handful of pebbles he had taken to carrying around on his person at all times.

Honestly, shaping exercises were kind of relaxing when he didn’t have Xvim breathing down his neck and being a jerk. He should try finding one that was actually challenging – really challenging, but not Xvim’s patented you-haven’t-really-mastered-this bullshit – and set aside some time to... hm?

He drew the pebbles currently floating in front of him back to his palm and pocketed them, before leaning over a nearby ornamental bush where his mind senses had detected an extremely faint mental signature. Despite knowing exactly where to look, it took him two whole seconds to spot the mantis camouflaged against the leaves. He stared at the bug for a while, before an idea occurred to him...

He pointed his palm towards the insect and concentrated, trying to telekinetically draw it towards him without crushing it like a... well, bug. Something that was greatly complicated by the mantis holding on for dear life to the twig it was standing on. He had hoped to surprise it with this sudden maneuver, but its reactions were surprisingly fast for something that had been moving so slowly and ponderously just a second ago. Nonetheless, Zorian wasn’t so easily deterred. Five minutes later, he had finally managed to detach the mantis from the twig without hurting it and was levitating it in front of him. The mantis twisted and flailed around in the air, clearly unhappy with its predicament, but Zorian had established too firm a hold on it for his telekinetic control to lapse just from that.

At least until the mantis decided it was finished with this annoyance, then suddenly unfurled its wings and flew off. Oh, right – mantises can fly if they need to... He totally forgot about that. Shrugging, he focused on his mind sense for a moment, checking if Raynie had arrived yet.

She had. She was still hidden by the nearby building from where he was standing, but her mental signature was unmistakable. He set off in the direction of the restaurant, and was soon back at the entrance, trying not to stare at the street corner he knew she was going to emerge from. When she did finally round the corner, however, she stopped in her tracks and just sort of stared at him in apprehension instead of coming over to meet him. Honestly, what was up with that? He already agreed with her that it wasn’t a date, so what was she apprehensive about? He ‘accidentally’ turned in her direction, pretended he’d just noticed her and gave her a little wave.

She stopped stalling and came over to greet him properly.

“Sorry if I’m cutting it a little close,” she said. “With most people I know, it’s a miracle if they’re only ten minutes late, so I’ve learned not to be too early to this sort of stuff. You didn’t wait long, did you?”

“It was a bit of a wait,” admitted Zorian. “But to be fair, I was rather early. Don’t worry about it, I found things to amuse myself with.”

“Oh?” she asked. “And what would that be, if you’re willing to share?”

“Nothing too interesting. I was just doing some shaping exercises,” said Zorian, retrieving the pebbles from his pocket and making them float in a rotating ring above his palm. “Silly, I know, but it passes the time.”

Raynie stared at the rotating ring of pebbles for a second before shaking her head, mumbling something unintelligible and motioning for him to follow her into the restaurant. He returned the pebbles to his pocket and hurried after her.

The moment he stepped inside the dining hall of the restaurant, he understood the reason behind the restaurant’s somewhat unusual name – ‘Fearsome Catfish’ indeed. Hanging from the ceiling of the dining room was a preserved body of a massive catfish, big enough to swallow a grown man whole. An... interesting choice of ornamentation for a restaurant. Raynie seemed both amused and pleased that the taxidermically preserved trophy gave him pause for a moment, although he only knew that because of his empathy – she neither reacted nor said anything to him as she led him to a nearby table where they took their seats.

He half-expected Raynie to order a plate full of meat, what with her being a wolf shifter and all... but she actually ordered a grilled trout and a plate of vegetables. Huh. He supposed he shouldn’t be so quick to assume... though speaking of assuming things, was he expected to pay for them both? His cynical side was saying yes, since her choice of meal was on the pricier side of things... but then again she was the daughter of a tribal chief. Maybe she had plenty of money and this was perfectly normal for her. Maybe she’d be offended that he’s trying to pay for her share of the food and think he’s trying to court her after all...

“It will take some time for the chefs to prepare the food,” Raynie said. “Why don’t you tell me about these cat shifters of yours while we wait?”

Zorian scanned the other tables in the dining hall for any eavesdroppers. They were by no means the only people in the restaurant, and Zorian kind of thought this was way too public of a location to be having this sort of conversation... but it was mostly Raynie’s secrets that were at stake here, so if she felt this was fine, then it was. None of the other diners were paying any attention to them, so at least there was that.

He told her as much as he could without bringing up the invasion or information about Rea's background that he obviously shouldn't know about. Even so, he sincerely hoped that Raynie wouldn't want to speak with Rea after their talk, because he would almost certainly find himself in a bit of a hairy situation if that were to happen – he could scarcely explain how he came by some of his information without admitting he had spied upon the Sashal family in *some* fashion.

"I don't think they intend to harm you in any way," Raynie said once he was done. "They wouldn't be willing to leave you alone with their daughter like that if they did, nor would they let her get attached to your little sister if they meant to make you into a target. Most cat-shifters are dishonorable, but they don't target their own neighbors, friends, contacts and the like. They never make trouble in their own territory."

Well, Zorian had already known that the various shifter groups are by no means united, but it seemed they weren't even on particularly good terms either. Or at least Raynie's group didn't seem to like cat shifters much.

"I'm guessing the cat and wolf shifters don't get along, then?" surmised Zorian.

"We hardly ever interact with each other. Our relations are not bad because they're mostly non-existent," said Raynie. "I personally think they give the rest of the shifters a bad name, and I know I'm not the only one in my tribe with that opinion. You should watch yourself around your new friends. I know I just said earlier that they are not plotting against you, but that doesn't mean they're not dangerous. Cat shifters are rarely *just* cat shifters – they are the shifter group that has embraced Ikosian magical traditions the most. They especially like to dabble in illusionism, mind magic, scrying and... other shady disciplines. I wouldn't put it past them to spy on you in some fashion."

"I'll keep that in mind," Zorian nodded. "I'm curious, though – is that a general thing? Do different shifter groups usually avoid each other?"

"No, not at all," Raynie said, shaking her head. "We try to maintain contact with other shifter groups, it's just that cat shifters are... well, it's a long story, and I can smell our meals coming. We'll talk more after we've eaten."

She was right – the food was indeed brought over to their table not long after that. And Raynie was either very hungry or an extremely fast eater, because she scarfed down her meal in half an hour flat and then kept giving Zorian impatient looks while he ate his own food at a much more sedate pace. Rude. He refused to hurry up just because of her.

"Alright," said Zorian eventually, setting his plate aside to signal that he was done eating. "We were talking about shifter relations."

"Yeah," Raynie agreed. "Well, the first thing you need to keep in mind is that the current image of shifters as some sort of weird mages living on the fringes of normal society is something very... modern. Before the flood of Ikosian refugees came to the continent and conquered everything, shifters didn't live on the fringes of anything – partly because the rest of the natives hated us and would have never allowed us to live near them, but also because we didn't have to. We had our own tribes and territories to live in."

"The other natives hated you so much?" Zorian asked.

"Oh yes," Raynie confirmed. "Even today, the scattered remains of the original tribes that lived in the region – the people you collectively call Khusky – can't stand the sight of us. Thankfully for us, they have managed to thoroughly marginalize themselves over the years and no longer have any say in how shifters are treated. That's the good thing that came with the Ikosian conquest - the Ikosians didn't find shifters nearly as threatening or inhuman as the Altazian natives did. As far as they were concerned, we were just your typical group of overspecialized native mages that they hoped to absorb into their society."

"But?" Zorian prompted.

"But their attempts to absorb us never quite succeeded properly," Raynie shrugged. "We speak Ikosian and follow the laws of the land, but most shifter groups have stubbornly clung onto every shred of autonomy and independence that we could. Wolf shifters were the most vocal and successful in that regard."

"Ah, I see," said Zorian, understanding. "And since the cat shifters decided to discard their autonomy in favor of assimilating more closely into the rest of the population, you don't get along with each other."

"Yes," she sighed. "We're not enemies, but they have completely rejected our politics and went their own separate ways. Both sides agree that they've got nothing to say to each other and avoid contact."

Zorian hummed noncommittally. Somehow he doubted that the wolf shifters really didn't consider cat shifters enemies. He'd buy the idea that the cat shifters really *were* apathetic over the issue, but the wolf shifters must be pretty bitter over the other side breaking ranks like that. They were just powerless to do anything about it.

"So how successful are cat shifters, then?" Zorian asked curiously.

"Very successful," Raynie admitted. "Eldemar's government loves to point them out to shifter tribes worried about what would happen to them if they gave up on their traditional rights. It's why they are so reluctant to seriously crack down on them, despite their shady behavior. If the biggest success story of the shifter integration program comes under fire, it would likely cause all those other shifter tribes considering going down that path to back off and dig in harder."

Right, totally not enemies.

“So if cat shifters were so very successful, doesn’t it make sense to copy them to some degree?” Zorian asked. “I mean, I can understand not wanting to be criminals, but what stops you getting yourself some classical mages among your ranks? I’d be willing to bet their decision to acquire Ikosian-style spellcasting had a *lot* to do with their success.”

“What do you think I’m here for?” Raynie asked him with a smile.

“Ah, well...” Zorian fumbled. “While you’re clearly training to be a classical mage, you are a rare exception from what I’m hearing, not the rule. Why is your tribe only sending someone to learn this now? Why not earlier?”

“There is a reason why the shifter group most successful in adopting Ikosian-style magic is also the group that cares the least for our traditional rights,” she said. “While the idea sounds simple in principle, in practice it amounts to opening a backdoor for the central government to influence the tribe. Members trained as mages have a tendency to make power-plays and bring the mage guild, and through them the central government into internal tribal disputes when they don’t get their way.”

“Ah,” nodded Zorian in understanding. “And the central government is all about abolishing autonomous groups like yours when given a chance.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Plus, the tribal elders are very traditional and often react badly if the new mage shows too many outside influences upon return. Many times the mage simply walked out of the tribe in disgust after a few years of clashing with them.”

“So what changed to make you come here?” asked Zorian. A flash of indecipherable, but decidedly negative emotion welled up in the girl in front of him. “Or is that too personal a question?”

“It’s... not really, no,” she said, scowling for a moment before schooling her features. She was annoyed at something, but she didn’t seem to blame him for it. “I guess there are two main reasons. Ever since the splintering of the Old Alliance, the centralization policies that characterized its twilight years have been somewhat discredited, lessening the pressure on shifter tribes to assimilate. This makes outsider-trained members less threatening to many in the tribe. On top of that, the recent colonization drive to the Sarokian Highlands has many shifter tribes wary, since their lands are directly in the path of settlers. If a group of mages decides to settle inside of our borders, it is not at all certain we could get them to leave without asking the central government for help.”

“Help for which they would demand concessions,” Zorian guessed.

“Well, they are actually obliged to help us in that regard for free,” Raynie said. “It’s their duty. But every time we fail to resolve problems ourselves, we weaken our authority and credibility. If we do it too much, our supposed autonomy will end up being only on paper. So it would be best if we had some of our own mages to handle things. Anyway, those two come together into a situation where the tribal leadership felt we had to acquire some mages of our own, and could afford the risk that comes with such attempts.”

Zorian nodded and spoke no more of the topic, even though he could tell there was more to it. It wasn’t as though Raynie had lied to him – he detected no intent to deceive from his empathy – but there was clearly some factor she didn’t want to discuss there. Something personal, he guessed. Something that made her angry and bitter at her tribe, which she otherwise spoke about with pride and reverence.

He had a feeling that her coming to Cyoria was something of an exile.

He asked her to give him a rundown of other shifter groups and she jumped at the chance to change the topic to something else.

Shifter politics were surprisingly complex. Aside from cat shifters, the raven and owl shifters had also fully abandoned their tribal roots in favor of assimilation into regular society – they were not quite as successful as cat shifters, but both were doing decently for themselves. The viper shifters had also tried to pursue that path, but theirs was not a successful story – they failed to integrate and were nearly wiped out when they launched a short-lived rebellion during the Splinter Wars. The wolf, deer and boar shifters provided the core of the autonomist faction, which sought to preserve their traditional tribal structure and their special privileges. The bear and fox shifters were aligned with the autonomists, but had been slowly wavering in their support over the years and had powerful assimilationist factions working inside of them.

Finally, there were three more shifter groups that stood out from the rest for a couple of reasons. First, there were the eagle shifters, who couldn’t accept being ruled by anyone, autonomy or not. They simply transformed and flew off in the direction of the Winter Mountains, where they somehow survived till modern times. How they dealt with such a hostile, monster-infested environment nobody was quite sure, and they wanted nothing to do with the rest of humanity. Not even the other shifters. The second one were seal shifters, who got on the wrong side of Eldemar during the Necromancer’s War and were mostly killed off as a result. The survivors left for Ulquaan Ibasa along with other losing groups, and were never heard from again. Raynie suspected they wouldn’t want to talk to other shifters, even if they still survived in their new home. Finally, there were the pigeon shifters, who were never a tribe to begin with – they were a product of an eccentric mage that managed to get ahold of a shifter transformation ritual and was dedicated enough to create his own shifter clan with it. They were mocked and looked down upon by the other shifters, but Raynie admitted (after some prodding) that they were actually doing quite well for themselves. Being able to turn into a flying animal at will had its uses.

“I’m surprised there aren’t more attempts like that, to be honest,” Zorian said.

“There are,” Raynie said. “They just tend not to go anywhere. They start well, but then run into problems when the first generation shifters start having children. If not handled properly, shifter children tend to grow up somewhat... dysfunctional. Established shifter groups have centuries of tradition to draw on in this regard – new, experimental shifters are stuck with no guidance and must tread with utmost care for the first few generations. Something that a lot of new shifters have no patience for.”

The conversation drifted away from the topic of shifters after that, shifting to a discussion of the recent monster invasion of the city and how it affected them. Zorian largely deflected Raynie's questions about what exactly he did in 'his' team whenever they went hunting, as he suspected Raynie would be a lot less willing to just accept Zorian's implausibly high skills than Taiven was, and she didn't push the issue too much. He was rather surprised how big of an effect the monster invasion had on her, though.

"Honestly, this whole monster crisis is making me very self-conscious," Raynie revealed. "I was sent here to learn magic and become an asset to the tribe, and I thought I was doing fine in that regard... but now I know that many of my classmates are good enough to go after real dangers already and I'm... not. I thought I was among the top of the class, but it seems that's true only academically. I don't like it. I should have been among those of you going out there to fight those things."

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He had no idea how to respond to that, so he just kept silent. The conversation died down after that, and they went their separate ways. There was no mention of a second meeting, but she did mention he was welcome to ask her more questions if he thought of anything else. That was more of an approval than he'd expected to get, really.

And yes, she did indeed expect him to pay for both of them.

- break -

Zorian turned his new library pass in his hands, idly studying the identification glyphs etched on its surface. The name on the pass was not his, of course, since he'd brazenly broken into someone's house and stolen it... but the chances he would get confronted over that were, surprisingly enough, negligible. As he quickly learned when he tried to use his new pass, the higher passes weren't just a slip of inert paper like his old one was – they were small wooden panels imprinted with a magical identification array of glyphs. To use them, one just had to walk up to the doors leading to the restricted section of the library, and then insert the panel into the depression next to the door. If the pass authorization was high enough to access that particular section, the door would unlock and the visitor could walk inside. No interaction with the librarians was necessary, and nobody asked to see his pass when he tested it, even after he'd spent several hours in the mind magic section.

Honestly, he was feeling rather foolish at the moment. He expected the restricted sections to be guarded by some fiendish bit of security and identity checks around every corner, and instead he found a security system a child could break. If he knew it was this easy, he would have done this far earlier. As far as he could see, the only danger was that the man he'd stolen from might realize he'd been robbed... and Zorian really wasn't worried about that. He had picked his target carefully, took nothing except the library pass from the house he'd broken into, and had done his best to leave no evidence of his entry. Even if the man suddenly started caring about the library pass he hadn't used for months and noticed it was missing, Zorian really doubted he would conclude somebody stole it. Who the hell breaks into people's houses in order to swipe their library passes?

All that said, Zorian suspected that if he tried the same trick to access some really deeply restricted section, he would be stopped cold by firmer security. He would have to acquire a top level pass at some point and test it out near the end of a restart.

Right now, though, he had to see just what Xvim had in store for him. He pocketed the library pass and approached... the door...

He frowned. What the hell was happening? This was where Xvim's office was located, he was sure of it – had been here countless of times, and everything else was exactly where it should be. He just...

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, letting the mental shield snap shut over his thoughts. The compulsion to ignore the door to Xvim's office melted away, and his eyes finally stopped skimming over it like it didn't exist. No, now that he thought about it, it was more like he had dismissed it as irrelevant. As *obviously* not what he was looking for. If he'd been less sure of himself, who knows how long he would have looked for the door before figuring it out.

Opening his eyes and forcing down his annoyance at Xvim's antics, he knocked on the door and then immediately entered without waiting for permission to do so. He found Xvim calmly staring at him, fingers steepled together.

"*Pitiful*," Xvim declared. "That such a crude trap managed to snare you, even for a minute, shows how woefully unprepared you are for the dangers of mind magic."

"Yes, sir," agreed Zorian easily. He was too inured to Xvim's attitude to really get worked up by it anymore. "That is why I professed a desire for a training partner to Miss Zileti."

Xvim waved his hand through the air once, as if warding away a particularly annoying fly, wordlessly letting him know how little he thought of that idea.

"I understand, from talking to Ilsa, that you are a natural mind mage, yes?" Xvim asked. It was apparently a rhetorical question, because he didn't wait for Zorian's response before continuing. "It is commendable that you are trying to correct your deficiencies on your own initiative. Too many mages with such natural talents mistake their inborn advantage for actual mastery, wasting their potential and putting everyone around them at risk. Even themselves. *Especially* themselves."

Wow, was that actual praise from Xvim?

“Sadly,” Xvim continued, “your attempt, much like the shaping skills you displayed at our session last Friday, falls embarrassingly short of achieving actually worthwhile results. It is up to me, as your mentor, to mould you into something resembling a competent and responsible spellcaster.”

Ugh. Never mind.

“I see,” he said, somewhat sourly. “Please forgive my impertinence, but I was not aware that you were an expert in mind magic. I thought you taught advanced shaping exercises for fourth-year students.”

“I also do private lessons for particularly talented first and second years,” Xvim said, a ghost of a grimace flickering over his face for a moment before he smoothed it into his usual impassiveness. Xvim probably didn’t think much of their ‘talent’. “And, more relevantly, I teach a fourth year elective dealing with defense against hostile magic. Obviously, this includes mind magic as well.”

“Ah,” said Zorian. That did a lot to explain Xvim’s constant mind shield. Still... “I feel I should point out that my innate ability grants me a very powerful and flexible mental shield.”

“Oh? How interesting,” Xvim said speculatively. “Tell me, is your ability purely defensive or can you reach out and touch other people’s minds too?”

“The second one,” Zorian admitted. “That’s why I asked Miss Zileti for help – I needed a willing target that would let me practice telepathy and mind reading on them.”

“In that case, you probably already know about the mental barrier I’m currently sporting,” Xvim stated.

“Well, yes, but not because I tried to access your mind or anything,” Zorian lied. “It’s just that the base form of my talent is a passive form of empathy that tells me what other people are feeling, and I cannot sense anything from you. As far as I can tell, that only happens when they are shielding their mind somehow.”

“I am certain that is the only reason why you know of it, and that you have never even entertained the thought of getting revenge on your insufferable mentor by taking a quick peek at his mind,” Xvim said indulgently. “As it happens, though, I *want* you to try and invade my mind. Please do your best to get past my mental barrier and tell me how it compares to your own.”

Oh, this was absolutely perfect. A chance to attack Xvim and get away with it? How could he refuse? Still, as annoying as his mentor was, he didn’t really want to hospitalize the man, so he *didn’t* immediately launch the strongest mind spike he could form into his unprepared defenses. No, instead he first ran some light probing attacks to see if he could find any obvious imperfections (he couldn’t) and then launched a quick succession of weak attacks to gauge the strength of Xvim’s shield.

It was a very solid thing, comparable in strength to what Zorian and the aranea could create, which surprised him a great deal. On the other hand, that meant he didn’t really have to hold back. He powered up his strongest, most focused mind spike and slammed it directly into the mental barrier.

Though outwardly calm and composed, inwardly Zorian grinned in savage glee as he felt Xvim’s mental shield crack and buckle under his sudden onslaught...

...and then the moment passed, and Xvim’s mental barrier immediately snapped back into place, as perfect and unyielding as it was at the start.

Zorian’s eyes involuntarily widened in shock. N-No way... he repaired it!? How? He wasn’t a psychic, he was sure of it, and no spell he knew of could repair itself. Certainly not that quickly. *Zorian* couldn’t fix his mind shield that quickly. Hell, the aranea he practiced with couldn’t make their defenses snap back to an intact state that quickly.

He launched three more powerful attacks in quick succession with the exact same result: the attacks did damage to Xvim’s mental barrier, but it was repaired so quickly and thoroughly that a lesser attacker could have been fooled into thinking it had never been damaged at all.

He narrowed his eyes. No. No, he was not going to be foiled in this. Brute force wasn’t working, but he hadn’t been trained by the aranea for nothing – he had far more than that at his disposal. He started executing basic attack patterns taught to him by Mind Like Fire, treating Xvim like a fellow psychic instead of a mage using a structured spell, and slowly the limits of Xvim’s defenses revealed themselves to him. For one thing, Xvim did not seem to feel his probing attacks – anything not strong enough to crack his mental barrier was effectively undetectable to him. Secondly, his barrier was completely uniform – he never reinforced a spot he was attacking, even if he repeatedly targeted the same place over and over again.

When he next attacked, he did not use a powerful but momentary mind spike – he picked one part of Xvim’s mental shield and started crushing it. He didn’t let up, and slowly it began to crack under his mental pressure. No repair was possible – his attack was overwhelming the shield’s regeneration, widening the cracks and bringing it closer and closer to total collapse. He diverted a few tendrils of power from the main attack into the widening holes in Xvim’s defenses, causing the man to visibly flinch as telepathic forces seared his surface thoughts...

“Stop!” Xvim ordered, raising his hand into the air in a halting gesture.

Zorian immediately withdrew, letting Xvim recreate his mental defenses and regain his composure.

“Well,” his mentor said, massaging his sinuses. “An afternoon headache, just what I needed today. I suppose that will teach me to tempt my students. Nonetheless, it was a fascinating experience. Less classical mind magic, and more akin to something a memory moss, an azure sea hermit

crab or a cephalic rat swarm would employ.”

“That wasn’t a spell you were using to shield your mind, was it?” Zorian asked.

“No, it was not,” Xvim confirmed. “It was unstructured magic, much like your own abilities.”

“But how?” Zorian asked. “I can tell that you aren’t… well, a natural mind mage like me.”

“Mind magic shaping exercises,” Xvim said simply, as if that explained anything.

“There are shaping exercises for mind magic?” asked Zorian, surprised.

“There are shaping exercises for every field of magic,” Xvim said. “They are essential for building a proper foundation around which you can base your spells.”

Right, stupid question. What he *should* be asking was how doing shaping exercises allowed Xvim to do a reasonable impression of a full-blown psychic. He was a bit of a one-trick pony, but to be fair, it was a very nice trick.

“I was not aware that doing shaping exercises can give you unstructured magical abilities,” Zorian remarked.

“Really?” Xvim asked him curiously. “What did you think shaping exercises were, if not unstructured magical abilities? Do enough of related ones over the years, and they’re bound to build up to something greater than the sum of its parts. In the case of mind magic, the ability to defend against it is so universally coveted that countless training regimens for gaining mental defenses have been devised over the centuries. What I displayed is not a common skill by any means, but is not particularly rare either.”

Zorian frowned. Come to think of it, a fair number of people he’d encountered in the past had some form of mental defense that didn’t really feel like a structured spell. Alanic for instance, as well as Rea. Zach also had some sort of mental shield, according to Spear of Resolve – one she did not feel comfortable tampering with. He really should have suspected something like this earlier.

“Can you also use telepathy and mind reading in an unstructured manner, too?” he asked Xvim, acting on a hunch.

“Me, personally? No. I’ve never had an interest in anything other than defending myself,” Xvim said. “But if you’re asking whether it’s possible, the answer is yes… with caveats. It requires great dedication for rudimentary results – such an aspirant would never be able to duplicate the attack you just casually did, for instance, even after a lifetime of honing their skills.”

He knew it – it was just like soul sight. Getting a reduced version of the ability that affects only yourself was doable with a lot of work, but reaching out and applying it to someone else was all but impossible.

“So?” Xvim said impatiently, breaking his contemplation. “The comparison?”

“Err, right. Your shield seems to give you far less feedback than mine does, it’s too uniform in composition and your response to attack is very predictable and exploitable for someone who knows what they’re doing,” said Zorian, relishing the chance to make Xvim on the receiving end of criticism for a change. Xvim simply nodded, giving no indication that his pride was wounded by the barrage. “On the other hand, your shield has far fewer imperfections and you can repair it a lot faster than me.”

“Well then,” Xvim said, leaning back on his chair. “I guess we know what you’ll be practicing today, then, don’t we?”

“Alright,” said Zorian. He was fine with the idea, really. Improving his mental defenses was always welcome in his mind. “How is that going to work, though? I don’t think any classical mind spell can do much to me, barring surprise attacks like that trap you put on the door.”

“Surprises come in many forms, mister Kazinski,” Xvim said, reaching into his drawers and retrieving a spell rod, which he promptly pointed at Zorian’s face. “Allow me to demonstrate.”

Zorian hurriedly strengthened his mind shield, determined to weather the incoming mental attack Xvim was launching at him, but what hit him wasn’t a mind magic spell. It was some sort of dispelling wave, and his mental shield evaporated upon contact with it like a raindrop hitting a burning oven.

Then the knockout spell hit him.

He resisted. He may have been stripped of his mental shield and caught off-guard, but he was still an experienced mage and he went through Kyron’s ‘resistance training’ too – the relatively minor spell Xvim used could not subdue him. But the point was made, regardless.

“A proper mind mage,” Xvim said, “would have reconstructed his shield before the second spell had been even cast.”

Zorian sighed. Of course they would have.

“Start over?” he guessed.

“Start over,” Xvim confirmed.

In a scene that Zorian would rapidly begin to hate with every fiber of his being, Xvim once again pointed the spell rod at his face and blasted his mental shield into oblivion.

- break -

Following their Monday session, Xvim largely replaced their regular sessions with mind magic related ones, constantly pushing his defenses and giving him long lists of mind magic shaping exercises to try. Most of these exercises were absurdly easy for Zorian, teaching things he already had an instinctive grasp of, but searching the restricted section of the library with his brand new pass yielded some less intuitive ones that actually taught him something new.

He didn't intend to duplicate the circumstances that led to Xvim's new attitude in future restarts. While he'd definitely learned some stuff from Xvim when it came to mental combat, Xvim was ultimately an annoying teacher to learn from and nothing he wanted to teach Zorian absolutely required his help to work.

Besides, his meetings with Tinami weren't really getting anywhere. He wasn't really getting much from them himself, and Tinami basically turned his every attempt at interaction into an interrogation attempt, trying to figure out who had taught him to be as good as he was currently.

She also seemed to have blabbed about his meeting with Raynie, since everyone in class seemed to know about it when he came to the academy on Monday. Probably as revenge for refusing to answer her questions. In any case, that pretty much killed any sort of good will he may have had with Raynie – she accepted that he was not at fault when they talked later in the day, but she still didn't want to be seen anywhere near him after that. It was probably Benisek loudly congratulating him in front of the whole class that really screwed him over when it came to that.

Why did he ever think that hanging around that guy was a good idea?

Oh well, live and learn. Seeing how his social endeavors were in tatters for the rest of the restart, he focused his energies on finding the aranean treasury, his personal experiments, and tracking down and interrogating the invaders. The latter two were doing just fine, but his quest for the aranean treasury stubbornly yielded no results. He resolved to take the Filigree Sages up on their offer to take them to the Cyorian settlement in exchange for their help with memory manipulation – maybe aranean explorers would be more successful than him, and more help with his memory reading skills was always welcome. He should also save the Yellow Cavern Guardians from their invader again, just in case they had something new to tell him now that he had some actual experience with mind reading under his belt.

His invasion-related activities steadily continued as weeks passed, yielding no revolutionary results or critical revelations, but his memory reading skills were getting pretty good and he had found some interesting targets that might actually know something interesting. Unfortunately, his constant attacks had made the invaders cautious and paranoid, and everyone important was always armed and under tight security – Zorian didn't feel confident going after them under such conditions. He would go after them in a future restart, when they hadn't had the forewarning that he was coming for them.

As the end of the restart approached, Zorian laid off the Cultists a little, limiting himself to raiding their caches and monitoring their activities. The caches held no crucial clue or amazing treasure, but one of them did have a whole lot of cash (which Zorian intended to put to good use in future restarts) and the potion collection he stole at the start of the restart looked promising. Kael claimed he would need another restart to finish going through them, but some of them were clearly advanced combat potions that produced clouds of acidic vapor upon breaking, doused everything in unquenchable fire and similar effects. That sounded quite compatible with Zorian's fighting style, in all honesty.

And then, several days before the summer festival, his spying effort finally gave him the alert he had been waiting for: the leadership of the Cult of the World Dragon issued an order to one of their low-ranking groups to kidnap Nocka. It wasn't the same team as it was the last time, nor was the kidnapping scheduled to occur on the same date it had in the previous restart, but his efforts had caught the order anyway.

He ambushed them halfway to the Sashal family house, when they were still herding their giant centipedes through the sewers. His initial idea was to seize control of the centipedes and make them turn on their masters, making it look like they lost control of the beasts. Unfortunately, the mage controlling them knew what he was doing – the moment Zorian attempted to influence the minds of the monsters he clamped down on his control over the centipedes and shouted a warning to the rest of the group that they were under attack.

So Zorian used his backup plan and chucked one of the combat potions he recovered from their cache into their midst. The centipede controller, as well as three of his centipede minions, died on the spot, frozen solid when the bottle broke and the glittering blue liquid made contact with the air. Alas, that revealed his hiding spot, forcing him to shield himself from a barrage of offensive spells the three surviving cultists had started peppering him with.

Fortunately, with no more controller mage to contest his control, the last centipede was child's play to commandeer. Before his three attackers had realized what was happening, the centipede's venomous fangs bit down on the leg of one of them, and they had to defend themselves from a danger in their own midst.

They never stood a chance from that point on, though they had managed to kill the centipede before Zorian finished them off. His task done, he left the scene, wondering what the Cult of the World Dragon was going to do now that its plans had been foiled. Were they going to come after Nocka again, with more resources this time? Just how important was she to them, anyway?

He supposed he would find out soon.

- break -

To Zorian's surprise, Nochka was never attacked after that. Instead, the cultists attacked another family the day after that – this time a rather prominent officer serving in Eldemar's military who happened to be one of those pigeon shifters that Raynie didn't think much of. The man and his wife were unharmed, but their eight-year-old son was kidnapped by their unknown assailants and no ransom demand had been issued.

Unlike the cultists' attack on the Sashal family, this one garnered a great deal of attention from the newspapers and the authorities. After all, their new target wasn't just some random nobody, but a member of Eldemar's military... and they didn't bother with some flimsy 'monster attack' setup this time, choosing instead to just barge in and kidnap a kid during the night. Quite a bit more attention grabbing.

So. Clearly the cultists needed a shifter, probably a shifter child, for some purpose. Primordial 'summoning', most likely. They needed one so badly they were willing to kick over an anthill just before the invasion, exposing it to a huge risk of discovery.

But it didn't have to be Nochka, apparently.

"Hey, Zorian," Kirielle called out, distracting him from his musings.

He looked towards her and found her trying to paint a face on the next generation wooden golem he had made for her. It had a whole bunch of minor improvements over the old one, but Zorian suspected Kirielle only really cared about one of them – the new version had long, brown 'hair' attached to its head, based on her request. Apparently she decided that it wasn't lifelike enough for her.

"What?" he asked.

"Who are you taking out to the dance tomorrow?" she asked.

"It's none of your business," said Zorian. Ugh, he would have to make sure to be out of the house by tomorrow evening, just in case Ilsa sent someone after him again.

"Are you going out with the red-headed girl you're dating?" she asked.

"N- Wait a minute, how do you even know about that!?" Zorian protested.

"Kael told me," she said, biting the wooden end of her paintbrush for a minute before adding some fine touches on the golem's new eyebrows.

Stupid Kael... he probably thought this was all so terribly amusing.

"I think you could use a girlfriend," Kirielle said, before turning towards her new golem "Don't you agree, Kosjenka?"

Just as it had been made to do when presented with something that sounded like a question, the golem nodded its head gravely.

"See, even Kosjenka agree-"

"Kiri," Zorian cut her off.

"Yes?"

"Shut up."

43. Overwhelmed

Chapter 043 Overwhelmed

Perhaps it was because she 'knew' that Zorian already had a date, much like everyone else seemed to believe, or perhaps it was simply a matter of Zorian being more circumspect with his intentions this time around, but Ilsa didn't send any girl after him in the end. Not that Zorian had stayed at Imaya's place long enough to see that in person, of course – that could have easily left him stuck with an unplanned date for the evening *again* – but he had left a scrying beacon in the house so he could check up on it periodically.

A part of him was annoyed he even cared about that. In the grand scheme of things, such petty drama did not matter in the slightest... there wasn't enough time left in the restart for the consequences of ignoring it to really catch up to him. And besides, he could hardly be blamed for not showing up on a date he had never arranged to begin with! But, well, he was curious... and it wasn't like checking up on the house from time to time was some huge commitment on his part.

No, most of his time was spent on hovering on the edges of the invasion proper, trying to spot breakaway groups small enough to ambush. Well, that and repeatedly telling himself that he didn't have to interfere every time he saw the invaders kill helpless civilians, since they were going to be just fine when the loop restarted. The first thing was complicated by the variety of monsters that accompanied the mages, who all had very good senses and came in great numbers. The second was complicated by the sheer brutality the invaders displayed to everyone in their path. For heaven's sake, some of them were breaking into random houses and murdering entire families inside! Not even looting anything, just committing mindless slaughter of non-combatants for no real reason. Madness.

He knew stuff like that happened during the invasion, of course, but it was never this... *personal* for him. He was there this time, witnessing the behavior in detail and cold-bloodedly deciding where to engage the invaders and where to move on. And he wasn't talking about avoiding groups that were straight-up too big for him to handle – those were easy to ignore, since he had never felt compelled to help others if doing so would cost him his own life in return. No, he was talking about groups that were entirely manageable with his current skills... except that he couldn't figure out a way to deal with them without killing everything. And what would be the point of *that*? He needed Ibasan mages alive so he could read their minds – that was what this was all *about*. An ambush that did not result in subdued mages to interrogate was a waste of time and mana, as well as liable to summon Quatach-Ichl to dispatch him. The ancient lich always personally intervened when someone got too successful against the invading forces.

And that was without even considering the possibility that Red Robe was secretly lurking somewhere out there in the city, waiting for a big enough disturbance to clue him in that a time traveler was back in Cyoria. He didn't think that option was very likely, what with Red Robe completely abandoning his support of the invasion lately, but it was not an option he felt completely safe discounting. No, sticking to his original plan and avoiding unnecessary engagements was definitely the right choice to make.

Maybe it was a good thing his mind kept going back to the stupid date drama – if nothing else, it gave him something to distract himself with.

Fortunately for his deteriorating mood, he soon found a duo of Ibasan mages that had strayed too far from their main group and were only lightly defended. Well, relatively speaking. They had two war trolls and twelve skeletons as bodyguards, with another six war trolls vandalizing shopfronts not too far from where they were standing, but he was confident he could deal with that if he could surprise them.

He made his way towards the group, mentally nudging the iron beak whose senses he was tapping into to fly closer to his targets so he could examine them more closely. There was something deliciously ironic about using the invaders' own scouts against them like that, but the real reason he was using the iron beaks instead of simply scrying on the invaders was that iron beaks had much better vision than he did and could also see in the dark. Very useful, that. He had also tried to employ the same trick on the war trolls that hung around the invaders, but found their senses very hard to process. Trolls had terrible eyesight, and were colorblind to boot – their main sense was their ridiculously good sense of smell and, to a lesser extent, their hearing. Not to mention they were far less mobile than the iron beaks, and the Ibasans kept a much tighter leash on the brutes than they did on their iron beak flocks. Hmm... he wondered...

Acting on a hunch, Zorian focused on the nearest iron beak flock and tried to dominate the one flying on the tail's end of the flock. It was surprisingly willful for an animal, but his attempt was not contested by anyone and the iron beak soon broke off from its group and made its way towards Zorian. Huh, that worked. Nobody seemed to be reacting to his actions, either. Convenient. Apparently the iron beaks were a bigger weak link of the invasion than he'd thought!

He removed a potion vial from his pocket and handed it to the dominated iron beak that had landed next to him. It took some time, but eventually he managed to telepathically convey to the magical corvid that it shouldn't clutch the vial too tightly in its claws unless it wanted bad things to happen to it. That done, he directed it to dive bomb the Ibasan duo with the vial.

He would not have been surprised at all if his ploy had ended up as a failure. A lot of it depended on the iron beak executing everything flawlessly, since Zorian was only dominating the iron beak, not puppeteering it – a dominated creature executes orders to the best of its own ability, not the controller's. That was nice, in the sense that there was no way Zorian could have puppeteered the bird precisely enough to pull off something this complicated. It did mean he was a bit of a helpless observer as a result, though. Oh well, even if the ploy failed it should at least act as a proper distraction for his own attack...

The iron beak exceeded his expectations. Not only did it approach the two mages from behind, entirely on its own initiative, it dropped the vial at

the exact spot Zorian told it to aim at. The *exact* spot. That had got to be some innate magic ability at work – they were uncannily accurate with their feather attack too, come to think of it. In any case, once the vial hit the ground it exploded into a cloud of yellow gas that knocked out the two Ibasans in a matter of moments. Their bodyguards weren’t affected – the war trolls because their magically-enhanced metabolisms kept the knockout gas from working, and the skeletons because they had no metabolism to affect – but once their controllers went unconscious, it became ridiculously easy to goad the war trolls into attacking the skeletons. It took less than a minute before every skeleton was reduced into dust and splinters.

He directed his iron beak to make a few passes at the two trolls, and the bird interpreted that as ‘send a couple of feather volleys straight at their eyes (ouch), after which the two former bodyguards ran off to chase the bird in blind anger, leaving Zorian free to approach the two knocked-out mages unopposed.

This was the fifth group he ambushed tonight, and the first one where everything had gone so smoothly. He didn’t even have to personally fight in the end! He really should use iron beaks more extensively in the future.

After dragging the two unconscious bodies to some less exposed place, he took a deep breath and dived into their memories.

Memory reading, more than any other branch of mind magic, deeply resembled divination in the way it functioned. You had to decide what you wanted to look for, and if you were asking the wrong question, your answer would be worthless or misleading. In Zorian’s case, there were four main things he looked for whenever he read the minds of Ibasan mages: whether they knew about any mage in a garish red robe, where the primordial ‘summoning’ ritual was supposed to take place, what they knew about the goals of the invasion and, last but certainly not least, whether they knew anything about the time loop or time travel in general. The same thing he probed the minds of cultists about, really. He was lucky this time, in that one of the two mages lying before him was a higher ranking mage that should hopefully know more than the common grunts he had been dealing with thus far.

None of the Ibasans knew anything about a mage wearing red robes, and the two men he currently had at his mercy were no exception. Follow up questions regarding missing members which had left the group around the start of the time loop revealed that despite their inability to maintain discipline during the actual invasion, the Ibasans ran a pretty tight ship during the lead-up to it. Anyone who stepped out of line was severely punished by the Ibasan leadership, and the handful of cases where someone tried to abandon the invasion resulted in Quatach-Ichl hunting them down like dogs as an example to everyone else. Consequently, all such attempts had stopped long before the time loop had begun.

As far as Zorian was concerned, that pretty much killed the possibility of Red Robe being an Ibasan invader. He had suspected as much, considering how Quatach-Ichl treated Red Robe during that evening, but it was nice to have more confirmation. It was still possible he was connected to the Cult of the World Dragon, which didn’t (and couldn’t) exercise anywhere near the same control over its members.

As far as the location where the primordial ritual was concerned, none of the Ibasans officially knew anything about it... but it was apparently a sort of public secret among group commanders (such as the one whose mind Zorian was currently reading) that the ‘summoning’ was supposed to take place on top of the Hole, or at least as close to it as humanly possible.

Zorian felt pretty stupid when he found that out. Of course. Of course it was the Hole, the city’s biggest and most obvious landmark. He had even known that the Cult assigned special significance to the damn place, he just never... damn it. He shook his head. In his defense, the lower-ranking cultists were convinced that the ritual was going to take place in some super-secret place that nobody knows about.

As for the goals of the invasion, that was something Zorian found very easy to extract from the minds of his victims, as they knew very few actual facts about that. Only the very top of the Ibasan leadership seemed to know what they were really trying to accomplish here, and the common grunts were going along with the whole thing almost entirely because Quatach-Ichl was going along with it too. The ancient lich was held in very high regard by the Ibasans. As a thousand-year old lich, he was an almost impossibly ancient mage, and had power and skill to match his age. He was alive back when the gods still spoke to humanity, and was rumored to have been blessed by several of them. On top of all that, he had a reputation for being harsh but fair, as opposed to a lot of other Ibasan leaders who simply had a reputation for being harsh. He was something of a saint to these people, as strange as that looked to Zorian. The mindset was that if Quatach-Ichl said this was possible and worthwhile to pull off, then it was. It was just that simple.

Also, there was a general feeling among the Ibasans that Altazians were all a bunch of degenerate weaklings that would surely fall like wheat before the mighty men and women of Ulquaan Ibas. Then again, that particular brand of rhetoric was common in Eldemar too, so he didn’t think it all that notable in the grand scheme of things.

As for time travel, his current victim knew nothing of it, just like everyone else he- wait! There was something. It wasn’t about the time loop, or time travel, but apparently Eldemar had a secret research facility deep, deep within the Dungeon, dedicated to researching time magic. Time dilation, to be more precise. The facility was heavily defended, with insanely good security measures – as they had to be, considering the sheer depth the facility was located at – so the invaders had decided to leave it alone. Some of the Ibasan leaders, notably Quatach-Ichl, were known to be unhappy about that. They felt something important had to be there, if Eldemar was willing to maintain a research facility in such a dangerous environment, and wanted to have it. Unfortunately for them, the rest of the leadership felt the number of troops and effort required to crack their defenses could not be justified with such speculative gains.

That was... interesting. Although the Ibasan mage he was memory-reading did not know the exact location of the facility, Zorian was pretty sure *he* did. The map left to him by the matriarch had a number of locations marked on it, two of which he had never been able to reach to check out. One was surrounded by Ibasan forward bases and patrolled too heavily for him to ever approach it successfully – Zorian presumed this was their main base. The other was ridiculously deep, and he never even tried reaching it – he did not think he could survive a journey into such depths.

Frankly, he was kind of amazed the aranea managed to map the Dungeon that deep, considering even powerful mages would think twice about descending to that depth.

He had no proof, but he strongly suspected this was the time magic research facility discovered by the Ibasans. And considering the matriarch had marked it down as important, it almost certainly had some relevance to his situation.

He dived deeper into the man's mind, looking for more information. He felt his victim's mind quake under the severity of the probe but persisted anyway – any compunction about hurting these people had evaporated after watching them rampage around the city for several hours.

The path outlined by the matriarch wasn't the only one, apparently, or even the main one. The government did not supply the facility through a perilous journey down the winding tunnels of the Dungeon proper – they did it by descending down through the Hole until they reached the desired depth, where they had drilled an artificial tunnel into the wall in order to connect the facility with the outside world. Of course, while that path avoided most of the dangers associated with such extreme depths, it was still insanely dangerous for anyone without authorization to be there, so that did not help him much. Maybe if he-

Oops. He pushed it too hard – overwhelmed by his (still rather crude and unsophisticated) memory probe, the man's mind collapsed into a chaotic, undecipherable mess. He would be getting nothing more out of him. Damn it.

He fired two piercers at the unconscious mages, killing them both, and turned to leave, only to find an iron beak watching him closely from a nearby window sill. It was non-hostile, simply scrutinizing him. Zorian checked the feel of its mind, and found that it was indeed the very same iron beak he had dominated earlier, just like he suspected. His influence over it had dissolved a while ago, though, so that couldn't be the reason why it was so docile towards him. Huh.

If nothing else, he'd expected it to resent him for overriding its will. He sensed no animosity from the bird, however – just satisfaction and schadenfreude at seeing the Ibasan mages dead. Either the iron beaks didn't like the Ibasans much, or this particular iron beak was not a fan.

"So," Zorian said. "How do you feel about helping me kill more of these?"

The iron beak cocked its head to the side, uncomprehending. Right, still only an animal, if a very clever and willful one. He sent the bird a telepathic impression of two of them killing more invaders.

The iron beak answered with a shrill screech and a burst of bloodlust so strong Zorian found himself taking a step back from the animal.

Hate. Grudge. Kill.

"Right," he mumbled to himself. "I'll take that as agreement."

He didn't bother to dominate the bird this time – he just instructed it to find another small group of invaders and started looking for more iron beaks to possibly subvert.

- break -

Zorian subdued two more groups after that, neither of which had anything new to teach him, before Quatach-Ichl suddenly teleported in front of him and blasted him in the face with one of those jagged red disintegration beams he loved so much. He died instantly, unable to raise any defenses in time.

Oh well, the night had been coming to a close anyway. At least he'd managed to experiment a little with the iron beaks flying around. Sadly, he had discovered that only a tiny minority of them were receptive to his control, and contacting the wrong ones invariably caused the entire flock to descend upon him like a murderous mob. The previously subverted birds also immediately switched sides back to their brethren when this happened, which he really should have expected but somehow was still taken entirely off-guard the first time it happened. In any case, the iron beaks definitely hated the invaders for some reason, but turning them against their masters was very difficult. Something kept them loyal, and the few mages whose minds he had questioned for an answer didn't know what it was – they thought of iron beaks as dumb animals and paid no heed to their thoughts and motives.

He began the restart in the same general way he had started the last two – by scouting the state of the invasion, getting his mana crystals, helping Taiven clean up the Dungeon of monsters, and so on. Except, of course, that he was far more effective at all of those this time around. He also stole a better library card for himself immediately and recreated Kosjenka for Kirielle, among other minor additions.

The newest restart, much like the two that preceded it, showed no sign of future knowledge by the invaders. This was the third consecutive restart where Red Robe unceremoniously ditched them, and Zorian was starting to suspect this was now a normal situation rather than just a momentary whim. Most likely, Red Robe had completely lost interest in the invasion after their confrontation.

The question was – why? Why do that after he had spent all those restarts stubbornly handing out knowledge to them?

Well, perhaps a better question would be, why had he been doing that in the first place? What did helping the invaders do for him? Was it just a way to keep Zach focused on some highly visible, but ultimately irrelevant quest so he wouldn't question things? Or perhaps a way to muddy the waters, so to speak, and hide the aftershocks of his own actions by regularly inducing a big splash at the start of every restart? Maybe. But the sheer amount of information he provided to the invaders made him think there was more to it than that. It was incredibly optimized to do as much damage to the city as possible – Red Robe must have sunk an enormous amount of time and effort to produce something like that. The outcome of

the invasion mattered to him in some personal way. So why stop? What changed?

Zorian tried to think of it with a properly paranoid mindset. Red Robe thought that the aranea had brought an unknown, but large number of people into the time loop. These people were organized and also crafty enough to evade his notice for years. Not something that would be easy to hunt down and purge. Zorian had also displayed mind magic in their battle, so the one encounter Red Robe had had with these people involved one of the few types of magic that could permanently deal with him. All of this meant that the time loop got infinitely more dangerous for Red Robe all of a sudden. There was a legion of enemies plotting against him and lurking around every corner.

If Zorian was in Red Robe's place, would he immediately begin to plot against this group, laying down traps and ambushes and trying to track them down? No, definitely not. He would get away as soon as possible, not just out of Cyoria but out of the entire wider region around the city. If he began the restart somewhere in the city, he would get the hell away at the start of the restart, much like Zach seemed to be doing. He wasn't sure how long he would stay away, but Zach had yet to stop leaving the city at the start of every restart, and he was the reckless one out of the three of them.

Maybe it wasn't so strange that Red Robe was staying away from the city at the moment. In hindsight, that bit of misdirection by Spear of Resolve had been far shrewder than Zorian had given her credit for at the time. But how long would it be before Red Robe realized that the legions of enemy time travelers simply didn't exist?

There was another option. If Red Robe was helping the invasion in an attempt to optimize it, so that it could be as effective as possible once the time loop ends, and if the aranea were only ejected from the time loop instead of soulkilled, as Red Robe claimed... then any further optimization attempts would be a total waste of time. Once the time loop ended, the aranea would be alive and well again, and any plan developed in their absence would give worse results than the one Red Robe had previously developed. Admittedly, Zorian mostly liked this option because it meant that the aranea were recoverable, but it would also explain a lot of things. Such as Red Robe's reluctance to use his soulkill spell more liberally. If 'soulkilled' persons were only gone for the duration of the time loop, that would neatly explain why he didn't use it on non-loopers – that would be entirely counterproductive, since he would still have to deal with them eventually, except that he wouldn't have the option to try out different tactics against them in the time loop, and couldn't find out what worked best.

Zorian could only hope that investigating the invaders would bring some answers to his questions. Though if everything else failed, he supposed he could always behave like Zach and simply launch an endless stream of suicidal missions aimed at breaking into the time magic research facility, since that was clearly relevant to the time loop somehow. He was bound to succeed eventually, right? If Zach was able to kill Oganj with that method then surely he could break into one measly facility.

Hmm, maybe he was thinking about this wrong – he should outright recruit Zach into the attempt. He was still a bit leery of contacting the other boy, both because that would mean revealing himself to Red Robe if he was monitoring Zach and because he was not at all sure Zach would be of any actual help to him at this point, but if he was reduced to metaphorically banging his head on the wall then he might as well involve someone who has spent gods know how many years in the time loop honing the skill at doing exactly that.

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Something to keep in mind when the time comes, anyway.

- break -

With the start of classes, Zorian decided to approach Raynie again while skipping on the mind magic training with Tinami. He still hoped to get to know the Aope heir better, but it was clear that trying to get close to both Raynie and Tinami at the same time was unfeasible, and Raynie seemed the easier one to handle. He did not recreate his initial request as closely as he had intended, but Raynie agreed to set up a meeting between them nonetheless.

Benisek had a spontaneous attack of clumsiness when he had tried to loudly congratulate Zorian and ended up sprawling on the floor of the classroom after tripping over his own two feet. It was a funny and mysterious thing, and Zorian hadn't had absolutely anything to do with it, but it sure was nice that he'd only made a scene out of himself instead of himself *and Zorian*, wasn't it?

Still, while he had high hopes that his attempt to get to know Raynie better would go better this time around, the fact was that interacting with her involved a lot of waiting time – he might as well try to get to know another one of his classmates in the meantime. And since female classmates had a high chance of producing the same kind of problems that Tinami had in the previous restart (because that was just how his luck worked, damn it), that someone should probably be a guy. Hmm, which one of his fellow male students looked interesting... oh! Edwin was really interested in golems, wasn't he? He had both of his parents in the golem-making business and couldn't shut up about them the last time Zorian had asked a mildly-topical question about the subject. Well... he might as well show Edwin his own golem designs and ask him what he thought. It would be interesting to see how his designs compared to ones made by someone hyper-focused on the field.

He waited until classes were over and then walked over to where Edwin and Naim were talking. Like always when he saw them together, he found it interesting how different the two of them were, both physically and in terms of personality. Edwin was a short boy, with pitch black hair and slightly darker skin tone that hinted his ancestors were relatively recent arrivals from the south, or perhaps even from Miasina. Naim was a relatively unassuming brown-haired boy of average height, distinguished only by the fact he was rather athletic and fit for your average student. Edwin was talkative and expressive, getting excited easily and often gesticulating heavily when he spoke. Naim was calm and restrained, like some sort of serene monk who had achieved enlightenment and could thus no longer be fazed by anything anymore. They were like the sun and the moon, yet somehow they'd ended up as inseparable.

He had to admit, he felt just a little bit intimidated by the prospect of approaching them. He was worried they would be suspicious of him, suddenly approaching them out of the blue like that. Zorian's previous relationship with the two was polite, but very, very distant. They had hardly known each other. Then again, that was an accurate description of his relationship with most of his classmates bar Benisek.

But he need not have worried. Edwin was naturally a friendly sort, and only got friendlier when he found out why Zorian was talking to him. And while he did sense some exasperation from Naim, that was solely because of the topic of the conversation rather than Zorian's presence as such. He was not as crazy about the topic as Edwin.

"That's a nice stabilizer for the kind of small doll this is intended for," Edwin said, tracing the relevant glyph sequences with his finger. "I don't think it would work for something larger and heavier, like a proper, man-sized golem made out of solid steel, but it's downright inspired for this. I'll have to remember this. I don't understand why you put these in, though," he said, jabbing his finger at the trio of compressed nodes he used to fine-tune the design. "They're inelegant and just plain unnecessary. The design works perfectly without them, and they don't seem to do anything except randomly tweak things with no rhyme or reason."

"Actually, the design *doesn't* work without those," Zorian said. "All of the prototypes were breaking down on me until I got sick of trying to make it work like it was supposed to and just forcibly tweaked things in the manner you're looking at. It works fine now, but it makes altering the design a real pain. I'm hoping you can help me find the underlying issue that's tripping me up."

Edwin gave him an incredulous look. "Wait... so this is, like, an *actual* design. Not just theory work? You've built one of these?"

"Well, yeah," Zorian said. "What would be the point, otherwise?"

"But isn't that super expensive?" Edwin asked curiously.

"No, it's just moderately expensive," said Zorian. Though in all honesty, his sense of what was expensive and what wasn't had probably gotten utterly skewed while he was in the time loop. "But I'm funding it out of my own pocket and no one can really stop me from spending my money on whatever I find appropriate."

"Oh no, I'm not criticizing you," Edwin grinned. "Hell, I wish I could do the same! You sure you don't need an assistant or anything?"

"It's... a possibility," Zorian said hesitantly. He could see that Edwin was very serious about his suggestion, and it surprised him. He had thought he would have to make an effort to get him to cooperate on specific projects, and here he was proposing partnership. "How much time can you dedicate to this?"

Naim gave a short, amused laugh. He was largely content to quietly sit on the sidelines thus far, but apparently he couldn't resist reacting to this.

"That sort of thing is all he does in his free time," Naim said with a light smile. "The real question is just how long your patience will last before you tell him to knock it off already and go home."

"Oh shut up, you," Edwin complained. "Like you are any better, mister training. You have your martial arts, and I have my golems."

"I have a lot on my plate lately, so I'm not exactly sure how much time I can dedicate to this. But I think I can spare a couple of hours every two or three days if you're up for it."

"I'm up for it," said Edwin. "For a chance to see how my designs work in practice, I'd even be willing to wake up before noon during the weekend. What's keeping you so busy anyway? The classes are only starting."

"Ah, well, I do a lot of independent studies," said Zorian. "The golem experiments you already know about, but I also do a lot of studying into spell formula in general, as well as alchemy, general purpose utility magic and so on. I do advanced shaping exercises and practice combat magic whenever I find the time."

"Sounds a bit unfocused," Edwin said. "Impressive that you manage to fit all of that into your schedule, though."

"Yes, and you still found time to join in the monster hunts," Naim noticed.

"I think of that as combat magic practice," Zorian said.

Naim gave Edwin an amused look. Edwin scowled back at him.

"What?" Zorian asked.

"When I told Edwin I wanted to join a hunter group to practice my combat skills in real situations, he called me an idiot. He said no one else would be dumb enough to risk their lives for *training*," Naim said, patting Zorian on the shoulder like an old pal. "Well, it seems there are two of us. Welcome to the idiot club, Zorian."

"Right," Zorian mumbled. "But wait, what other reason would a student like us have to join a monster hunter group?"

Naim shrugged. "Money. Fame. Duty."

Oh right, some people get paid to do that stuff. And aren't stuck in a time loop that made stuff like fame and duty utterly unattainable.

Before he could actually say anything, another one of their classmates suddenly decided to enter the conversation.

"Forgive me for butting in like this," said Estin Grier, suddenly speaking up from behind Zorian. "But I couldn't help but overhear your conversation. Do you mind if I comment a bit?"

There was a brief pause, as the three of them stared at the newcomer. In the end, it was Edwin that broke the awkward pause.

"We're just talking, man," Edwin huffed. "It's not a private club or anything. Go ahead and say whatever you want to say."

Zorian glanced at Estin, studying him for a bit. The boy was one of the students he once suspected might be Red Robe – well, just 'the third time traveler' back then, since he hadn't met the guy yet – since his family emigrated to Eldemar from Ulquaan Ibasa. If he was being truthful to himself, the boy's appearance had contributed to those suspicions – Estin was a tall, severe-looking fellow, with sharp facial features, dour expression, thick eyebrows, black hair and eyes of such dark brown they looked almost black too. Him being very withdrawn and rarely speaking unless prompted by someone or something did nothing to dispel the rather sinister impression he got from the boy.

But as far as Zorian was able to piece out, Estin was really just a normal, albeit extremely intimidating student. He had no links to the invaders and didn't really behave like someone aware of the time loop.

"Very well," Estin nodded seriously. "I was going to note that while most of the students didn't join the monster hunts *solely* in order to test and hone ourselves in the crucible of battle, they surely considered that an additional point in favor of participating. One can have multiple goals for deciding something."

"So... you also like combat magic practice?" Naim surmised.

"Yes," Estin agreed. "That is one way to interpret that. And with that, we can see that there are three of us who wish to test our combat skills and grow. Perhaps we could help each other. Have a meeting so we can trade news and personal styles, spar, and other such things."

For someone who stayed quiet most of the time, Estin sure was very verbose once he got going. Still, he was all for Estin's idea, since he'd been curious about their level of combat skills ever since he'd heard they participated in monster hunts. Naim was also interested, so after discussing it for a while, the three of them decided to ask Ilsa to let them borrow a training hall sometime in the future. One with actual ground, because apparently Estin's magic 'didn't work well with indoor environments', whatever that meant.

Estin also asked about Edwin joining them, but he wasn't interested. Edwin didn't like to fight, and had no interest in honing his combat skills. Zorian assured the golem enthusiast that he still intended to work with him on their golem designs.

He just had to figure out a way to fit these two new obligations into his already overloaded schedule.

- break -

Finding a training hall suited to their needs turned out to have been largely a non-issue – the academy had lots of training halls, and most of them were free to use by any student. Not all of them were billed as combat magic training grounds, but they all had basic safety wards in place and could be unofficially used as such. According to Ilsa, such 'misuse' of academy resources had been rampant for quite some time already, and was accepted as normal even by the teachers these days. As such, she recommended they just commandeer whatever place they needed for a few hours instead of waiting a week for the academy to give them an official time slot that may or may not suit them, at a training hall that may or may not be what they needed. They just had to make sure they weren't interrupting a sanctioned study group or some such.

Armed with that knowledge, they toured some of the available options until they found a training hall that was really just a walled-off and warded section of academy grounds, and thus had plenty of soil and rocks that Estin apparently needed to really show off.

Estin, as it turned out, was one of those people with an innate magical ability. Specifically, he could manipulate earth, rocks and similar materials in an unstructured manner, much like how Zorian could work his mind magic. Estin was rather cagey about the specifics of how his ability worked, since it was apparently his family bloodline and they were trying to keep it semi-secret, but it apparently wasn't immediately usable in its untrained form and Estin's current abilities were a result of considerable talent and a lot of work. In the handful of mock-fights they did to familiarize themselves with each other's skills, Estin used the ability exclusively to levitate large clumps of earth and rocks around himself, interposing them between himself and incoming spells with unerring accuracy. Well, if he could see the attack coming anyway – he didn't fare so well when Zorian made his magic missile loop back and come at him from behind his back. It also took some time for him to form a sphere, and he didn't seem capable of controlling more than four at any particular time, because when Zorian launched an eight-missile swarm at him he simply surrendered and asked him to tone it down in the future.

Still, it was a pretty useful trick he had there. Blocking with the spheres didn't seem to take any attention from Estin, allowing him to focus purely on peppering his opponent with offensive spells while his spheres defended him. If he had something more dangerous than magic missile in his arsenal, or if he could actually weave a homing function into those magic missiles, he might have actually posed a problem for Zorian.

Well, a problem for him so long as he held back so very badly. He decided in advance that the only spells he was going to display was his mastery of magic missile and basic shield spells, and that appeared to have been a good choice because he was beating both of them pretty decisively even with that. Especially Naim. As a first generation mage with no special magic or familial history to draw on, he was limited to the same 'magic missile and shield' combination that Zorian claimed to be limited to, but without the years in the time loop to hone his skills at those two spells to near-perfection.

If he were fighting against pre-time loop Zorian, Naim would have wiped the floor with him. He had more than twice the mana reserves that old Zorian had, and had clearly known how to cast those two spells years ago and had been slowly honing them all that time. On top of that, he was highly fit and agile, and in his fight against Estin he simply dodged every projectile that the other boy sent his way. The old Zorian couldn't weave a homing function into his magic missiles, and would thus not be any more successful than Estin in that regard.

But sadly for Naim, he wasn't fighting Zorian's past self, and thus ended up overmatched in his own game. Zorian's shield was impenetrable to anything the other boy could dish out, and dodging didn't work against Zorian's attacks.

After this, Naim and Estin decided to move on to hand-to-hand combat, probably specifically to spite and one-up Zorian. Knowing he was useless in a fist fight and would just embarrass himself, Zorian immediately bowed out of that, conceding he had no chance against either of them. They were both very smug about that.

Well, whatever, let them have their consolation prize. Better than being bitter at Zorian for besting them, that's for sure. In any case, the two of them had no less than five rounds of that, and it became obvious by the end that Naim was just plain better at that than Estin was, despite Estin's greater size and bulk. He would later find out that this was what Edwin had been talking about when he implied that Naim was just as obsessed with martial arts as he was with golems. He practiced martial arts religiously every single day, and was good enough to get invited to national contests in the field.

After that, they decided to share training methods and other advice – something that ended up surprisingly useful to Zorian, since both of them had found some neat little shaping exercises that Zorian never thought to look for, but which ultimately ended up with Zorian doing most of the talking and demonstrating. He expected as much to happen, though – he *was* the most experienced person among them, after all.

He left the meeting pleased with how it turned out. Considering that both Naim and Estin wanted to have another meeting like that, Zorian supposed they were pleased with it too, even though Estin was throwing him some sour looks when he thought Zorian wasn't looking. When they did organize another meeting, though, it wasn't just the three of them that showed up.

Briam, Kopriva and Raynie also showed up, wondering if they could join. Naim and Estin immediately dumped the decision on him, spontaneously designating him as the group's leader. Lovely. He accepted, of course. If nothing else, he was pretty sure that sending Raynie away would not reflect too well on him and his plans to get closer to her.

The problem was that all three of them were very raw and untrained when it came to actual combat magic. Briam was admittedly already a member of the hunting group, but that was solely because he had his fire drake familiar – his spells were almost entirely centered around supporting that living flame thrower. Kopriva was in the process of becoming a member in a hunting group, but also not due to combat magic as such – she got in on the basis of providing her team with alchemical bombs and potions, and was heavily reliant on them herself. Raynie probably had some of her shifter magic to fall back on if really pressed, but she was keeping that part of her a secret and her mastery of classical combat spells was nothing to write home about.

Somehow, they still managed to make the meeting work, but it involved a lot more work and responsibility than Zorian was comfortable with. Since he was 'the leader', it mostly fell upon him to help the newcomers out.

At the end of the meeting he was sought out by Raynie, who handed him an envelope with the time and place for their meeting. It was the same restaurant she had used last time, which he supposed made sense if the owner was a personal friend of hers like Kiana claimed.

While this was happening, Zorian was in the process of finalizing his agreement with the Filigree Sages. In exchange for transporting them to Cyoria, guarding their 'salvager crews', and transporting their finds back to their home, Zorian had secured three different mind magic teachers, one of which was supposed to be an expert in memory reading and manipulation. Said memory reading expert also agreed to probe the minds of up to five prisoners that Zorian brought to her and share the findings with him. Finally, and a lot less critically, Zorian was entitled to a portion of the things the aranean salvager crews found in the settlement – only important because it gave him the excuse to closely monitor their activities, ostensibly so they wouldn't cheat him out of his due, but really just so he knew how to properly 'salvage' the place in future restarts.

Embarrassingly, it took less than two days for the Filigree Sages to do what Zorian couldn't manage in an entire restart. Apparently the solution to finding the Cyorian web's treasury was to descend down the deep vertical shaft which the Cyorian aranea used as garbage disposal, except that halfway to the bottom was a hole in the wall that led to their treasury. The hole was big enough for an aranea to comfortably pass while lugging cargo, but Zorian would have to crawl to pass through the opening and into the main chamber. The shaft actually had numerous such tunnels of various sizes branching off of it, all but one of which were dead ends, but it wasn't that hard to narrow it down once you knew what the trick was.

According to the Filigree Sages, shafts like these were the 'secret' to the ease with which the aranea could penetrate even very deep layers of the dungeon without getting slaughtered in the process. While a shaft like that did allow for some of the horrid things from lower layers to reach you easier, they were very defensible and could always be collapsed on invaders if incursions got too frequent. In cases where such shafts didn't exist, aranea were liable to create them via application of stone shaping spells.

The actual treasury was... huge. A lot of space was taken up by huge spools of spider silk thread which were presumably the web's primary source of income. But there was also a lot of raw currency there, both in the form of paper notes as well as precious metals and gems. A fair number of alchemical explosives and potions were also there, including heaps of different healing potions that the salvage crews claimed were optimized for aranean biology. They were very excited about those, and wanted Zorian's help in contacting whoever made those – they seemed very dismissive about the possibility that the Cyorian aranea produced those themselves. There were quite a few spellbooks, alchemical recipe books, or spell formula blueprint compilations - many of them highly restricted, rare or very expensive. The Filigree Sages intended to cart all of them off back home for research purposes, but they agreed to let Zorian peruse them and copy a few choice bits for his own use. That would be

enough to keep him busy until the end of the restart, so he was perfectly happy with that.

Finally, the vault held a lot of stuff that was really only of interest to aranea. Leather pouches and straps that aranea used for carting things around, nutrient blocks that were the aranea equivalent of dry rations, things like that. The Filigree Sages, at least, seemed very intrigued by those, marveling at the Cyorian web's technological sophistication and ingenuity. It all looked very underwhelming to Zorian, but he supposed it wasn't easy establishing a technological society when you have no hands.

Amazingly, the treasury was only the tip of the iceberg. There was another secret part of the settlement he had never found - a secret magic research room, which could only be accessed by selectively disabling a few choice bits of the warding scheme in one of the rooms, and then passing through the newly-opened hole in the ceiling. Sadly, there was a further layer of defenses even beyond that, and neither the Filigree Sages nor Zorian had been able to crack the wards on the second door thus far. The leader of the salvagers was starting to toy with the idea of simply smashing the door, but worried that there was some kind of self-destruct mechanism inside that would destroy the contents if the entrance was forced open. That was how Filigree Sages secured their own magic research rooms, apparently.

Finally, there was a room for storing records, which Zorian hadn't noticed simply because it had never occurred to him to try and connect his mind to the one particularly lumpy wall in the back of the settlement. Apparently the bumps were 'memory stones' – magic items that could record thoughts and memories, and which were apparently the aranea's equivalent of written records. Personally, Zorian didn't think this method was nearly as convenient as written records, but the Filigree Sages claimed this was a much more natural and convenient method for them, so what did he know? The important thing was that the records room held information about most of the dealings and operations the Cyorian web had had with the humans on the surface, barring top secret ones, and that Zorian could possibly coopt some of their organization for his own purposes. The Filigree Sages had no interest in that, seeing as how they intended to simply cart off anything that wasn't nailed down rather than establish some kind of long-term presence, so they simply pointed the room to him and told him to do whatever he wanted with it.

Embarrassingly, Zorian remembered noticing the wall the first time he searched the place and thinking its unique texture might be significant... so he dug it up with alteration spells and was disappointed when he found nothing but solid rock behind it.

It was after one of these meetings with the Filigree Sages that Zorian came back to Imaya's place and found Taiven waiting for him. Curious. They didn't have another monster hunt scheduled until tomorrow. Maybe she wanted to talk about upping their tempo? They were extremely successful this time around, thanks to Zorian making full use of his future knowledge, so maybe she wanted to strike while the iron was hot. If so, he would have to disappoint her – he had too many things on his plate to devote more time to that.

The moment he got closer and she noticed him, however, he immediately realized she wasn't here about something like that. She was upset. She asked to speak to him in private so he led her to his room and locked the door. He had heavily warded it at the start of the restart with a permanent warding scheme, so there was no need to waste time on privacy spells.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"What's wrong, he asks," she mumbled.

Crap, she was upset at *him*. He didn't remember doing anything to make her upset, though.

She took out a light blue crystal and slammed it at the desk of drawers next to his bed.

"What's that?" she demanded.

"That's a rhetorical question, surely?" Zorian asked, baffled. "It's a piece of crystalized mana, of course."

"Yes, but why do you have an entire crate of that under your bed?" she demanded.

Zorian frowned. "You've been rooting through my stuff without my permission?"

"No, your little sister was," she said. "She and Nocka were playing princesses and making crowns out of crystalized mana for the two of them, Kana and Kosjenka. I walked in on them and asked them where they got those 'pretty stones' they were using."

Damn it, Kiri!

"Okay," said Zorian, taking a big breath to calm himself down. "Putting that aside for the moment, why has this gotten you so upset? Why does it matter if I've got a crate of crystalized mana under my bed?"

She balled up her hands into fists, seething in her own frustration and... self-loathing? What?

"Because everything!" she finally shouted, slamming her fist into the nearby wall and causing him to flinch back in shock. "Everything! Everything, everything, everything!"

"Taiven, please!" shouted Zorian, frantically trying to calm her down. "Just calm down, you're not making any sense!"

Was she... crying?

"How can you be so good at everything!?" she half-shouted at him, pushing him away. "You're good enough at alchemy that Kael praises you.

You create golems in your free time. You're so good at divinations that adult professionals accused me of lying when I told them how good at finding monster nests you are. And you're apparently good enough at combat magic that they're letting you teach your own group!"

"That's not—" Zorian tried to explain.

"Don't try to lie to me!" she snapped at him. "I know you're a better combat mage than me. You try to hide it, but I can tell. I'm not *stupid!*"

"I never claimed you are," Zorian assured her.

She ignored him.

"I worked on this for years," she cried. "I'm two years older than you and I worked *so hard!* Every day, every weekend, every moment I could spare. I made sure to focus; not spread myself too thin. I *live* for this. And then I find out that not only are you better than me in the one thing I focused on, you also have time for all these other things too! How!? How are you so much better than me? *What am I doing wrong!?*"

"Nothing!" Zorian hastily assured her. "You're honestly pretty damn awesome, Taiven, and the only reason I got even close to your level is because I'm a dirty cheater who cheats."

"Then show me how to cheat, too, damn it!" she shouted.

Before he could say anything in response to that, she... wrapped him into a hug and started sobbing into his shoulder. He awkwardly returned her hug after a few seconds, desperately trying to think of a way to handle this situation.

He couldn't think of anything at the moment. In light of that, perhaps it was a blessing in disguise that Taiven didn't look like she would stop crying any time soon.

44. A Show of Trust

Chapter 044 A Show of Trust

The idea that someone might connect all the dots and realize his abilities were way too developed for his age was not a foreign idea for Zorian. He tried to make sure that the abilities he showed to any one person or group were firmly within the realm of possible, but he always knew that a sufficiently curious and dedicated individual could track down enough clues to realize something didn't quite add up. There was no solution to this, as far as he could tell – not unless he wanted to spend most of his time performing an incredibly elaborate and boring act. Something which he wasn't sure he was capable of, and which probably wouldn't be too good for his sanity. Ultimately, he decided that the whole thing was largely a non-issue. As long as he wasn't caught doing something illegal, he could simply tell such amateur detectives to get lost. Well, he'd probably be more formal and courteous about it than that, but that was what it all boiled down to in the end.

He was even aware that it might be Taiven who caught on to him. In many ways, she was in an ideal position to do so. She was probably the only person who actually had a solid idea of what was normal for him and what wasn't, and was thus far more likely to realize just how abnormal and sudden his current skill growth was. He had been interacting with her pretty heavily lately, giving her lots of material to work with. And lastly, they'd known each other from before. They were... friends. She would feel entitled to an explanation of some sort, and would be a lot less hesitant about confronting him than someone else might be.

And yet, despite all of that, Taiven still managed to completely blindsight him in the end. He expected her reaction to be a lot of things, but never did he imagine she would break down into tears. It was just so unlike her. Yes, she was a very emotional girl, but she was also the sort to keep going forward and never let anything get to her.

He glanced to the left, where she was sitting on the bed beside him. She was a mess. She had stopped crying for a while now, but after-effects were still very visible – red face, runny nose, the standard stuff. Still, her emotions had leveled off in the past few minutes, so maybe she was ready to talk now?

“Feeling better?” he asked.

She lightly punched him in the shoulder as a response.

Yes, definitely feeling better.

“This sucks,” she complained. “I came here all fired up, ready to get some answers, and in the end we didn’t even have a proper fight. I just made a fool of myself. Why couldn’t you have been more angry and defensive and... Zorian-like?”

“Err, sorry?” he said, mildly confused. He was tempted to ask just how she defined ‘Zorian-like’ but decided it would be best if that remained a mystery for now. “To be fair, you weren’t behaving very Taiven-like either.”

“I guess,” she conceded. “Tell me something. Have you always been this talented? Have you been lying to me this whole time?”

“No,” he answered simply.

She scrutinized him for a moment, watching for any sign of uncertainty and shiftiness in his eyes and posture, before sighing heavily.

“Figures,” she said. “I thought as much. You’d have to be very dedicated to keep up the act for so long, and I can’t think of a reason why you’d bother. Still nice to hear it from your own mouth, though. Except... that only leaves one option on the table. That you overtook me in everything, including my specialty, in the few short months since we last saw each other. That...”

“You’re wrong,” Zorian said, shaking his head. “I did not overtake you. I am confident that if we fought, you’d be victorious nine times out of ten. You’re still better than me.”

If he didn’t just use mind magic to incapacitate her right from the start. Or ambush her. Or cover the battlefield in enough explosives to level a building. But he was pretty sure Taiven wouldn’t count those as ‘real’ victories anyway, and aside from that, his point still stood.

“It doesn’t matter,” she huffed. “With the kind of ridiculous growth you’re displaying, you’ll close that gap in a handful of weeks and then leave me in the dust. And you’ll have all that other stuff you’re tinkering with too. Am I wrong?”

“Sort of,” he said. She gave him an annoyed look so he immediately clarified. “It’s complex. There is no way I’ll be able to close the gap between us ‘in a handful of weeks’, as you said. But time flows differently for me than it does for you, so I’ll get a lot more than that.”

“What? What the hell are you saying?” she asked, giving him an incredulous look.

“We’ll come back to that later. Before I say more on the topic, I want to know what got you so upset about this,” he said calmly.

“Say what? Zorian, you can’t say something like that and just go ‘but we’ll talk about that later’. This... this demands immediate clarification! This will be bugging me in the back of my head until I get an answer!” she complained.

“I know,” Zorian said, smiling widely. “That’s why I’m not explaining anything until you tell me what’s going on.”

She glared at him. He only smiled wider.

“You’re evil,” she told him, looking away. “Besides, I already told you what’s bothering me and I’m pretty sure you heard me just fine. Everything I’ve done, all the skills I’ve spent my life honing... if you can surpass it all so easily, then what the hell have I been doing all my life? I don’t know what kind of cheat you used, and it honestly doesn’t matter because *it shouldn’t have been enough!* I’m good at this and I live for this, you can’t just decide one day to pursue the same field as me and then catch up to me in less than three months... while not even focusing on it properly! The only way that could be possible is... is if I were never really that good to begin with...”

“Oh, come on,” Zorian protested, quickly wrapping Taiven into another hug to forestall a second round of crying he could feel welling up inside of her. “That’s so totally ridiculous. Why would you doubt yourself like that? How does me being better erase your own accomplishments?”

“Accomplishments?” she asked incredulously, pushing him away. “What accomplishments? I work as a freaking teacher’s assistant, Zorian. For a non-magical class no less! Do you honestly think that’s what I hoped for when I graduated?”

He winced. So Taiven wasn’t as sanguine about that ‘temporary setback’ as she pretended to be... In retrospect, he shouldn’t be so surprised by that – while failing to secure herself a mentor immediately after graduation was by no means the end of the world, it was bound to be a severe blow to her confidence. Still...

“Taiven, aren’t your parents both battlemages?” Zorian asked. “How come they haven’t pulled some of their connections to find you a mentor, or even just a better job?”

“Oh, my parents would love to find me a mentor,” Taiven scoffed. “In fact, they already have someone in mind! He’s one of their old friends who’s long left the exciting parts of the business behind him when he lost his leg to a rock worm. He’s all about being cautious and minimizing risks, and he never does anything more challenging than routine pest extermination. Of course, that’s precisely why my parents want me to learn from him. If they had it their way, I’d be hunting mutated rats until I was thirty or something.”

“Ah...” said Zorian awkwardly. He seemed to have walked straight into a touchy subject there.

“Yeah,” Taiven said. “I love my parents, and I know they just want to keep me safe, but we just don’t see eye to eye there.”

“Okay, sorry to bring that up then. But really, if the reason you’re so upset is that you think you’re some kind of failure, well... you can rest easy. You’re an awesome combat mage. As awesome as you ever were, and nothing I do can change that.”

“I’m... not sure I really believe that,” Taiven sighed. “I couldn’t find a mentor. The team I made wasn’t going anywhere until I recruited *you* in it. Meanwhile, my parents keep insisting I’m not ready and that it’s a good thing I’ve had such a slow start of my career. It’s nice to hear some encouragement, but it rings a little hollow considering... you know.”

“Taiven, I’m not so good because you’re secretly bad and nobody bothered to clue you in until now,” Zorian said. “I’m so good because I had more than four years to hone my skills since we last saw each other.”

Taiven looked at him like he had grown a second head.

“That’s right – I’m actually older than you now,” Zorian said. “With that in mind, it is actually pretty amazing that I am *still* not capable of casually sweeping you aside in a fight. Sure, I could kill you instantly from an ambush, but if we clashed head to head in a battle of pure spellwork, I would have to use every trick at my disposal and still wouldn’t be guaranteed a win. *That* is why I keep insisting you’re awesome.”

“I don’t understand,” she said. “You don’t sound like you’re joking, but that’s what this looks like to me. How can you be older than me? That’s not how age works, Zorian.”

“Ah, did you already forget what I told you earlier?” Zorian asked, amused. “About how time flows differently for me than it does for you? I seem to remember you said it would keep bugging you until you get an answer...”

“Look, you know I’m not one for riddles and intellectual maneuvering,” Taiven said crankily. “Why don’t you just tell me what’s happening here, okay?”

Sure, why not.

“I’ve lived through this month before,” he said. “Many, many times. Every time I die, or on the night of the summer festival if I don’t, my soul gets wrenched back in time to the start of the month. It’s an endless loop that sees me getting stronger and more capable with each passing restart. Since you don’t retain your memories across restarts, my growth appears abrupt and inexplicable to you, but it’s really nothing more than your typical gradual improvement. Believe it or not, you’re the one that taught me a fair deal of that combat magic you’re so jealous of.”

“Shut up. I’m *not* jealous!” she protested.

He quirked an eyebrow at her. “Out of all of that, *that*’s what you chose to focus on?”

“Yeah, well, at least that one has an easy response,” she said. “What the hell am I supposed to say about the rest? Sure, it would explain your

skills perfectly, but it's just so..."

"Crazy?" Zorian offered.

"Yes," she agreed. "And also terrifying. You're basically saying I'll get killed in a few weeks and replaced with a one-month younger version of me. And that this isn't the first time this happened, it's just that I don't remember any of it. That's like something out of a horror story!"

"I prefer to think of it as just memory loss rather than death," Zorian said. "You're still you, you just lose a couple of weeks of your life."

"Repeatedly," she added.

"Repeatedly," Zorian confirmed. "I'm not saying it isn't terrifying, just that I don't think it's equivalent to death. Admittedly, I'm a little biased here – if I thought that the time loop murdered millions of people at the end of every restart, I'd have probably gone insane from stress a long time ago."

"Ah," she winced. "Sorry, I guess I'm still thinking of this as some kind of hypothetical scenario instead of something that's actually happening. Still, assuming you're not just pulling my leg here – and I swear to heavens, Zorian, if you are pulling my leg I'll glue your mouth shut with that really nasty gunk they use on dangerous prisoners – that's still pretty messed up. And also very unfair. Why are *you* the only person to remember anything?"

"I'm not," he said. "There are at least two other people looping with me, possibly more. One of them wants to destroy Cyoria."

She stared at him for a second before getting up from her position. For a moment he thought he had gone into too much detail too fast, and that she was going to walk through the door, but instead she started looking through his drawers, searching for something. He thought about telling her off for rooting through his stuff like that, but decided to wait and see what she was up to.

She eventually found an empty notebook and a working pen in one of the drawers, appropriated one of the larger and thicker books in his room and then reclaimed her seat on the bed.

She opened the notebook on her lap, the heavy book she took serving as an improvised table, and quickly scribbled something down on top of the page.

Huh, he'd never thought of Taiven as someone to take notes like that.

"There, I'm ready," she said. "Why don't you start from the beginning this time..."

- break -

In the end, he wasn't sure whether he had convinced her what he was saying was true or not. She took a lot of notes, asked even more questions, and then just left after telling him she had to think about things.

A far better outcome than he had expected to get, honestly. He really hoped she would overcome her disbelief and accept his story. It would be nice to have someone other than Kael to talk to about time loop related things. Not that there was anything wrong with the morlock boy, far from it, but sometimes he really wished he could get a second opinion about stuff.

Of course, it would hardly be him if that little bit of hope that came his way wasn't soon balanced out by something or someone popping up to complicate things. In this case, that someone was Xvim. When he arrived at his office the next day for their weekly mentoring session, he was informed that 'his' training group had been noticed and that Xvim was not happy at all that such an amateur had delusions about being fit for a teacher. In order to *make him* fit for a teacher, Xvim decided to step up their schedule – they now met three days a week instead of the usual one.

He really hated that man.

- break -

His talk with Raynie was going well, in his opinion. If nothing else, she was a lot more relaxed than she had been in the previous restart – she'd even ordered a glass of wine to go with her meal. Of course, he wasn't actually learning anything new from her, since she was telling him the same things she had told him the last time they'd done this, but that was to be expected. He couldn't exactly continue on where they last left off without explaining where he got that information, and he didn't feel like making something up. The week had been stressful enough, he was fine with just going with the flow like this.

"You know," Raynie said, taking a small sip from her glass, "I'm getting the feeling that you already know most of what I'm telling you."

Oops. It seemed Raynie was a bit more perceptive than he gave her credit for. He didn't think he was being particularly careless, so maybe she was just that good. Probably for the best that he'd never tried to lie to her, then.

"Sort of," he admitted.

"Why did you ask me something you already know the answer to, then?" she asked.

"So I can compare it with what I already know and see whether you were feeding me a bunch of lies or not," he said.

She snorted derisively. "I think you've confused me with one of your cat shifter friends. Don't you think it's kind of rude to assume the worst of people like that?"

"So you're saying your visit to our training group the other day *wasn't* about you testing me to see what I would do?" he asked with a smile.

"Ugh. It was so obvious, huh?" Raynie sighed. "Well, it wasn't *just* that... but yes, I wanted to see how you would treat me."

"And?" he asked curiously. "What's the verdict?"

"It's good," she said. "You didn't lash out at me for being so clearly underpowered compared to you and your buddies, but you also didn't drop everything to spend the entire meeting hovering around me, trying to 'help'. A fair treatment. I respect that. I don't want special privileges."

"So you intend to keep coming, then?"

"Yes. As I said, seeing your reaction was just a part of it. I wasn't lying when I said I wanted to get better."

There was a brief silence as Raynie seemed to be considering something.

"So, Zorian? I'm curious about something," she eventually said. "What is it that drives you to try so hard? I mean, you're near the top of the class at every subject, and you seem to be good enough for a fourth-year when it comes to combat magic. That had to have taken quite a lot of work. What are you trying to accomplish?"

Hum. What an interesting question. His reason for pushing himself at so many magical skills was, of course, that he very much needed them to survive... but that wasn't true for all of them. Some of them he pursued for personal reasons, because he had an interest in the field. The funny thing was, he no longer had any idea what he wanted to actually *do* with his life once he was out of the time loop. Most of the career paths he had been eyeing before he got stuck in the time loop no longer appealed to him. They were too modest and routine for someone of his current skills, and he would only get more capable as time passed.

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He could do better than that. But better *how*?

"Independence," he eventually answered. Raynie gave him a curious look so he hurried to clarify. "My family and I don't really get along. I want to get away from them as soon as possible. Buy my own place, get a source of steady income to support myself, things like that."

All true, except that he already had the skills to achieve all of that easily. But it was the best answer he could come up with on such short notice.

"I see," she said. "I apologize if I'm overstepping my boundaries, but why aren't you getting along with your family?"

"It's a bit personal," Zorian sighed. "And also a long story. But the short version of it is that my parents have never cared much for me. I am the third son and a disappointment."

"A disappointment?" Raynie asked curiously. "Do I want to know?"

"You probably already know this, but I have a really famous older brother," Zorian said.

"Yes, Daimen," she nodded. "What about it?"

"I'm not him," Zorian said simply.

"Ah," she said, drawing the word out. "It's *that* kind of disappointment. But shouldn't your other brother have the same problem, then?"

"He does, but he's more charming and social than me," Zorian shrugged. "He'll never measure up to Daimen, but he's ultimately alright in their book."

Also, Fortov was a selfish asshole and could go straight to hell for all that Zorian cared.

"Interesting," she said. "Let me present you with a hypothetical situation. Imagine it was not Daimen who came first. Imagine it was *you*, and your parents treated you as their chosen son. But then Daimen came about, and they promptly switched their favors to this new wonder child. Your time in the spotlight is over, and your parents fully expect you to move aside for their new darling. Do you think you would still have the same attitude you do now?"

Oh boy. He had a feeling this wasn't really a hypothetical situation at all.

"Well..." he said, swallowing heavily. "Truthfully, I don't think it's possible for me to know what this hypothetical me might think and feel. So much would change in my life that I wouldn't be the same person sitting here today. *However*, assuming someone magically switched me with this alternate version of me... yes, I would have the same attitude."

"You wouldn't try to fight for your birthright as the firstborn?" she asked.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "The alternate version of me, having experienced my parents' favor, might see some value in trying to get it back. *I* would still seek to strike out on my own as soon as possible. The scenario doesn't change anything for me."

"I see," she said, lost in thought.

Not long afterwards, they finished their talk and went their separate ways. As he walked back to Imaya's place, he wondered whether he'd answered her 'hypothetical situation' correctly.

She agreed to meet with him next week, so perhaps she would eventually explain what that was about.

- break -

He spent the rest of his Saturday working on the next golem with Edwin. This one was going to be a little more ambitious, being made out of steel and much bigger than Kosjenka – though not nearly as big as he had originally wanted, since Edwin had informed him that construction of golems taller than a meter in height was prohibited unless one had a special license. He had already broken that law in a previous restart, and he was definitely going to break it again in future ones, but there was no need to do so right now. He didn't think Edwin would report him, but he probably wouldn't want to help him break the regulations so brazenly. Them being arrested would be but a brief inconvenience for Zorian, but Edwin wouldn't think of it that way.

The next day he immediately left the house in the morning and descended into the tunnels below Cyoria. One way or the other, the magic research room was getting opened – if he could not bypass the wards on the entrance, the Filigree Sages would break down the door to get in, consequences be damned.

He didn't really agree with this decision. It had been less than a week since the Filigree Sages had started their salvaging operations, so he didn't see why they were in such a rush to get it open. Well okay, they did explain why they were in such a hurry – the Cyorian underground was highly coveted territory among the aranea, being a center of their magical and technological revolution and all, and they were worried that the neighboring webs would swoop in and muscle them out any day now. Of course, Zorian knew from previous restarts that the neighboring webs weren't going to come any time soon, but he couldn't exactly tell the Filigree Sages that he had seen the future and that their fears were unfounded.

But no matter, even if they ended up destroying the contents, it wasn't some great harm, at least from his perspective. He could always try again in future restarts.

He approached the dead settlement and he reached out telepathically to the guards posted by the Filigree Sages, announcing his arrival. Circle of Fortune and Golden Dust, the overseer of the Filigree Sages' expedition, moved to greet him.

[Welcome back, Zorian Kazinski,] the aranea greeted. He had told her previously to just call him by his name, but she hadn't taken him up on that. [Any news from the surface?]

[Nothing too important,] he said. [The monster incursions are beginning to peter out so the number of monster hunters stalking the Dungeon should see a sharp drop soon.]

[Good,] she said. [This place is outside their usual patrol routes but I still worried some of them would stumble upon it. Are you ready for the attempt?]

[I guess. I still think you're rushing, though.]

[We are,] she admitted. [I am not casting aspersions on your combat skills, but you're still just one mage. If nothing else, you cannot be in more than one place at the same time. We have to work quickly.]

They soon arrived at the room that held the research room. Six more aranea were already inside, two of them analyzing the wards while the other four waited for a command to break down the door. After conversing with the two aranean ward breakers for a few minutes, Zorian created a floating disc of force to stand on and lifted himself towards the hole in the ceiling where the entrance stood.

He took out the ward analysis device from his jacket – the 'pocket watch' that Taiven had been hired to retrieve so long ago, and whose absence clued him in to the existence of the treasury. He had located it inside the treasury uncovered by the Filigree Sages and, while he fully intended to dismantle it to see what made it tick, for now it was more useful to him intact, serving its intended purpose. He channeled a divination spell through the device and got to work.

From what he and the aranean ward breakers had been able to tell thus far, there were three main layers of defenses on the entrance. The first one would electrocute anyone touching the walls of the entrance. The second one would superheat the air inside it to lethal temperatures. The third one would bring down the entire ceiling on top of wannabe looters. All three had complicated and hidden trigger conditions, tied to a detection layer that neither he nor the aranean ward breakers could figure out.

Obviously, the third defense was the priority to disable, but it also appeared to be the defense most sensitive to attempted tampering. The Filigree Sages had worked out a way to neutralize it, but doing so would no doubt trigger all other defenses – both the two they were aware of, and any further ones they had yet to detect.

The ward analysis device really showed its usefulness, though – the detection layer, so byzantine and obscured from scrutiny in the past, simply unraveled under its power. It was... not as bad as he feared. He could do this. He contacted Circle of Fortune and told her he thought he could

disable the defenses. The aranea in the room exploded into a flurry of activity, mostly vacating the room in case he overreached and brought the whole room down. Circle of Fortune and the two ward breakers, however, remained. The ward breakers would help him in the attempt, while Circle of Fortune simply announced that she 'had to be there'. He didn't argue with her, too absorbed by the task in front of him.

Over the course of the next hour and a half, he and the two aranean ward breakers slowly and carefully neutralized the detection layer and then moved onto unlocking the door itself. The door itself had some additional defenses, relatively minor in nature but strong enough to really ruin their day if they triggered any of them – it was to his immense relief, then, that they managed to get it open without setting off a single one.

Unfortunately, that's when the defenses inside the room itself, completely separated from the main ward scheme and therefore undetectable from the outside, activated. If Zorian hadn't reacted immediately by erecting a shield in front of them while simultaneously directing the force platform they were standing on downwards at maximum speed, the incoming explosion would surely have killed them on the spot. Even with that, they ended up crashing painfully on the floor of the cave, dazing them for a couple of crucial seconds.

There was no time to sit down and recover, though, because the ruined entrance to the research room was starting to pump sickly yellow gas into the room and Zorian had no intention of seeing what effect it had when breathed in. He held his breath and quickly sealed the entrance with a bubble of force, stopping more gas from pouring in, before casting a spell he'd seen Kyron cast once during the invasion. He raised his hand into the air and concentrated on the gas, causing it to surge towards his outstretched palm, where it flowed into a small, compact ball.

Moments later, once he was sure he'd gotten all of the gas, he restructured the churning ball of poison gas into harmless, inert dust and took stock of the situation with Circle of Fortune, who was lucky enough to escape the incident without consequences. The two ward breakers were not so lucky – they weren't dead, but it was close. It turned out that aranea could not hold their breath like humans, so they ended up breathing in some of the poison gas in the room before he neutralized it. They would recover, but not any time soon, so Circle of Fortune asked him to drop them off back at the main Filigree Sages' settlement and pick up a new pair of ward breakers as replacements.

He later sent some ectoplasmic eyes and other remote sensors into the room to check it out, and found it completely wrecked by the explosion and coated in some dangerous looking green slime. Circle of Fortune just mentally shrugged, pronounced the entire thing a bust and ordered the entrance to the room walled off with alteration spells to prevent any further surprises coming from there.

[Don't beat yourself up over this failure,] Circle of Fortune told him. [If we had gone through with our original plan, those defenses would have still gone off, probably killing the entire assault team assigned to breaking down the door. Plus, we'd also have had to deal with other traps you ended up disabling before you ran afoul of that last set. This is a much better outcome.]

Well, that was one way of looking at it. He left Circle of Fortune to deal with the final cleanup of the situation and went off to find his mind magic teachers among the aranea.

It didn't take long for him to track them down to one of the isolated corners of the dead settlements, where the three of them were huddled together and engaged in telepathic conversation.

Before this restart, such intra-aranean conversations were completely opaque to him – telepathy was not language-independent, so unless the aranea 'spoke' in a manner he could understand, he was out of luck. Now, however, one of those teachers had begun to teach him how to understand and use the aranean telepathic language, so he could actually understand a few snippets. He was still a rank beginner at it, of course, but it was enough to understand the general topic of the conversation. They were discussing the three strongest neighboring webs – Burning Apex, Red Brand Bearers and Deep Blue – and the threat they would pose to the expedition if they decided to send a war party to Cyoria. Sadly, that was about as much as he could figure out from the conversation. The details totally escaped him.

He made a mental note to see if he could find something about the neighboring webs in the records room. It might be a good idea to visit them sometime and see what they had to offer.

[Greetings,] he sent to all three of them. [Am I interrupting something important?]

[We're just killing time,] Voice of Peace answered for them. She was the teacher that was supposed to help him learn how to interpret aranean senses, thoughts and memories. She'd decided on her own initiative that this included teaching him the aranean language, claiming he would never be really capable of making sense of the aranean mind without being fluent in it. She was also the most enthusiastic of his three teachers, often willing to work with him beyond their officially allotted time or go beyond the strict boundaries of what she was assigned to help him with. [Are you here for your daily lesson?]

[Yes,] he confirmed. [I know I'm a little early, but the project to open up the magic research room was a bit of a disaster.]

[We've heard,] said the aranea known simply as 'Hammerer' – a rather apt name, considering the aranea in question specialized in telepathic combat and favored powerful, unrelenting assault. [Circle of Fortune was always the reckless sort. At least you made sure nobody died. I must admit I didn't expect much from you when I heard you were supposed to guard us, but it seems you are actually useful from time to time.]

[Hammerer!] Voice of Peace protested.

[I just say it how it is,] Hammerer responded, not in the least bit contrite.

[Let's not bicker in front of our student. It sets a bad example,] said Memory of Sublime Glories, the last of his three teachers. Zorian got the notion that she resented him somewhat and considered the job of teaching a lowly human to be beneath her. Or maybe teaching in general, he

wasn't really sure. Either way, she was too professional to let that get in the way of her job, so he had no cause to complain. [Are we following the same program we did the last time?]

[I don't see why not,] Zorian said.

[In that case, we will continue where we left off yesterday. As an aside, I will not be able to help you further unless you acquire someone to serve as a, ah, *practice subject* for our next session. You indicated this would not be a problem?]

[No,] Zorian stated. [It won't be.]

It should be trivial to ambush one of the cultists and drag him down here for interrogation and memory magic practice. The only thing he was unsure of was whether to go for a low-ranking member who probably didn't know anything but whose disappearance would go largely unnoticed or if he should aim higher. He would have to think about it some more.

[Before we start though, I'd like your opinion about something.] Zorian said.

[Oh? What about?] Memory of Sublime Glories asked. [Is this about that massive memory packet lodged inside your mind, perhaps?]

Ugh. This was a problem with learning memory manipulation from the aranea – he had no choice but to let Memory of Sublime Glories inside his head somewhat. He was pretty sure he would detect any serious breach of trust on her part, but it was hard to prevent her from taking a sneak peek at his thoughts every now and then.

[I thought you said you'd refrain from doing that?] he asked her, annoyed.

[I barely looked,] she protested. [An aranean memory packet inside a human mind, especially one of that size, is just very noticeable. Besides, you were just thinking about letting me examine it in more detail, so why are you complaining about that? I'm about to get a much closer look at it anyway.]

Zorian sighed in defeat. He hated it when the aranea responded to his thoughts before he actually put them into words. It was just rude. Still, she was essentially correct – he needed her to take a look at the matriarch's memory packet and tell him what she saw, because to his own amateur mental senses it seemed to be degrading already.

If that was true, then he needed to know how much time he had.

After a bit more back and forth he reluctantly opened his mind to her and agreed to let her take a closer look at his mind so she could figure out what was happening with the memory packet. Thankfully, she seemed to behave herself, so the explosives around his neck remained inert and undetonated.

Eventually she withdrew from his mind and gave him the verdict.

[I'm afraid you're correct,] she said. [The boundaries of the memory packet have indeed begun to fall apart.]

His heart sank. That was precisely what he was afraid of. He wasn't ready. If he opened the package now, he doubted he would get anything out of it. But if he waited...

[How long do I have?] he asked.

[Hard to say. I've never seen a memory packet that big, so it's hard to judge how the decay will progress. It can stay stable for another three months, I think. Maybe four. If you really want to be certain, though, you'll have to open it within the next two months.]

[Isn't there anything that can be done to stop, or at least slow the decay?] Zorian asked desperately.

[Repairing memory packets is fairly easy if you're the one who made them,] Memory of Sublime Glories said. [Far less so if somebody else did. I don't think I could repair something that elaborate, and you would never trust me to tinker that deeply with your mind, anyway. I will teach you the basics of the skill, if you wish, but to get good enough to repair that thing you will have to secure a better teacher.]

[Any idea where I could find one?] Zorian asked.

[The Luminous Advocates probably have what you need,] she said. [I heard they can be hard to deal with, though. They drive a hard bargain.]

Ugh, those guys. Well, desperate times called for desperate measures. If nothing else, getting enough money to pay for their outrageous prices should be fairly trivial at this point.

[In that case, I'd like to postpone our current lesson plan for a bit and concentrate on memory packets and how to repair them,] he told her.

[Of course,] she agreed easily. [Here is what you do...]

- break -

He returned home later in the evening, tired and depressed. He had hoped to do some more work after his visit to the Filigree Sages, but between

the failure to secure the contents of the magic research room intact and the confirmation that the matriarch's memory packet had begun to unravel, he didn't feel like doing anything.

"Oh, you're back!" Imaya exclaimed when he entered the house. "Your friend has been waiting for you for a while now. She's in the basement with Kael right now. Do you want me to call her or are you going to get her yourself?"

His friend? Her?

"Taiven?" he guessed. Imaya nodded. Huh, that was a lot earlier than he had expected to hear from her. This could be either very good or very bad. "I'll go see what she wants."

"You know, the last time your 'friend' visited you, she left the house looking like she had been crying," Imaya said casually.

"Is there a reason why you're pronouncing 'friend' like that?" Zorian asked her suspiciously.

"You're not breaking young girls' hearts, are you, mister Kazinski?"

"Ugh. There is nothing like that between me and Taiven, okay? And besides, if anyone is the heartbreaker here, it's definitely Taiven," he protested.

She gave him a curious look.

"I'd prefer not to talk about it," he said, shaking his head.

Thankfully, she didn't press the issue, so he went to the basement to talk to Taiven and see what she decided. He found her talking with Kael about the time loop, comparing notes and discussing time travel mechanics.

"So does this mean you believe me?" he asked her hopefully.

"I suppose," she said. "This is still all very fantastical and unreal to me, but everything you told me seems to check out. Or at least the parts I can actually check do. And Kael here seems convinced you're telling the truth, too. So yeah, I guess I kind of believe you."

"Is there anything you can tell me that would help me convince you in future restarts?" Zorian asked.

"Kael and I talked about that for a while," she said. "I don't know. Any personal information I could give you would just creep me out if you started spouting it off all of a sudden – I'd sooner decide that you've been spying on me or that you're reading my mind than that you are a time traveler. If you just tracked me down at the start of the restart and started showing off everything you've learned inside the time loop, I'd definitely accept that something strange is going on, but I'd probably think you're a shapeshifter in disguise or possessed. It's only because I interacted with you pretty heavily for a whole week that I never doubted that you're... well, you."

"How about this then: I start the next restart the same way I did this one, joining your group and all, wait for a few days for you to get annoyed with my growth spike, and then confront you about it on my own initiative before you have a chance to get really fed up with it," Zorian tried.

Tension that he never even noticed until that moment seemed to drain from her shoulders and she sagged in relief.

"What?" he said, frowning.

"I... was afraid you'd just keep duplicating the circumstances that led me here over and over again," she admitted. "Even if I don't retain memories of it, I don't want to be repeatedly reduced to tears. It was humiliating once, thank you very much."

"Truth be told, I wasn't okay with the idea of repeatedly making you cry, either," he told her. "So that option was definitely off the table, even if you were okay with it."

She looked away, embarrassed.

Kael cleared his throat to get their attention.

"I hate to break up the moment, but we have much to talk about," he said.

"Yes," Taiven agreed, relishing the chance to change the topic. "First of all – Zorian, why haven't you contacted Zach yet? This 'Red Robe' of yours is a threat to you both, and you said yourself that you think he's at the center of all this. It only makes sense to work together. I don't understand your reluctance to talk to him."

"First of all, there is a possibility that Red Robe is monitoring Zach and tracking his movements. If so, then contacting him would mean revealing myself to Red Robe," Zorian said. "Secondly, I suspect that the moment I contact Zach, my whole schedule is getting thrown into the trash can. I have some fairly urgent things I need to do in the near future, I can't drop everything to hang out with Zach. Even assuming he is fairly understanding of my goals, he'll still probably insist on taking part in my activities. Since the things I'm doing require subtlety, which he entirely lacks, that's a problem. All in all, I just don't think it's a good idea to involve myself with him at this moment."

"So, what, you intend to avoid a potential ally just like that?" Taiven asked.

"Only until I'm done investigating the invaders and I can get the matriarch's memory packet open," Zorian said. "After that, I will probably go out and meet with him to see what he has been doing and whether we can help each other."

"Huh. Alright," she said, somewhat mollified. "That makes more sense. To be honest, I thought you'd be a lot more stubborn about this than that. Kael said you had some sort of grudge against the guy, and I know how you are with your grudges."

"Well, Kael is wrong. I don't have a grudge against Zach," he said, giving the white-haired boy an annoyed look. "But whatever. One problem solved. What else do we need to talk about?"

Kael ripped out a page out of his notebook and offered it to Zorian.

"We made a list," Kael said with a smile. "Taiven had a lot of suggestions."

Zorian accepted the piece of paper with a sigh and began to read. She really knew how to pick a day to drop this on his head, didn't she?

When it rains, it pours.

45. Fine Structures

Chapter 045

Fine Structures

Zorian was starting to realize he didn't understand Taiven nearly as well as he thought he did. And it wasn't just the surprising amount of insecurity that lurked behind her seemingly endless optimism and confidence that made him think that – it was also the amount of thought and consideration she put into his time loop situation. When he told her about his situation, she actually listened to him without interruption, and even took notes, and then later came back with a list of questions and ideas. This was very atypical behavior for her. Taiven was pretty much a prime example of the 'less thinking, more action' philosophy, and she even admitted that she still wasn't entirely convinced about the whole 'time loop' thing, so he was rather baffled about her motives and thought processes.

Still, while the list she had made with Kael's help was kind of surprising, it contained nothing particularly revolutionary, and all of the points could be boiled down to four basic questions. Why didn't he get help from more people around him than her and Kael? Why didn't he tell the government or academy authorities what was going on and get their cooperation? Why was he pursuing so many magical fields instead of properly focusing on them, one at a time? And lastly, why didn't he try harder to develop his combat magic!?

Zorian found the last one especially amusing. It was only a few days ago, after all, that Taiven was breaking down into tears over his 'incredible combat skills', yet now she was saying he should have put *more* effort into them.

You just couldn't satisfy some people.

Alas, Taiven didn't find her complete turnaround of opinion nearly as amusing as he did. Zorian's logic for putting combat magic practice squarely in the 'secondary goal' pile – namely, that very few of his problems could be solved through direct violence and that he just wasn't terribly suited for combat magic in the first place – had been summarily rejected by Taiven, who decreed that she would be helping to bring him up to snuff in that regard. Through sparring.

Constant, daily, dangerously serious sparring. He'd apparently had no idea what he was getting into when he'd decided to go along with her idea, because there was a huge difference between sparring with Taiven when she thought he was just a precocious amateur with a couple of tricks and sparring with her when she considered him a serious threat right from the start and wasn't afraid of hurting him. She was vicious and merciless, and he was honestly afraid she would end up killing him if he didn't give it his all, despite all the safety wards embedded into her family's training hall. It was just a bit too intense for his liking.

Maybe she was still a little bitter about him improving so much in so short a time.

"Are you ready?" she asked him, twirling her combat staff playfully in her hands.

"No?" Zorian tried. He'd just finished another frustrating session with Xvim, and didn't get to rest at all before coming over to Taiven's place. The last thing he wanted to do right now was get smacked around in the name of training.

"Too bad," Taiven snorted derisively. "We're starting. Go!"

Yeah, he didn't think that would actually get him anywhere. He immediately threw himself to the side, dodging her opening shot. Which wasn't a magic missile or anything reasonable like that – no, she opened the battle with a powerful beam of force. 'Force lance', as the spell was called, was her new favorite when fighting him. He knew better than to try to shield against it this time – the beam was practically designed for cracking simple force barriers, focusing an immense amount of penetrating force on a tiny patch of the shielding surface. Some of the stronger, more advanced shields could withstand the beam, but nothing in Zorian's arsenal could truly stand up to it. He had learned that lesson very painfully in the first few spars he'd had with Taiven during the past few days, and he still had bruises all over his chest and arms to prove it. Even at their highest setting, the safety wards couldn't blunt the power of the spear-like beam completely.

No, the only realistic defense he had against that spell was moving out of its way. The good news was that beam spells like those couldn't home in on targets, so dodging them was an option. The bad news was that a beam traveled blindingly fast and was really hard to evade at the distances he and Taiven fought at. Plus, he kind of sucked at dodging.

The last few days had forced him to learn quickly, though, and in this particular case he was fast enough to move out of the beam's path.

He responded immediately with a gust of wind, trying to knock her off-balance and possibly blind her. Sadly, this was not the first time he'd tried that and she simply countered it with a weather shield before throwing a fully-powered fireball at him. Gods, she really wasn't playing around, was she? He fired off a dispelling wave to negate it, since the alternative would be to tank it with a much more expensive aegis. Besides, cost concerns aside, the spherical shield would leave him immobile while in place, and Taiven would be sure to capitalize on that.

A force lance that quickly followed the fireball told him that this was indeed her likely plan – if he had stood still and tried to tank the fireball, the force lance would have caught him flat-footed.

He threw a small swarm of magic missiles at her, all of them on a very direct trajectory towards her. They were just bait, really, intended to take advantage of a certain predictable maneuver Taiven liked to do, where she countered such attacks by firing a massive battering ram of force that not only swept the attack aside, but also acted as a counter attack at the same time. That's why he immediately followed up his barrage with a ray

of electricity, which would be completely unaffected by her blast of force.

He guessed her response well this time. She had tried to respond with a force battering ram, but then caught onto his plan half-way through and dodged the beam he'd sent at her. As for himself, he used the disturbance in her attack rhythm to initiate a short-distance teleport, transporting himself behind her back. She noticed him, of course – she was probably using that mana-sensing trick she'd taught him so long ago – but she could do little else but raise a hasty aegis to shield herself against the blast of force he'd sent at her. He followed this up with a force lance, intending to give her a taste of her own medicine, but she expertly dodged that and sent an eight missile swarm at him, forcing him to fire another dispelling wave to deal with them. He kind of wondered why she still kept bunching up her projectile swarms together like that when she already knew that allowed him to take them all out with a single counter-spell. Maybe she couldn't? He knew he had better shaping skills than her, so maybe that kind of fine control over one's projectiles was beyond her.

He teleported again to evade another battering ram of force and then sent his own missile swarm at her, each missile following its own exotic trajectory to make them hard to track and take out.

The battle raged like that for another couple of minutes, before Zorian was forced to concede defeat due to running out of mana. It was a good fight in his opinion, if nothing else because he didn't get any new bruises this time around. Taiven complained, of course, lecturing him about pacing himself better, but the simple truth was that she was driving him way too hard for him to be conservative with his mana use. He would rather be too frivolous with his mana use and lose due to exhausting himself than end up on the receiving end of an offensive spell again.

"You know, running out of mana like that in a real battle basically means you die," Taiven said.

"And getting speared through the lung by a force lance doesn't?" Zorian countered.

She stared at him. "Okay, yeah, you got me there."

She walked over to a nearby bench and motioned him to sit beside her.

"Have you thought about that list Kael gave you?" she asked.

Of course he had. He even discussed with her some of the points she'd brought up over the past few days, although he suspected she didn't like his answers all that much. Interpreting her question as a demand for a more long-winded, comprehensive explanation, he started telling her about the reasoning behind his decisions.

His reasons for not getting help from more people, and especially official authorities of any sort, were simple to explain. The more people he told about the time loop, the greater the chance that they would let something slip to the wrong person and lead Red Robe back to him. Unless they had something he really needed, and which he simply couldn't get by any other way, it was best to keep them ignorant of the time loop. Truthfully, even telling Taiven was probably a pointless risk. He told her about the time loop for the same reason he kept taking Kirielle with him to Cyoria, despite his little sister being nothing but a huge liability and time sink – he wanted someone familiar to talk and confide to.

He kept his mouth shut about that last detail in his explanation to Taiven, though – he doubted she would appreciate hearing that. Instead he focused on the fact that virtually no one would be willing to believe him about being a time traveler, and that convincing them would probably take weeks and could easily cause quite a stir. This was especially true in regards to her ideas about contacting the city government or academy authorities. Zach had already tried to notify them about the time loop and had never been taken seriously – there was no reason to think Zorian would be any more successful at it than Zach was.

"Didn't you say Zach is kind of an idiot?" Taiven asked curiously.

"Sort of," said Zorian. "But in this case, I think he's far more suited to the task than I am. There is no way I'd ever be as trustworthy to authority figures as Zach."

"Ah, yes, the natural mind magic thing," Taiven said.

"Well, that too, but I was actually thinking about how I'd probably never be as forthright and honest about things as Zach probably was," he admitted. "I'd hide things and people would notice and be wary of me as a result."

Taiven gave him a long, searching look. "You're not even telling *me* everything, are you?"

"I'm telling you most things," he said. "Everything I think is relevant."

She stayed silent and gave him an annoyed look.

"Anyway," he said quickly, looking to change the subject, "even ignoring that, contacting Cyoria's authorities is a particularly bad idea because there is obviously someone high in the administration that is cooperating with the invaders. I'm almost certain by now that whoever is leading the Cult of the World Dragon also has a high position in the city government – it would explain why the members of the cult keep getting lucrative contracts from the city and exemptions from all sorts of normal regulations – and it would make sense for Ibasans to also have someone in their pocket."

"I keep forgetting that part," Taiven admitted. "Which is pretty bizarre, now that I think about it. Finding out that some crazy cult has thoroughly infiltrated our city government is honestly one of the scariest parts of your story, but the part where I'll apparently get erased out of existence at the

end of this month sort of drowns out everything else.”

Ouch. She was still fixated on that. He did his best to move the conversation along, tackling her concerns about spreading himself thin next.

Her complaints that it would be better for him if he picked one or two things to really focus on held merit. Unfortunately, there was a reason why he was not doing that - he kept encountering various emergencies during his time in the time loop, which forced him to often drop topics or push them into the background to accommodate the newest priority that just sprung up on him. The second issue basically amounted to personal weakness – he could only focus on something for so long before he got thoroughly sick of it and had to do something else. Since he aimed to be a generalist mage anyway, he didn’t think of this as some huge issue he had to work on, but he understood why a tightly-focused spellcaster like Taiven would be annoyed with him for that.

“As for not trying harder at combat magic, well... we already discussed that topic enough, I think. You already know my opinion on the matter,” he told her.

“Yet you keep coming to these spars anyway,” she noted. “I know I was kind of pushy about it, but it’s not like I can really *make* you come if you decided to put your foot down.”

“Well, I *do* want to get better at it,” he shrugged. “No reason to refuse free practice. I just wish you would tone it down a little.”

“Oh, come on. What are you afraid of?” Taiven scoffed. “Aren’t you a big, bad time traveler that can’t really die?”

“Treating death as a nuisance could easily become a habit that would kill me for real once I’m out of the time loop. Unless there is a pressing need for it, or some downright amazing opportunity, I’d like to avoid dying too much,” Zorian said. “Also, you *do* realize that the time loop only resets when Zach dies, not when I do? If you end up killing me, you’ll have to live with the consequences ‘till the end of the month.”

The look she gave him told him that no, she did not realize that.

Yup, that was more like the Taiven he knew.

She mumbled something about sensitive little flowers and then leaned back on the cold wall behind them. Rather unhealthy, that.

“You know, you don’t have to rely on me to help you with combat magic,” she said. “There are quite a few combat magic instructors in Cyoria. With the amount of money you have at your disposal and the ability to keep spending it over and over again, you could get instruction from all of them. Combat magic may not be a priority for you, but keep that in mind. This is a killer opportunity, and you will never get anything like it outside of your time loop.”

Zorian frowned. “What do you mean?”

“A lot of mages simply won’t teach you if they know you’ve been taught by their rival or competitor,” she told him. “As in, they’ll refuse out of principle. There is quite a bit of difference in teaching your personal tricks to some young mage who is just starting out and teaching them to this extremely talented guy who has absorbed the teachings of several veteran mages. Hell, some mages won’t want to have anything to do with you if you seem too competent, period. They don’t want to create a competitor that will overshadow them and steal lucrative opportunities from them in the future.”

“No offense Taiven, but Daimen never had any trouble securing powerful teachers,” Zorian said. “If anything, the number of people who wanted to mentor him increased as his talent became known to people.”

“I don’t doubt it,” she said. “But I guarantee that some doors also became closed to him at the same time. For you, that doesn’t have to be the case – not only will prospective teachers never know who else taught you in the past or how good you really are, you can also do things like sign apprenticeship contracts without them really binding you to anything. Hell, you could accept some really shitty deals if it meant getting some of the really deep secrets people have. Just... think about it, okay?”

“I am thinking about it. I’ve been thinking about that sort of thing since the start of the time loop. It’s just that more pressing issues keep cropping up and eating into my time,” he said. “I’m surprised you’re bringing that up, though. Doesn’t that bother you? I mean, we’re basically talking about weaseling out the secrets that these people have spent their life gathering without compensating them in any way.”

“Well, yes,” she said. “But realistically speaking, I’d do it in a heartbeat if I was in your place. And frankly, so would nine tenths of those same experts you’re feeling sorry for. Are you seriously telling me you haven’t been doing something like that all this time?”

“Sometimes,” Zorian said. Ilsa stood prominently in his mind, since he’d flat-out become her apprentice to get her to teach him some of her stuff. “But I have been keeping a mental list of people I ‘owe’ in this way, and I was thinking of doing something for them once I get out of the time loop. It’s already quite a long list, though, and I don’t know whether I can even do anything for some of them...”

“Ugh,” she grunted, looking away uncomfortably.

“What?” he asked.

“You’re a really weird guy, Zorian,” she complained. “You can be such a selfish jerk at times, and then you say stuff like that and I realize I don’t understand you at all.”

"The feeling is mutual, Taiven," he told her with a smile.

"What, that you think I'm a selfish jerk or that you don't understand me either?" she asked.

"Both," he said. Man, she really walked into that one...

She made an outraged sound and gave him a light shove.

"You're violent, too," he added.

"Whatever," she said, getting up from the bench. "I'll bring Grunt and Mumble to our next spar so you can have some variety. I think I can also call in a few favors from my former classmates who also went for combat-related careers and have them fight you a few times as well. Your spellcasting is technically flawless but you need better combat reflexes."

Zorian gave her a curious look.

"Why are you being so proactive about this?" he asked her. "I know you hate me bringing it up, but it was only a few days ago that you hated the idea of me surpassing you in your own field. Why did you change your attitude so drastically? You don't even fully believe in the time loop story, according to your own admission."

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"Because your life is on the line," she told him seriously. "That's the most important thing I got from your explanation. If it weren't for that... well, I'd be hell of a lot more jealous and bitter about all this. But it's not just an advantage, you have a heavy responsibility on your shoulders, and someone is trying to get you killed. In light of the chance that you might not make it out of this alive, all of my frustrations seem so... petty in comparison."

Huh... was *that* why she was so insistent he needed to work more on his combat skills?

"Don't die, okay?" she said when he didn't say anything for a while. "You're the best friend I have."

Zorian fidgeted uncomfortably, unused to that kind of confession and mystified as to how he should respond to it. The snide, cynical part of him felt that was a pretty sad admission. He hadn't exactly been a nice person in his pre-loop days, and he had nursed a grudge against her ever since she'd laughed at his love confession. If the invasion and the time loop had never happened, would he have gotten over that in time to salvage their friendship? Or would he have continued to push her away until she eventually gave up on him, completely unaware that she apparently considered him her best friend?

"I'll try not to," he eventually told her. He couldn't promise anything. Telling her that he would definitely live and that she had no cause for concern would be a lie and they'd both know it. "Say, Taiven, did you put some thought into how we can make this time loop work to your benefit? You know, like Kael did for his alchemy?"

"Well, no," she said, shaking her head sadly. "It's useless, isn't it? Practicing combat magic requires shaping skills and routines that cannot be transferred via written notes. What could either of us possibly do to help the other Taiven?"

"I could teach you various shaping exercises and note which ones work best for you, though," Zorian said. "I could show you the different combat spells I found over the restarts and note which ones you handle the best and what the most effective way of training you in them is. Kirielle's magic lessons are at least two times more effective now than they were when I first tried to teach her, so it should be utterly trivial to create a training program that would let you grow twice as fast as you would without it."

"Just how much stuff do you think you can cram in one month?" Taiven asked skeptically.

"We won't know 'till we try it, will we?" Zorian countered. "And besides, there is no reason why the final training plan has to be limited to a month. Does *every single new thing* you learn necessarily build atop things you already mastered?"

"No?"

"There you go. That means we can break down a training plan into month-long chunks and optimize them separately. We can get at least a year that way, especially if you branch out in some necessary support skills that you've been ignoring. Your lack of divination skills is really felt in any restart where I decide not to join you, for instance."

Taiven looked torn. She was clearly excited about the idea but at the same time she felt... guilty about it?

"I don't know..." she said. "That sounds really time consuming, and you don't really get anything out of it. You said yourself that you already have too many things vying for your attention."

She was right, of course. Still, he owed her *something* for all the help she'd given him in the past, and this seemed like a perfect way to pay her back. He would find the time if he could. Maybe not a lot of time, but still.

"I was going to look into combat magic-related shaping exercises anyway," he said. "It might actually be a better idea to go through those together

with you than to study them alone. You would know which ones are more useful better than I would. And besides, who says I have to hover around you all the time – I’m sure you can do a lot of testing yourself and then write a notebook for me to transfer into the next restart like Kael is doing. Or just tell me what you found out face to face before the summer festival.”

It didn’t take much convincing before Taiven was fully on board with the idea. In a way, this was what she had asked of him back when she lost her composure – to ‘show her how to cheat, too’. He promised to bring an initial batch of spells and shaping exercises tomorrow on their next spar and then left to take care of other obligations.

He wondered how long it would take for her to realize that she had agreed to spend day after day doing shaping exercises. He’d have to practice his Xvim impersonation for tomorrow.

- break -

In the ruins of the aranean settlement beneath Cyoria, Zorian patiently waited for Memory of Sublime Glories to finish memory probing the Ibasan mage he had captured and brought to her for interrogation. He had ventured deep into invader-held underground to retrieve this man, and was fortunate to stumble upon one of the middle-ranked leaders of the invasion force, so he had high hopes for the result of Sublime Glories’ memory dive.

In the meantime, he kept floating above the cavern floor not far from the aranea and her victim, holding himself aloft with the personal levitation exercise. In his left hand he held one of several small stones, which he kept disintegrating into dust in similarly non-structured manner. He had mastered both shaping exercises a long time ago, but the mild disruption effects present this far underground made them mildly challenging and thus a nice way to pass the time.

He was starting to run out of rocks when the aranea finally withdrew from the invader’s mind and approached him.

Obviously, he had not told Memory of Sublime Glories anything about time travel, so he was not surprised that her report didn’t mention anything remotely related to that. Still, she found out plenty of things of interest.

[The Ibasons are scared of you.] Memory of Sublime Glories said. [Well, not you personally, but the human nations on this continent are a source of constant worry for them. The technological revolution you are undergoing has not taken root on their island, and they fear they will gradually become powerless and irrelevant as time goes by. Since your nations have recently gone through several rounds of self-destructive wars and a deadly epidemic, and are at their most disunited in a long while, a lot of Ibasons feel that the time to strike at you is now. There has been a lot of agitation to launch some kind of invasion, but apparently there is also an influential faction that thinks such an invasion would be utter suicide and advocates trying to reopen diplomatic links to the continent. In light of that, this attack seems to have two main goals. The first is to make this nation look weak to others, thereby making any potential invasion by Ulquaan Ibasa look more attractive to their less warlike kin back home. Such a perception of weakness could also possibly ignite another continental war that would weaken everyone on the continent further. The second goal is to destroy any chance of official peace between Ulquaan Ibasa and Eldemar, thereby making the position of the reconciliation faction untenable.]

[They’re not scared that Eldemar might respond to the attack by outright invading Ulquaan Ibasa?] Zorian asked.

[Ulquaan Ibasa is remote and inhospitable, and Eldemar has continental rivals to worry about.] Memory of Sublime Glories said. [They expect a response, but nothing substantial. A series of raids at most.]

Zorian wasn’t so sure about that. Eldemar had been prospering for some time now, and the government was quite proud and aggressive. He wouldn’t put it past the current royals and the Noble Council to launch a full scale invasion of Ulquaan Ibasa out of sheer principle, costs be damned. Especially since the Ibasons were diplomatically isolated and not part of the byzantine web of alliances that prevented the larger Splinter States from simply attacking the smaller ones and absorbing them through force of arms.

As the aranea continued with her findings, however, it became obvious that the Ibasons had not simply relied on empty hope to discourage such an invasion. Sometime near the beginning of the month, just before the start of the time loop, the Ibasons had managed to overrun Fort Oroklo without alerting Eldemar that it had changed hands.

Situated on a small island to the northeast of Eldemar and named after the general that had defeated Quatach-Ichl’s army at the conclusion of the Necromancer’s War, Fort Oroklo was a small but important installation that served the dual purpose of being a monitoring station for keeping an eye on Ulquaan Ibasa and a supply base for Eldemar naval patrols. The Ibasons apparently called it ‘Fort Dagger’, because they considered it a knife pointed straight at their throat. So long as Eldemar held Fort Oroklo, they had a perfect staging ground for any raid or invasion on Ulquaan Ibasa.

Before Eldemar could launch an attack on Ulquaan Ibasa, it first had to retake Fort Oroklo – a heavily-warded fortress situated on an excellent defensive position.

[Some of this doesn’t make any sense,] Zorian complained. [According to you, the Ibasons are transporting their forces straight from Ulquaan Ibasa to Fort Oroklo, then from Fort Oroklo to some unknown point in the Sarokian Highlands, and then from there to beneath Cyoria.]

[Yes, what of it?]

[That’s not enough stops for an effective teleportation chain,] Zorian said. [Only two stop points for a journey of such distance, with the final destination point being deep underground to boot? There is no way that’s really what’s happening. If they were sending letters or small packages

maybe, but no way could you transport an army like that. Even if Quatach-Ichl is the best mass teleporter in the whole damn world, the mana costs for such long jumps would be completely impractical on that scale.]

Admittedly, such a small number of stops would do much to explain how they could transport such an army through Eldemar territory without being discovered by Eldemar, but...

[They're not teleporting in the manner we've seen you do it,] Memory of Sublime Glories noted. [They are using some kind of stone construct to open a dimensional passage between two points. Like a door to another land.]

What?

[Can you describe that 'door' in more detail, please?] Zorian asked, frowning.

Instead of answering with words, the aranea promptly projected an image of said 'door' that she pilfered from the man's mind straight into his mind.

It wasn't a stone arch like he expected – instead, it was a collection of stone 'bars' arranged into a form of a large, skeletal icosahedron. Suspended in the middle of this bizarre geometric construct, like a window cut into the very air itself, was the dimensional gate. It appeared circular at first glance, edges marked by a warped, blurry outline that looked as if someone had ran a finger through a wet painting and smudged all the colors together. As the aranea helpfully rotated the image, however, it became obvious that the gate looked circular no matter from which direction it was seen. It was spherical.

Well... he supposed that answered some things. The gate spell was pretty much the pinnacle of dimensional magic, requiring both a lot of mana and extreme shaping skills to pull off successfully, but the invaders did have an ancient lich on their side. If anyone could casually open a gate, it would be Quatach-Ichl.

But...

[They were inspired by ancient artifacts called Bakora gates,] the aranea added. [Though unable to actually figure out how the Bakora gates work or how to activate them, they realized that the 'icosahedron' thing around them is meant to stabilize the dimensional passage and make it last indefinitely. Or at least as long as you keep supplying it with enough mana. So they made their own version of it.]

[Wait, you're saying that thing down there is constantly active?] Zorian asked incredulously.

[According to our prisoner, yes,] the aranea said. [As far as he knows, the door is never shut down.]

Gods, a *permanent* dimensional passage like that... no wonder the invaders could bring such a huge force beneath the city and keep supplying it. He fired off a bunch of additional questions about how the knockoff Bakora gate was made, what its limitations were and so forth, but found that their captive had no idea of any of those things. Anyone except the leaders of the invasion was unlikely to know such things, and possibly no one except Quatach-Ichl, who seemed to be in charge of maintaining the gates.

Annoying. Still, the fact that the invasion was supplied by permanently active dimensional gates did provide certain opportunities. For instance, it meant that if he could capture the gates fast enough, he could get access straight into the heart of Ibasan operations, perhaps even Ulquaan Ibasa itself. Destroying the gate in their main base would no doubt utterly cripple the planned invasion, unless a new gate was easy to build, which he doubted. Finally, it opened the possibility of stealing the design from whoever made the thing – something he definitely wanted to do if it was at all possible.

Hopefully the design wasn't exclusively held by Quatach-Ichl or ran on children's souls or some such, because that was one amazing piece of magic.

[What about the research facility I've told you about?] Zorian asked.

[Nothing that you don't already know,] Memory of Sublime Glories told him. [Frankly, I think you're going about this the wrong way. You say the previous aranea found out something important about that facility? Well, I don't think they did it by reading the minds of Ibasan invaders. Admittedly, I cannot tell that for certain without getting access to some of their leaders, but they seem to neither know nor care about what's down there. Except for the lich, and as we both know, they'd never succeed in reading that thing's mind.]

[Well they clearly got information about it from someone,] Zorian said.

[Yes, well, it is a *government* facility. It stands to reason that someone from the government knows what they do down there. Chances are that if you want to find out about the facility through the same methods that the previous web used, you are going to have to target whichever government official that facility is reporting to.]

That... was a good point. He had no doubt that Spear of Resolve would attack a city official without the slightest bit of hesitation if she felt he had answers to her questions and she felt she could get away with it. And she could definitely get away with it, since she knew she was stuck in a time loop and none of the consequences would matter beyond a certain point.

[A valid point, but let's refrain from antagonizing the city government for now,] he said.

[More than fine with me,] the aranea responded.

Having exhausted all of the topics Zorian could think of, they bid each other goodbye and agreed to meet the next day for his usual mind magic lessons.

- break -

Weeks passed, and while he didn't make any incredible breakthroughs, his various projects kept slowly advancing forward. He absorbed everything about memory packet creation and reinforcement that Memory of Sublime Glories could teach him, he dutifully practiced what the other two Filigree Sages had to teach him, he scoured the academy library for interesting shaping exercises for both himself and Taiven, he built no less than three different golems with Edwin, and he learned a large number of spells from the books he and the Filigree Sages had found in the aranean treasury.

The most interesting of these new spells were a couple of highly illegal teleport variations that could punch through weaker teleport wards. If he could master those, he would get a major mobility boost within the city. Admittedly, it was possible that the city authorities could detect when someone was bypassing the city's teleport redirect in that fashion, but even if they could indeed do that, that would still make those spells incredibly useful during the actual invasion, when they'd be far too busy with other things to deal with him.

Oh, and he also met with Raynie a couple of times. He was given a lot of information about the current political climate among shifter tribes and their history, which was kind of interesting but probably not really important for anything. The meetings were a nice distraction, though, so he didn't care that he wasn't really learning anything.

"So there is something I'm kind of curious about when it comes to shifter magic," Zorian said. "I apologize in advance if I'm asking you to reveal some kind of tribal secret, but what exactly is the big advantage of being a shifter as opposed to just using a potion or a ritual to assume an animal form? I know that shifters can eschew material components that are otherwise needed to make a transformation shell and that you can do a partial transformation to access the senses and other traits from your alternate forms, but that seems a little underwhelming, all things considered..."

"Well, you have to remember that shifters originate from a different time, when other methods of transformation were far less developed and common than they are now," Raynie said. "But there are some things you're missing. The shifter transformation is much faster and safer than anything you can cook up with your alchemy skills, and you automatically get instincts to go along with your new form. A normal mage that transforms into an animal will have big problems moving in their new body and even interpreting the animal's senses if they're too different from what humans are used to. A shifter can innately understand how their alternate form works, so it doesn't take much for bird shifters to learn how to fly as easily as birds or for wolf shifters to actually understand what their enhanced noses are telling them."

"Ah," said Zorian in understanding, remembering how badly he flew while transformed into an eagle, even after spending several sessions practicing his flight. "Yeah, that does sound like a major improvement over a transformation potion."

"There is also a stealth factor to consider, as your cat shifter friends can attest," Raynie continued. "It's much easier to use transformation magics covertly when you can transform at will, whenever you want, to what *extent* you want, with no strange movements and material aids required. And since we're on the topic of your feline friends, let me ask you something that *I've* been kind of curious about. Did you know all this stuff about shifters before you met the cat shifters, or did you only research the topic because you started hanging out with them?"

"I'd known about shifters for a while by the time I met them," Zorian said. It was true, in a way. "I was searching for help with something and came to Vani for advice. He actually advised me to seek you out."

"Me!?" she asked incredulously. She frowned. "Or do you mean shifters in general?"

"Both. But he recommended you by name," Zorian said.

"Oh?" she leaned forward in her seat, curious. "And what exactly could I help you with?"

"It doesn't matter," Zorian said, shaking his head. "I've already gotten help elsewhere, and I've been told by others that you couldn't have helped me anyway."

"Oh come on," she huffed. "That's just teasing. You can't just say something like that and then say it doesn't matter. Either you tell me or I send a letter to Vani, asking him what he sent you to me for."

Ugh. He didn't think she was serious, but if she was that could easily lead to awkward questions about why Vani doesn't remember ever talking to Zorian in the past. He really had to learn how to watch his tongue better; he was becoming as bad as Zach.

"It's very personal so I'd appreciate if you leave the matter alone, okay?" Zorian sighed. "The short story is that I had the misfortune to end up on the receiving end of a necromantic spell and had a piece of foreign soul spliced with my own. I wanted answers as to what exactly happened to me, and Vani suggested I approach your tribe for help. But since he had no idea how to actually find them, he named you as a possible contact."

"Ah, that's... more serious than I thought," she said. "I'm sorry I pried. Are you..."

"I'm fine," said Zorian, waving her off. "Don't worry about it. I found a nice priest that helped me learn how to sense and protect my soul, so there should be no further incidents like that."

"I see. That's good," she said. She stared to the side for a few seconds, considering something, before refocusing back on him. "So did you at least get any good abilities out of the whole thing?"

"I'm... not sure," Zorian said evasively. "I'm still not sure what exactly the newest addition to my soul is or what it does."

"Really?" she frowned. "But didn't you say you learned how to sense your soul?"

"Yes, so?"

"So why don't you just focus on the spliced part for a while and try to figure out what it is? That sounds important to know. I know you probably want to forget about whatever happened to you, but as a shifter I can tell you it's very unhealthy to ignore parts of your soul because they won't ignore you."

"Hold on, how would I sense a part of my soul?" Zorian frowned. "That wasn't a part of the lesson I received from the priest."

Raynie opened her mouth to say something before quickly closing it. She stayed silent for a while, considering something.

"You know," she finally said, "I'm not sure whether anyone other than shifters would even want to sense specific parts of their soul. No need, probably. Unless they intend to modify it somehow, and that's usually a bad idea. And also not something a priest would do, unless they're a very heretical priest. So your teacher probably didn't even know that it could be done."

"Oh," Zorian said lamely.

"Do you want me to teach you how to do it?" Raynie asked.

"What?" asked Zorian. "Really? Aren't shifters very secretive about their magic?"

"No?" Raynie said uncertainly. "Not about stuff like this, anyway. This is simple stuff, every shifter learns how to do this as a child. They have to if they want to make use of their abilities properly. I can't see any harm in teaching you how to do it if you're willing, and I kind of feel like I owe you for all the help you've given me during the practice sessions you organized."

Huh, something good came out of that time sink? This restart was just full of surprises.

"Well, I'm willing," he shrugged. "Name the time and the place."

He didn't have much hope that a technique designed to sense a part of your soul would give him anything particularly substantial about his soul marker, but it didn't hurt to try and see if it led to something.

At the very least, Raynie implied it was a simple thing to learn, so it shouldn't become another thing vying for his time.

- break -

As it turned out, the method for sensing parts of your soul turned out to be rather simple when someone actually pointed it out to you. Well, provided one had already gone through the trouble of developing a personal soul sense beforehand. The results he got when he used it to inspect his soul were... better than he hoped. He actually *could* sense his marker and the way it was woven into his soul, but unlike shifters, he didn't get any instinctive understanding of its function and how to use it (if it could be actually used by the one it was stamped on). Which made sense, considering it was not actually a part of his soul in the way a shifter's alternate form was.

Raynie herself seemed unfazed by the partial failure and told him to keep trying for a while. It usually took months for shifters to fully map out the way different parts of their soul interacted with one another, and while she doubted his case made him as complex as a shifter she felt it was too early to give up after a single day or two.

Fair enough. He supposed he could set aside an hour or two every weekend and see if it led anywhere.

In the meantime, the day of the summer festival approached and Zorian became consumed with preparations for the end of the restart. This time, he had something a bit more ambitious he wanted to try out.

He was going to try and infiltrate the Ibasan main base during the invasion and pass through the dimensional gate to see where it led. And then, hopefully, find someone new and more interesting to interrogate on the other side.

46. The Other Side

Chapter 046 The Other Side

“I’m ready,” Zorian said. “You can start casting whenever you want.”

Estin, his current practice partner, gave him a solemn nod and started launching magic missiles at him in quick succession. Zorian calmly intercepted them all with his shield, dividing his attention between watching the way Estin was casting the spell so he could help him improve it afterwards and trying to work out the absolute minimum shield strength he could get away with to safely tank the attacks. A bad idea usually – if this had been a real spar, like the ones he had been having with Taiven recently, being as cheap as possible with his counters would be a recipe for disaster. But well, his practice group had pretty much given up on those when he was involved. He was too good and didn’t know how to hold back properly, so these days he mostly served as a living target and dispenser of advice.

Not that this made him useless to the group, far from it, but it did mean he had to get creative to get some personal benefit from attending these practice sessions.

After fourteen magic missiles, Estin stopped casting and they switched positions, with Estin defending himself and Zorian attacking. The former Ibsan was the only person in the training group who could really tank one of his magic missiles at maximum power, so there was no need for Zorian to hold back. The floating earth spheres Estin used as shields were far more resilient than he initially gave them credit for, soaking up his magic missiles with ease. No matter what he tried, he could not even shatter one, much less punch through them. It was an interesting challenge.

He had largely reached a plateau in terms of magic missile strength. Like all spells, magic missile had a limited amount of mana it could be supercharged with, and Zorian was at the point where he simply couldn’t cram in more mana without hopelessly destabilizing the spell boundary. That was a shame, as magic missile was his most energy-efficient combat spell, thanks to the amount of practice he put into it. In fact, the spell was so mana-efficient at this point that it was playing merry hell with his ability to judge how far his mana reserves had grown. He could cast about 35 of them in quick succession, which was more than four times the amount he could cast before the time loop – that shouldn’t be possible, especially since he was sure his mana reserves still hadn’t topped out yet, so the most logical conclusion was that his magic missiles required significantly less mana now than they had in the past. The magnitude system probably wasn’t designed with people like him in mind. He doubted a lot of people practiced magic missile as doggedly as he did.

And yet, for all the refinement his magic missile now had, he knew from Kyron that he still hadn’t reached the pinnacle of the spell. A *properly* executed magic missile would be totally invisible. Which his magic missiles weren’t.

He had an idea about that, though.

No one in the practice group other than Estin could reliably tank one of his magic missiles without their shields giving way. Even his normal missiles often proved too much for them, never mind if he really powered them up. As a consequence, he had been forced to learn how to adjust his attacks downwards to something they could deal with. He quickly found that trying to purposely weaken his missiles was pretty hard. Strategically sabotaging the spell boundary to make the spell less mana efficient was inelegant and offended his professional pride, but trying to make magic missile technically perfect yet functionally weaker was not as easy as it appeared at first glance. His reflexes, honed over the years spent in the time loop, and even the very construction of the spell itself naturally tended towards a certain optimum effect. Going against it was a constant struggle.

Still, he had gotten the hang of the ability to dial down the missile’s power after a few days, and had discovered that when he dialed the power low enough, he could get the shine and opacity to drop like a stone. At the very lowest point, he could produce missiles that were nothing but a faint warp in the air – and sadly, about as effective on anything they hit. Still, practicing the spell at these lower power levels made it easier to see the faults and imperfections he made in the spell boundary, and fixing those immediately led to a small but noticeable increase in his mana efficiency when casting his normal version of magic missile.

He had a feeling this was the secret to effectively developing proper invisible force spells – don’t start by making normal versions invisible, instead reduce the power and work on making a weaker version more technically perfect and mana efficient. Then steadily work your way up until you end up with a flawlessly executed, fully-powered version.

None of the books he’d found actually outlined this method as a possible training regimen, instead suggesting endless repetition of the spell as a method, but Zorian felt his idea had merit. He had little to lose by trying it, since the officially suggested training method consisted of mindlessly practicing the normal version for years and even decades at a time. Yes, he was stuck in a time loop, but there had to be a better method than *that*.

After he’d failed to get through Estin’s earth defense, he called for a brief pause to let everyone replenish their mana reserves. He personally didn’t need the break – he was purposely using only a small fraction of his reserves during these practice sessions, and he had already honed his ability to assimilate ambient mana as far as it could go, so it generally took him only a few minutes to go back to his top form. The others needed to catch their breath, however, and he had to be mindful of that.

If nothing else, he was learning the limitations of people around his age. He had honestly forgotten what it was like to be on their level, and had trouble judging what people his age found challenging or even downright impossible. Hopefully this experience would make him better equipped to pretend he was a normal student in the future, or at least more aware of what would attract people’s attention and to what extent.

The break was eventually interrupted when Edwin marched into the gathering, the latest golem they'd made following after him.

"Hey Edwin," Naim greeted. "What brings you here? Finally decided to join us?"

"Ha, no. No, I'm here because of this," he said, grasping the little golem by its shoulders and proudly pushing it forwards so the group could take a look at it.

The construct was pretty impressive, even if Zorian was a little biased in thinking that. Being little less than a meter tall, the golem did not look particularly intimidating, but he doubted anyone would mistake it for a harmless toy. Its slender, humanoid figure was made out of alchemically-treated steel and powered by a comparatively massive crystalized mana battery that supplied it with plenty of power. Its movements were smooth and natural, and despite Edwin's rough handling, it never lost its balance like Zorian's previous golems would have. The golem looked and moved like a credible little helper and last ditch defender/distraction.

They did a good job of making it, Zorian felt. Enlisting Edwin to help with his golem making had definitely been the right decision.

"Neat," Naim shrugged. "That's what you and Zorian have been working on all this time, isn't it? What about it?"

"Yes," Zorian agreed. The last time they met, he left the golem with Edwin so the other boy could run a bunch of tests to see if it worked properly. Did Edwin find some critical flaw in the construct or did he just come to brag about their success? "Is there something wrong with it?"

"It?" Edwin asked with faux outrage. "His name is Chelik, and he's absolutely perfect! I mean, just look at him! Everyone, meet Chelik. Chelik, say hi to the nice folks gathered here."

The golem quietly gave a brief wave before letting its metallic hand unceremoniously drop again.

Yeah, apparently Edwin just wanted to brag. Zorian caught Estin and Kopriva rolling their eyes at the spectacle, while Briam and Raynie seemed honestly impressed by the little golem. Naim just continued smiling serenely, and Zorian couldn't tell whether Naim was honestly happy for his friend or just humoring the guy.

"Unfortunately, there was one part of him that I just couldn't test properly," Edwin said. "We warded this little beauty with every defensive ward we could manage. Well, Zorian did, I just kind of watched and took notes. But never mind that, the point is that Chelik here should be able to shrug off a *lot* of damage and disruptive spells and..."

"You want us to try and damage it," Estin surmised.

"Yes," Edwin agreed with a grin. "I'll just move aside and then you can all just attack it together."

"All of us?" Raynie asked curiously.

"Yeah," Edwin nodded. "He's really tough, so don't worry about overkill. I don't think any of you can really do anything to it individually."

Estin frowned, clearly taking that as a challenge, before putting one of his palms on the ground in front of him. For a second, nothing happened. And then, without any warning, the ground beneath Chelik opened up like a set of earthen jaws and pulled it into the resulting hole before snapping shut. The poor golem was left with most of its body trapped under the soil, with only its head sticking free.

Edwin stared at the buried golem for a second before glancing uncertainly towards Estin. The other boy inclined his head to the side, smiling faintly, clearly very pleased with himself.

"Okay. Claim disproven," Edwin chuckled awkwardly. "Could you please unbury him so we can move onto further testing?"

Eventually, they did try to bring down the little golem with a collective magic missile barrage and predictably failed. Even Zorian's missiles did not damage Chelik in any way, though hitting the limbs and head could imbalance it and knock it to the ground. Estin tried to hammer it into scrap with one of his earth spheres, but only succeeded in knocking it to the ground and rendering it immobile so long as the sphere was pressing down on it. Kopriva cracked a vial of alchemical acid at it, but this didn't work either. Finally, Briam went ahead and summoned his familiar and had the juvenile fire drake breathe fire at the golem for a while. That at least had some effect, in the sense that the golem ended up visibly heating up as a result. The fire wards weren't able to deal with sustained fire magic, it seemed. Edwin terminated the testing at this point, not wanting to see Chelik actually destroyed.

A satisfactory result, all things considered. The vulnerability to being buried and otherwise restrained was a large and obvious weakness, though, and Zorian was already considering what he could do to overcome it when making golems in the future.

The end of Edwin's golem test ultimately also signaled the end of the current practice session as well, and most people excused themselves and left afterwards. The summer festival was only a few days away, so this was basically the last training session he would have with the practice group. That fact left him strangely sad – he had originally resented the loss of free time that came with the meetings, but the classmates he taught had ended up growing on him a little. It was nice to have someone actually respect his skills and achievements for a change, instead of constantly reminding him about how inadequate he was and how far he still had to go.

He turned towards Raynie, the last person to remain at the training ground with him. She didn't look like she intended to excuse herself, so he assumed she wanted to talk to him.

“Yes?” He asked.

“Did you find out anything about your extra soul bits?” she asked.

She was stalling for time, but whatever. No reason not to answer the question.

“Sort of,” he said. “I found a few ways to interact with it, but I only know what one of them actually does. Or at least I *think* I do. I’ll try it out soon to make sure.”

Yes, it was rather surprising, but apparently the marker actually *was* designed to be interacted with by its bearer. There were multiple... switches, for lack of a better word, that were clearly meant to do something once they were activated. A good number of them were utterly inert, and did not react at all to his probing, either because he did not know how to interact with them properly or because they were broken in the marker’s transfer from Zach to Zorian. A lot of them were perfectly functional, however, and readily responded to his probes, eager to be set off like exuberant little puppies. He shied away from actually experimenting with them, since they gave absolutely no indication what their function was.

All except one. There was one command switch that immediately gave him a vague impression of what it was meant to do when he tried mucking around with it. He planned to test that one at the conclusion of his portal infiltration attempt.

“Make sure to have someone watching over you when you do that,” Raynie cautioned. “At the very least they can call for help if you collapse or something.”

“I will,” Zorian lied. “Now why don’t you tell me what’s really bothering you.”

“It’s nothing you can really help me with,” she sighed. “I just feel like complaining to someone, I guess. I have no one here to confide to, except for Kiana. My fault, really. I didn’t try very hard to make any other friends. I don’t want to bother Kiana about this again, so...”

“Well, feel free to complain,” Zorian told her. “Is this about your family, perhaps?”

“Yes,” she confirmed. “I sent them a letter last week. Asked them if I could come home for the summer festival. They said I wasn’t welcome. Well, not really in those words, but I can read between the lines.”

Harsh. What did she do to deserve that kind of response? Well, Raynie did say she wanted to complain, so he would probably find out soon. He opted to stay quiet and let her talk.

After a moment of quiet while she collected her thoughts, she started her story.

“The leadership of my tribe is hereditary,” she said. “The firstborn son of the current chief inherits the mantle of leadership from his father. Simple enough, but the problem was that my father didn’t have a son. My mother had a hard pregnancy when she bore me, and the tribe refused to bring outside healers to help. After I was born, she could conceive no further children. Or at least that’s what we all thought for a time. Regardless, it was decided that in the absence of a male heir, even a daughter would do. Nobody wanted a succession crisis.”

Hmm, so the tribe accepted a female leader but wasn’t too happy with it. Considering the ‘hypothetical scenario’ she’d asked him about earlier in the restart, he had a feeling he knew where this was going...

“As I grew up, I was constantly told I had to be strong for the tribe,” Raynie said. “That I have to work hard and embody the ideals we represented, so that there could be no question as to whether I deserved my position. I never resented that. I was proud of my tribesmen and my parents, for putting so much faith in me. I did my best, and I was good at it. Good enough that, in time, even my staunchest critics had fallen silent. But then mother got pregnant again.”

Zorian winced internally. It was a son, wasn’t it?

“Nine months later, mother gave birth to the baby boy that my father had always wanted,” she said bitterly, confirming his suspicion. “I wasn’t sidelined immediately, of course. They had to make sure my brother was not defective in some way before doing something so rash. I had hope for a time that I might succeed in keeping the mantle through superior skill and effort, but of course he ended up being a blasted prodigy. It was clear that he would eventually eclipse me. I... did not take it very well. I did not step down from my position quietly, and some of the tribe members even supported me. Mostly because they felt I had proven myself capable while my brother was still a relative unknown, and the designated heir had never been stripped of their position like that, so the whole thing was a bit questionable. But ultimately, my worst enemy was my own father – I had thought he was proud of me, of all I had accomplished, but in the end he was the one arguing most vehemently that I should move aside so my brother can take the mantle. How could I have possibly won that battle when my own father stood against me?”

“So they don’t want you back because they think you’re a threat to your brother’s legitimacy and the tribe’s leader?” Zorian spoke out.

“I *am* a threat to his legitimacy,” Raynie said. “Was. I don’t know. I’m not really sure about anything anymore. I feel like nothing I did mattered in the end. What do I even have to live for, now? All my life I was taught to live for the tribe, but I’m not sure I even want to go back there when they finally deign to let me return. What is there waiting for me? I don’t think I’ll ever be happy living back there.”

Zorian studied her for a moment, wondering if he should try and comfort her. She seemed more angry than sad, though, and he had a feeling she wouldn’t appreciate such a gesture. Best not to risk it.

“So you being here is your exile, then?” he asked.

“Pretty much,” she answered. “Me being here allows them to cement my brother’s position without my interference. Plus, me being educated by outsiders and taught outsider magic destroys whatever shreds of legitimacy I had left.”

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“I can’t understand why they won’t let you home for the summer festival, then,” Zorian said. “Not that I understand why you’d even want to go back to your father and brother you clearly can’t stand, but that’s beside the point. The point is that if you’ve been outmaneuvered that thoroughly, surely there is no harm in letting you go back home for a few days. That seems very petty of them.”

“I was a bit of a bitch to my brother the last time I was home,” she admitted. “I guess the little shit went crying to our parents, because they’ve been keeping him away from me ever since. They seem to think there is a risk of me killing him. So insulting.”

They kept talking for a while – well, Raynie kept talking, he mostly just listened – but eventually she ran out of steam and just fell quiet for a time before announcing it was late and that she should go. Before she left, however, she told him that she enjoyed their meetings and asked if they could continue meeting like that, even if his original purpose for approaching her had long been fulfilled at this point.

He agreed. Of course he did. And despite her stoic demeanor, he could tell she was very happy to hear that. But the summer festival was just around the corner and she would soon forget any of this ever happened. The next time they met, they would be virtual strangers to each other.

He decided not to befriend Raynie again in the future. Not while the time loop was still in effect, anyway. If he ever managed to get out, though, he told himself that he would try to befriend the red-headed shifter for real. She reminded him of his pre-time loop self too much to just ignore it. Her problem was, as she said, something he couldn’t really help her with... but maybe just having an extra friend would be enough.

He remained at the training ground for quite some time afterwards, lost in thought, before making his way back to Imaya’s place.

- break -

It was the day before the summer festival and everything was ready. He had stopped Nocka’s kidnapping again, crafted all of the equipment he would be using in his gate-crashing attempt, and evacuated the Filigree Sages back to their home. Now all that was left was to gather the findings Kael and Taiven had made with their personal research and store them inside his mind for future restarts.

Fortunately, he was currently meeting them both in Imaya’s basement for exactly that purpose.

“Here,” Taiven said, handing him a small notebook. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’m kind of glad the month is coming to a close. You have no idea how annoying it is to practice shaping exercises all day, every day.”

“Taiven, I’ve had Xvim as my mentor for the past four years,” Zorian pointed out.

“Yeah, yeah...” she waved dismissively.

“Show me what you’ve learned,” he told her.

“What? But it’s all written down there,” she protested, pointing at the notebook in his hands.

“Doesn’t matter, I want to see it personally,” he insisted. “Some things really cannot be written down.”

She had progressed nicely, he decided fifteen minutes later. Some things he considered trivial didn’t really work out, which meant he either wasn’t teaching them properly or Taiven was spectacularly unsuited for them, but there were also some exercises that came almost naturally to her. It was a good start, if nothing else.

“That was way too slow,” he said. “And you fumbled a bit towards the end. Start o-“

“If you say ‘start over’ one more time, Zorian...” Taiven warned him.

“Fine, fine, I’ll stop channeling my inner Xvim,” he chuckled. “We’ll stop here. I got what I needed, I think. Kael, how about you? Are my eyes deceiving me or has the amount of notebooks you got for me actually *shrunk* from what it was initially?”

“You said you memorize how the whole book is made with that spell of yours, not just text, so I figured I would write as dense as possible and save space that way. A single book takes the same amount of space in your memory regardless of how much is written in it, if I understood you correctly,” Kael said.

“That’s true, but the alteration pattern I store is never flawless, so some imperfections are bound to creep up in the reproduction. I hope you didn’t make the letters too small...”

Some quick testing proved that Kael’s condensed writing survived the memorization-reproduction process just fine, so Zorian went ahead and memorized the whole stack.

"Well, that's it, I guess," Taiven said awkwardly. "I guess we'll see each other in the next restart. Not that I'll remember any of it..."

"Actually, I'm going to skip going to Cyoria for a couple of restarts," Zorian admitted. "I need to find a way to halt, or at least delay the degradation of the Matriarch's memory package. And also to advance my memory reading skills so I can get something out of it if I fail. I can't waste time on classes before I solve this."

"Fair enough," Kael said. "I'll note that I have pretty much exhausted all the low-lying fruits when it comes to my research. I'll need to reach out to other experts and maybe acquire some restricted materials through less than legal channels the next time we do this. I know you're justifiably leery of making too many waves, so you'll have to discuss this with my other self."

Just as well that he was putting his routine in Cyoria on temporary hold, then. He didn't need a distraction like that right now.

The group separated after a while, with Zorian leaving to find Kirielle. There was one last thing he wanted to do before the end.

"Kiri, do you think you could show me your drawings?" he asked.

She didn't need much convincing. She ran out of the room and soon returned with a thick stack of papers that represented her artistic endeavor over the course of the past month. She drew anything that caught her fancy, it seemed – the sparrows that liked to gather on the street in front of Imaya's house, the house they lived in and its inhabitants, the trees in the nearby park where she played with Nochka, and so on. He was especially impressed with the handful of images that depicted Cyoria's main train station – not only did she remember what all the various storefronts they'd visited looked like, she even memorized many of the individual items that had been on sale. Zorian had forgotten most of that stuff roughly five minutes after they had left the train station, but Kirielle had remembered it well enough to draw a realistic picture of it an entire day afterwards.

If he ever found some time to kill, he should ask Kirielle to teach him how to draw. He doubted he would be any good at it, but the mental image of his little sister trying to teach him something was amusing.

"...and this one is Nochka's kitty fo- err," Kirielle fumbled, barely catching herself in time. She threw him a panicked look and then tried to shove the drawing of the young black cat beneath some of the already inspected drawings.

Heh.

"Her kitty form, perhaps?" Zorian asked innocently.

"You knew!" Kirielle gasped.

"I knew," he confirmed. "So could you tell she's a shifter on your own or is she simply as bad at keeping secrets as you are?"

"I'm not bad at keeping secrets!" she protested. "And, um, she kind of slipped that she can do magic and I bugged her until she showed me what she can do."

Ah yes, the eternal tendency of people to brag about their skills. Well, that and Kirielle's incredible ability to keep bringing the subject up until the victim decides it's easier to just give in and humor her. He didn't blame Nochka for giving in, considering how often he ended up doing the same.

Nochka's indiscretion aside, there were no further surprises waiting for him among Kirielle's drawings. He then tried to cast the memorization spell to commit the entire stack to his memory, but found that Kirielle was intensely protective of her work and strangely suspicious of his actions. It took a while for Zorian to convince Kirielle that the spell he wanted to cast was totally non-destructive and that he wouldn't even dream of burning her artwork or anything similar. Really, where did she even get the idea?

"Fortov once burned a bunch of my drawings when I asked him to show me some magic," she admitted. "Said it was a joke."

Zorian rolled his eyes. Yes, that sounded about right for Fortov. Knowing Kirielle, she was probably being extremely annoying and disruptive... but that was still a very shitty thing to do.

"I'm kind of insulted you'd compare me to Fortov, but whatever," Zorian said. He quickly memorized the stack and handed it back to her. "There. All done."

Kirielle quickly leafed through the papers to make sure he really hadn't done any damage and then left to put the drawings back to her room.

She was back soon enough, though, looking worried.

"Zorian, why did you want to memorize my drawings?" she asked. "You could just ask me to show them to you whenever you wanted to take a look. Are you going somewhere?"

Zorian gave her a sideways glance, wondering what to tell her. He would be leaving her behind during the next few restarts, and he kind of felt guilty about it, but there was no helping it. It was why he was 'wasting' some of his mental space on her drawings instead of filling it out with something more practical.

She was pretty observant to have come to that conclusion, though. She probably noticed some of his other preparations.

"Yes," he admitted. "I am. After the summer festival."

"Oh," she said. "But don't you have to attend classes?"

"Well, yes. But this is more important," he said. "Don't worry, I won't be gone long. You won't even notice I'm gone."

Surprisingly, she accepted this explanation without complaints. Good. The last thing he needed was for her to freak out this close to the end.

"But," she decided, "you have to bring me a gift when you come back. Or I'm telling mom you left me alone with a bunch of strangers."

"Sure," said Zorian, rolling his eyes. He wondered if gifting her with the drawings she'd drawn herself in previous restarts counted as cheating.

Probably. But he was going to do it anyway, just to see how she reacted.

- break -

The dimensional gate beneath Cyoria was a difficult target to approach. One had to avoid numerous Ibasan patrol groups to even get near it, and then the prospective attacker had to deal with an entire defensive base built around the gate if they wanted to actually pass through. Storming such a place was a task for a battlegroup, not a single mage, and would give the defenders plenty of time to shut down the gate if they felt the base was about to fall. Not to mention that Quatach-Ichl could and probably would come to their aid if such a major assault was launched on the place. No, the only viable way of accessing the gate was to sneak in somehow. A rather unlikely endeavor, considering the place was teeming with mages and war trolls, and likely had plenty of detection wards layered on top of it too. But Zorian had a plan. A rather reckless plan that he'd never even think about trying outside of the time loop, but it was a plan regardless.

At its core, it rested on the assumption that the Ibasans would send almost everyone they had to participate in the invasion proper, leaving only a handful of defenders to guard the gate. Thus, the best time to make the attempt was when the invasion had already begun. If the Ibasans were smart and cautious, that wouldn't be true and his plan would be over before it even began. If they were *really* smart and cautious, the gate would be shut down the moment the invasion began and all of his plotting would have been for nothing. But Zorian was willing to bet that the Ibasans needed all the manpower they could get for the fighting on the surface, and that the leadership needed the gate functioning so they could retreat safely to their island. There was a lot of sea between Eldemar and Ulquaan Ibasa. He was hoping they would just leave behind a skeleton crew at the base, with orders to summon Quatach-Ichl if they get into more trouble than they can handle.

Thus, when the day of the invasion had finally come, Zorian immediately descended deep into the tunnel system beneath Cyoria and started looking for some nasty critters to dominate. Something strong enough to cause a distraction, but weak enough that the defenders wouldn't panic when it started throwing itself on the base defenses. Just a random monster attack that would distract everyone and give Zorian a chance to slip inside unnoticed.

It took him some time, but he eventually found a pack of hook goblins – small, flightless, bat-like humanoids whose front limbs sported huge, hook-like claws. Highly dangerous up close but easily killable. A threat but not *that* much of a threat. Perfect.

Then he waited. As time went by, his prediction of Ibasans withdrawing virtually everyone to participate in the invasion gradually came to pass – the Ibasans were indeed withdrawing nearly all patrol groups around their base, allowing Zorian to finally approach the place and lay his eyes on the center of Ibasan invasion. Well, he already knew its basic layout from the memories extracted from the captured Ibasans, but that wasn't the same as seeing it first-hand.

The base was situated in a massive cavern, and was quite large. It was practically a small town, which was not very surprising considering the amount of forces the Ibasans normally kept here. In the center of the settlement stood a handful of stone buildings that were probably raised from the cavern floor via alteration. The gate was in the middle of this section, serving as the heart of the settlement. Surrounding the fancy stone buildings was a ramshackle collection of tents and pens where the peons and war trolls lived.

There were no walls around the settlement, but each of the tunnels connecting to the cavern had a checkpoint that served as a first line of defense.

Zorian waited for a while for the numbers to thin out further and when they remained static for a while, mentally pushed the hook goblins to attack one of the checkpoints, doing his best to boost their bloodthirstiness and suppress their fear. He didn't have to do much, honestly – hook goblins seemed to be almost perpetually angry creatures, going utterly berserk at even the slightest provocation. They fell upon the checkpoint, screeching and clawing, and the base immediately went into an uproar.

Zorian's original idea was to use the distraction to attack one of the other checkpoints while everyone else was distracted, but that turned out to be unnecessary – when he reached his chosen target, he found out that its guards were unprofessional enough to leave their posts to help out their buddies against the hook goblins. Or maybe the base was even more short on manpower than he originally suspected? No matter, he decided to simply take advantage of the situation and waltzed in.

He made it all the way to the gate without being stopped, or even confronted by anyone. At one point he crossed paths with a mage running towards the battle site but it only took a weak suggestion from Zorian that he was '*completely normal, nothing to see here*' and the man promptly put him out of his mind and kept running. He honestly didn't expect it to be that easy. Unfortunately, when he reached the dimensional gate itself he found that it had its own guards and that they refused to leave their posts, despite the commotion.

Four mages and two trolls. He could deal with them perhaps, but he didn't think he could do it without raising a ruckus. Shame. He was just about to throw caution to the wind and start chucking around fireballs and explosive cubes everywhere, when one of the other defenders came running

and started shouting at the mages around the gate. The hook goblins had broken through the checkpoint and the newcomer wanted them to signal Quatach-Ichl to come and save them.

Uh, oops? He honestly didn't think his little minions would end up winning. It seemed that not only did the Ibasans leave a skeleton crew to hold the base, said skeleton crew was composed out of the dregs of their force. No wonder this infiltration was so easy.

Fortunately for Zorian, no summoning of Quatach-Ichl would take place. The mages guarding seemed horrified at the very idea. Their leader ranted for an entire minute about how the ancient lich would have them all flayed alive if they summoned him to deal with a bunch of stinking hook goblins, and eventually sent two of his fellow guards and both of the war trolls to contain the incursion.

Zorian could only watch incredulously as the gate was suddenly left with only two mages to guard it. Well. That certainly made things easier. He waited for a while for the other Ibasans to get some distance away from the gate and then chucked a vial of sleeping gas at the two remaining guards from his hiding place. One of them, the one that spoke to the panicked defender and seemed to be their leader, managed to stumble out of the cloud in a semi-lucid state and promptly received a piercer in the head for his troubles. The other collapsed into sleep, as intended, and Zorian blew the cloud away with a gust of wind before hurriedly approaching the dimensional gate they were guarding.

Zorian itched to examine the thing in greater detail, but no, this wasn't the time for that... the current priority was to find out what was on the other side. Looking through the opening itself, he could see that the gate led to an empty, spacious room devoid of further guards. Which was rather weird – were the Ibasans really leaving one end of the gate undefended? He tried extending his mind sense through the dimensional opening and was pleased to note that the gate was no barrier to his mind sense. And even gladder that he could detect no hidden enemies.

Suspicious, but mindful of the limited amount of time he had, he took a deep breath and stepped through the gate.

He felt a tendril of magic brush against his soul protections the moment his foot touched the floor of the destination room, trying to identify him. It recoiled from his spiritual defense and Zorian immediately felt the atmosphere in the room change, becoming heavier and more foreboding. He had been detected by the wards and labeled as an intruder.

Behind him, the edges of the dimensional opening started crackling with lightning. The gate then began rapidly shrinking and soon winked out of existence entirely in a soft flash of light.

- break -

Though the closing of the portal had taken him off guard, Zorian was ultimately unconcerned about its disappearance. He was already through, after all, and at least this way the Ibasan forces on the other end of the gate wouldn't be able to pursue him.

He quickly looked around and confirmed that the room was indeed empty, aside from the now-inactive stone icosahedron erected in the center of it. There was only one door in sight, and Zorian immediately blasted it to splinters rather than open it normally. No need to risk getting hit with some hostile ward effect because he was dumb enough to grasp the handle. Quickly leaving the gate room, he started exploring the place, trying to find out as much as he could before the Ibasan forces on this side of the gate, alerted by the wards, came running to deal with him.

Except that there were no Ibasan forces. And he wasn't in some hastily erected base, either. He quickly found out that the gate had been situated in a basement of a pretty luxurious mansion. A very large, seemingly abandoned mansion. Zorian was confused at first – the first gate in the chain was supposed to lead to some isolated place in the Sarokian highlands after all, so he kind of expected a wilderness camp surrounded by trees.

Then the defenders of the place finally tracked him down, and he understood where he was. The undead boar that just tried to bite his leg off was exactly like the ones that assaulted Lukav every restart.

He was in the Sarokian Highlands. Specifically, he was in Iasku Mansion. And the place was apparently teeming with undead.

He frantically dodged a knife thrust by his assailant – a silent, knife-wielding man wrapped in concealing black clothes. Zorian had shot him through his head with a piercer earlier, but that didn't seem to bother him too much. Another black-clad, knife-wielding corpse advanced at him from the left, and the blasted boar looked like it was readying for another charge.

Zorian threw a glowing cylinder on the ground in front of him, causing a disruptive, dispelling pulse to wash over everything around him. The three corpses attacking him collapsed lifelessly to the ground, the pulse having destroyed the magic that kept their animating souls bound to their bodies.

Zorian sighed. That was the third dispeller grenade he had been forced to use since coming to this place. He'd only ever had five of them to start with, not having expected to fight hordes of undead today. Most of his other single-use items were gone as well. He knew this mission was likely to result in his violent death, but this was still kind of annoying.

And also more than a little dangerous. The presence of so much undead meant there were necromancers inside. It might actually be dangerous to die here.

He was just about to go back to the gate room and barricade himself there when a living person entered his mind sense, heading straight for him.

Well, crap. That was the necromancer, wasn't it? Of course it was. That must be why the undead backed off after that last attack. He quickly scattered his remaining explosive cubes on the floor in front of him and retreated deeper into the corridor.

Then the door on the other end of the corridor opened and a tall, muscular man with a huge mustache stepped into the corridor. He took one look

at Zorian and smiled jovially, like seeing an old friend who he hadn't heard from in years.

"Welcome!" he said. "I am Sudomir Kandrei, the owner of this humble abode. May I ask why you have invaded my home?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Zorian, taking a step back. Step deeper into the corridor, step deeper into the corridor... "The door was quite open, all I had to do was step through the gate. If you didn't want anyone coming through, surely you wouldn't have left that thing so unprotected. Why, I bet a whole army could just waltz through this place if you weren't careful..."

Zorian took another step back. Sudomir followed him, taking a step deeper into the corridor-

Now! Zorian sent a pulse of mana to the explosive cubes, triggering them and sending the entire corridor into a-

No, actually nothing happened at all. What the hell?

"Wards. Wonderful things, aren't they?" Sudomir smiled. "I can't have things exploding in my own home, you see. And besides, even if you did catch me in that trap, that wouldn't have killed me. I assure you I am quite hard to kill."

Lovely. Zorian stared at the man in front of him for a second and then concentrated on his marker for a second.

"What are you doing?!" Sudomir asked harshly. He could probably see that he was doing something with his soul. Damn necromancers and their cheating soul sight.

Zorian ignored him and ordered one of the 'slots' of the marker, the one that actually gave him an impression of what it was supposed to do, to activate. His vision immediately turned dark and then he woke up back in Cirin, Kirielle wishing him a good morning.

He sighed in relief, confusing Kirielle. Thank the gods that worked.

47. Politics

Chapter 047

Politics

Sitting alone in the train's compartment, Zorian stared through the window at the passing landscape, lost in thought and not really paying attention to what he was looking at. He was supposed to have disembarked already, but the events that had happened at the end of the previous restart were still at the forefront of his mind and he figured it was best to delay his plans for a few hours until he was less distracted. It wasn't like he had some tight schedule to follow this early into the restart.

Closing his eyes for a second, he searched his soul for the marker switch he'd used to escape Sudomir and immersed himself in the impressions it gave him whenever he connected to it. The switch in question did not announce its purpose in words, but it made itself understood anyway – it was the abrupt end of everything, followed by a return to the beginning.

Revert to starting point. That was what the switch claimed its function was, and, as far as Zorian could tell, that is exactly what it had done when he'd used it at the end of the previous restart.

He had a way to end the current restart at whim. He could start over at any time without leaving behind a soul that could be interrogated and messed with. Hell, he wouldn't be leaving behind anything – the world would end on his command. All it took was pressing a switch.

That changed everything. Necromancy, in many ways his worst enemy, was suddenly a lot less dangerous and frightening. The risk of having his suicide rings taken away or negated by fancy wards also became a lot less worrisome – the marker was virtually impossible to detect or take away from him. Many ideas he had previously dismissed on the grounds that they were too dangerous to attempt, such as exploring Iasku Mansion or pissing off Quatach-Ichl by aggressively going after Ibasan forces, were suddenly back on the table.

Getting killed or knocked out before he could react was still a danger, though, as was the possibility of being drugged into submission. He wondered if he could set up some sort of contingency to trigger the revert switch automatically upon his death... it would require delving deeper into soul magic, but that may be a smart thing to do anyway, and eliminating one of his major remaining weaknesses was no small feat.

A possible issue was that the revert switch might affect Zach and Red Robe as well, not just him. Was their restart cut short as a consequence of his action in the previous restart? Probably. It must have been, if the switch worked like he thought it did. There was a chance they'd failed to note the abrupt end, since he'd activated the revert switch very close to the time it usually ended at anyway... but since he intended to keep using the revert switch, that wasn't going to last very long.

It didn't really matter, though, even if they had noticed. Both Zach and Red Robe had already known there were at least two other time travelers in the time loop, so this told them nothing particularly important. Well, it might come as a bit of a shock to Zach, since he'd never had his restart cut short like that, but whatever. He could now experience what it was like for Zorian when the other boy went around fighting dragons and whatnot.

Opening his eyes, Zorian withdrew from the marker and refocused his attention on the passing landscape for a bit. It did not hold his attention for long before his mind drifted back to the events of the previous restart.

Truthfully, he hadn't expected his gate exploration initiative to be as successful as it ended up being. He had expected to face better and more numerous defenses on the Cyorian side of the gate, and once he managed to step through it, he expected to emerge into *another* heavily guarded Ibasan base. He hadn't expected to live long once on the other side. In fact, it honestly would not have surprised him if he had died before ever reaching the gate itself, nevermind actually accomplishing much on the other side. The first try had been primarily about testing the Ibasan defenses to see what he was dealing with.

Well, apparently he had been far too modest in his ambitions. He got everything he had been hoping for, and more. Now that he knew just how undermanned and unprofessional the defense of the gate was, and that there were no Ibasan reinforcements on the other side to come to their aid, he could afford to be a lot more direct in future attempts. Bringing a small army of golems and wiping out every defender so he could study the gate at his leisure actually seemed like a viable option. Granted, he would have to do it without giving the defenders a chance to summon Quatach-Ichl, but it seemed doable. As a bonus, said golems would be heaven-sent against the hordes of undead infesting Iasku Mansion. They were just as tireless as the living dead, and had no souls for the necromancer to mess with.

Of course, it was impossible to think about Iasku Mansion without automatically considering that final confrontation he'd had with Sudomir Kandrei at the end, and that soured Zorian's feeling of success somewhat. He got out of the situation unscathed in the end, but the fact was, he got thoroughly outplayed and backed into a corner by a dangerous necromancer and had to rely on an untested ability to escape from his clutches. That wasn't the way Zorian wanted his conflicts to go.

To be fair, though, the situation might not have been as bad as it looked. The restart was nearing its end by that point, so perhaps he could have stalled the man long enough to avoid any serious consequences. Failing that, he could have thrown a maximized fireball at his feet and hoped that reducing his body to fine ash interfered with Sudomir's ability to snare his soul. It was hard to know how dangerous the situation truly had been without knowing more about Sudomir's personality, or the limits of his necromancy skills.

Well, he was going to find out more about the man very soon. For one thing, Sudomir was the mayor of Knyazov Dveri, and therefore a public figure – there should be lots of information available about him, in both official and unofficial sources. For another, Zorian intended to keep attacking the gate beneath Cyoria and exploring Iasku Mansion at the end of every future restart. There was no reason to pass up on that, really –

the defenses of the gate were sufficiently flimsy that it wouldn't eat much into his schedule to organize an assault at the end of the month, and the revert switch made the idea of exploring a necromancer's lair a lot less crazy than it was up until recently.

He definitely had to do something about the wards on the place, though. Sudomir seemed to have placed some very sophisticated stuff on Iasku Mansion, and Zorian didn't feel comfortable just ignoring them. Who knows what kind of exotic, forbidden stuff a necromancer like Sudomir wove into his warding scheme?

Maybe he could avoid triggering the wards at all? If he could find some way to pass the initial authorization test upon stepping through the gate, the wards should stay dormant. There had to be a keystone or some such that let people pass through unmolested, there was no way Sudomir keyed in every individual Ibasan into the damn ward scheme.

After some thought, he decided that such a bypass would be useful, but would likely just delay the problem – if it was Zorian in Sudomir's place, he would have definitely placed further tripwires around the mansion to foil such abuse. Considering how much Sudomir relied on his wards to deal with intruders, he was bound to have thought of that and more.

He was wrenched out of his musings by the voice of the station announcer, who informed him that the train was soon going to arrive to its next destination. Deciding he had delayed things a bit too much as it was, Zorian grabbed his luggage and went off in search of an exit.

It was time to visit the aranean colonies again.

- break -

The last time Zorian had tried to get instructions from the Luminous Advocates, the result was a frustrating negotiation process that had lasted for nearly three weeks and had consumed the entirety of his funds in exchange for useful, but decidedly non-critical knowledge. The one thing he had needed back then, they had been unwilling to teach him. Consequently, he had stopped bothering with them. Especially since he had since found other, much more reasonable webs to trade with.

The situation had changed, however. He was a lot better at mind magic now, so they should hopefully look down on him a lot less. He was also in a much better position to satisfy their assorted demands, thanks to the discovery of the aranean treasury back in Cyoria and the ability to steal money and resources from the Cult of the World Dragon by raiding their caches. Finally, after getting taught about aranean culture and customs from Voice of Peace, he had come to a conclusion that he had likely bungled his previous interaction with Luminous Advocates somewhat. He had come off as impatient and disrespectful, which probably had a lot to do with them dragging the negotiations out for several weeks – it was both the means of pressuring him into giving them greater concessions and a way of getting back at him for a perceived slight.

That was why, when Zorian went off to meet with the Luminous Advocates on the first day of the restart, he didn't offer a trade proposal. Instead, he simply introduced himself and asked for a meeting sometime in the future. He was told to come back in two days. He did just that, at which point he presented the Luminous Advocates with a gift and spent several hours pretending he'd just dropped by to have a friendly chat with them instead of anything serious. Only then did he present his offer, starting with a very ambitious plan where he offered a lot and demanded just as much. They refused, of course, making a counteroffer that was ridiculously more in their favor, and so the negotiations began...

It took them an entire week and a half to agree on a deal in the end, which was slow and annoying, but still a lot better than before. The agreement, much like the one he'd had with the Filigree Sages in the previous restart, went beyond his primary goal of learning how to repair memory packets and also encompassed refinement of his basic telepathy skills, practice of mental combat techniques and further development of his ability to tap into and interpret aranean senses. The last one was not something the Luminous Advocates had any real experience with, by their own admission, but they were willing to lend him their considerable expertise on the topic. In fact, that was the part of the deal they seemed most excited about.

Of course, Zorian didn't spend said week and a half idling around while the Luminous Advocates dragged their feet – he spent most of that time scouting out other aranean webs to see what they were able and willing to offer him. He visited the Talisman Bearers, Ghost Serpent Acolytes and Silent Doorway Adepts – the three 'shady' webs that the Illustrious Gem Collectors had informed him about back when he'd first sought other aranean webs to learn from. Back then he didn't feel safe dealing with them, but his skills at shielding his mind had grown considerably since then. He also toured the seven webs in the vicinity of Cyoria that he'd found out about from the Filigree Sages – the Burning Apex, Red Brand Bearers, Deep Blue, Crystal Torches, Indestructible Silver Order, Stone Revelation Chanters and Riddles of Opening. All of them were interesting in their own way, but none of them could really help him with his memory packet repairing problem better than the Luminous Advocates could.

The Talisman Bearers were a magic-focused web – the most heavily magic-focused one that Zorian had ever encountered – and were thus a bad choice to go to when dealing with a relatively exotic mind magic issue like his. Still, visiting them had not been a waste of time in the slightest. Out of curiosity, he had bought several of the metal discs they used for their spellcasting to see how they worked. The spell formula designs etched into the discs blew him away – subjected to size and scarcity restrictions largely foreign to human spellcasting communities, the Talisman Bearers focused on squeezing in as many spells as they possibly could onto their primary spellcasting tool. The design was complex and incredibly dense, but it worked smoothly and efficiently, without the destructive resonances and disruptions that usually plagued such highly compressed spell formula constructs.

The discs were useless to Zorian in their natural state – he wasn't an aranea, and these tools were very much intended for aranean use. Still, they were sufficiently similar to human spell formula that he could learn a lot from studying them. Considering how much he relied on items, any advantage in that area was noteworthy.

The Ghost Serpent Acolytes refused to see him. Apparently their god/guardian spirit told them he was bad news and that they should tell him to get lost. He had no idea what that was about, but it automatically made the web a lot more interesting than he expected. What did the spirit know

about Zorian that pissed it off so much? He left the Ghost Serpent Acolytes alone for now, but he made a mental note to visit the web again in the next restart, before doing anything else, to see if they reacted the same way.

The Silent Doorway Adepts were another surprise, because the ‘doorway’ in their name came from the Bakora gate around which they built their settlement. That was very, very interesting. They got really uncomfortable when he started asking questions about it, too, blatantly trying to change the subject. They claimed the gate mystified them as much as it mystified humans, but Zorian wasn’t sure he believed that. There was definitely a story there, and their web was famous for having some kind of secret magic that allowed them to get into places. Still, it was obvious he wouldn’t be getting anything out of them on the topic, so he politely backed off and moved on to other topics.

Sadly, they had no interest in teaching him things. They pointed him back towards some of the webs he’d already known about, such as the Luminous Advocates, and that was that. That was not to say they were not interested in trade, though – they very much were. They showed passing interest in most of the stuff he offered, but what really caught their attention was crystalized mana. They really wanted crystalized mana for some reason – they were willing to take all of it off his hands, if he was willing, or as much as he could spare otherwise. In exchange, they offered a wide variety of magical items and tomes, all clearly of human origin... and many of them very much illegal. They also offered to put him in contact with some of their human ‘trade partners’, in case he wanted something they currently lacked. They also admitted, after some prodding, that they could provide him with information about other aranean webs – where they could be found, what they were famous for, and what their weaknesses were. They warned him, however, that they would cut all ties with him if he misused such information.

After some thought, Zorian asked them about alternatives to the Luminous Advocates when it came to mind magic specialists, agreeing to their price for such information. After a few hours, their representative returned with the information in question, giving him the names and locations for about eight more webs that were notable for their mind magic mastery. He thanked them for the information and left.

The seven webs around Cyoria all had some things in common. For one, they were all very friendly to humans and a lot easier to talk to than any of the other webs he had been interacting with recently. For another, they were all magic-focused webs – Cyoria was the epicenter of the aranean magical revolution, and all nearby webs had adapted to take advantage of that in some fashion. Finally, they were a lot more hostile to their neighbors than the other webs he had spoken with. The Burning Apex, Red Brand Bearers, Crystal Torches and Indestructible Silver Order all tried to hire him to attack their neighbors, and the Burning Apex outright stated that they intended to massacre the entire Riddles of Opening web whenever they got the chance, down to the last male and child. Oh, and all of them were very interested in any information about the Cyorian webs and any possible weaknesses they might have.

Zorian suddenly understood why Spear of Resolve had been so worried about her neighbors and wanted to get humans on her side.

Thankfully, none of the webs actually insisted that he had to help fight their battles, and were happy enough to engage in more peaceful forms of trade. Naturally, Zorian was primarily interested in mind magic instruction. The local groups, although primarily magic focused, did have decent grasp of their innate mind magic... especially when it came to telepathic combat. Most of them were fine in tutoring him in their abilities, although the Stone Revelation Chanters and Indestructible Silver Order required a higher level of commitment than he was able to spare in this particular restart. In addition, most of them also traded in exotic alchemical ingredients gathered in the deep dungeon, some of which were impossible to acquire on the open market.

Unfortunately, it was impossible to hide from a bunch of natural mind readers that he had contacted other aranea groups in the area while receiving tutoring in mind magic from them, so he could only get instruction from one of the local webs. Most of them didn’t care if he was also receiving instruction from the Luminous Advocates, though, except for the Crystal Torches, who refused to teach him anything if they weren’t the only ones teaching him.

He chose Deep Blue in the end, because they were one of the three major webs in the area and struck him as the most peaceful of the lot. Also, Deep Blue mind magic specialized in dominating and manipulating the various monstrous denizens of the Dungeon. Zorian figured their methods of dealing with creatures very different from themselves might also be useful in his quest to understand the aranean mind. And if not, well, being more effective at herding and neutralizing magical creatures was still a pretty useful skill to have.

Thus, he’d secured himself two tutorships from two different aranea groups for the restart. The Luminous Advocates complained, questioning the usefulness of a web like Deep Blue when he’d already secured the services of ‘the best of the best’, but Zorian couldn’t help but notice that they got rather more motivated in their teaching ever since he’d done that.

Trying to arrange for a third group of aranean teachers would definitely be a mistake, though. Best not be too greedy.

- break -

Not much happened until the very end of the restart. He dutifully kept learning mind magic from the Luminous Advocates and Deep Blue, and when he wasn’t doing that, he was advancing his studies in other magical disciplines and preparing things for the upcoming gate assault at the end of the restart. He was rapidly going through magical books he’d recovered from the aranean treasury in Cyoria, writing down any interesting spell he could find and outright memorizing ones that looked particularly useful. Ward analysis divinations, new combat spells, mind magic of the more structured kind... he’d learned so many new spells he had trouble remembering them all. He was also steadily trying out new shaping exercises, writing down which ones were easiest to work with, which ones had a trick to doing them right and which ones became much easier if he did some other exercises before them. He was surprised how lacking the various exercise manuals were in regards to crucial information like that.

By the time the restart was nearing its end, Zorian was ready for another attempt at the gate. He had adjusted his arsenal in light of what he had discovered about his opponents and thus had made six golems to bring along with him as support. He’d also captured several Ibasans during his trips to Cyoria, trying to discover a method of passing through the gate without triggering the wards on Iasku Mansion. Sadly, none of them knew

the answer to that particular mystery. He could only hope that the actual gate guards were better informed.

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Finally, he had tried to find out as much as he could about Sudomir Kandrei without attracting too much attention. Since the secret master of Iasku Mansion was also the mayor of Knyazov Dveri, he did that by teleporting to the town in question and started asking people questions and reading their minds while they talked. He found out that Sudomir had an excellent reputation among the people he governed – he was a capable administrator under whom the city grew a lot more rich and influential than it had previously been. He took full advantage of Eldemar's northern colonization drive to catapult the city to prominence, and then generously spread the wealth gained from that among the locals. He was known to be a rather secretive and private person, but very friendly and talkative when actually interacting with others. He was a powerful and talented mage, with a specialty in wards. His wife had died during the Weeping, and he was hurt deeply by it, never bothering to remarry.

Interestingly, Iasku Mansion wasn't as big of a secret as Zorian first imagined it to be. Quite a few people knew that Sudomir had some kind of secret hideout in the wilderness to the north, and that shady stuff happened there. However, most people thought that Sudomir's brand of shadiness involved smuggling of restricted merchandise and organizing drug-fueled orgies and what not. Basically, they thought he was connected to organized crime groups, not that he was animating corpses and betraying the country.

On the day of the summer festival, Zorian went to Cyoria and descended into the dungeon below the city to wait for the invasion to start. He couldn't find the group of hook goblins he'd used previously – him not being in Cyoria and killing monsters with Taiven had completely altered the distribution of monsters in the Dungeon compared to the previous restart – so in the end he settled for a female tentacle-tailed scorpion. Mostly because she had hundreds of young, and they followed her lead in everything. If he ordered her to attack the Ibasan base, they would do the same, with no need for specific directions coming from him.

Zorian slipped into the base while she and her brood distracted the defenders, much like he had last time. The golems, being much slower than him and very un-stealthy, were ordered to stay behind while he went off to subdue the more disciplined mages and war trolls stationed around the gate itself.

The war trolls were annoying. He needed the mages alive so he could interrogate them about the gate protections and the methods they used to summon Quatach-Ichl, but anything that would disable them would also fail to work against the war trolls. After some thought, he simply set up incineration traps a fair distance away from the gate and then started using a combination of guidance spells and gas bombs to bombard the area around the gate from a fair distance away. He turned the entire area into a thick cloud of sleeping gas, probably wasting more than half of the bombs needlessly, but whatever. The important thing was that the mages all ended up incapacitated and the war trolls came running after him, screaming their heads off.

They ran straight into the incineration traps, but rather than dying a horrible, fiery death, they survived the experience just fine. It took only a second for Zorian to realize what was happening. They weren't regular war trolls – no, these were the same sort of hyper-resilient ones that he and Taiven had encountered in one of the previous restarts. The ones that shrugged off fire. He teleported away in time to avoid being crushed to a pulp by the huge iron maces the two trolls wielded, but it was a short-distance teleport and they were upon him again in a heartbeat.

The resulting battle, which consisted mostly of Zorian teleporting around and throwing things at increasingly angry and injured war trolls, resulted in expenditure of nearly all of his prepared explosives and the destruction of four of his golems when he was forced to summon them as distractions half-way throughout the battle. Damn it.

But at least he was alive and well, and the same could not be said of his opponents. The war trolls were eventually frozen solid by freezing rays, after which he shattered them into pieces just to be sure. Live and learn – next time he was using frost traps instead.

Checking up on the rest of the Ibasans, he found them losing against the tentacle-tailed scorpions. They managed to wound the mother, but that only made her spawn go berserk with rage and they surged forth with suicidal fury. The Ibasans scattered in front of them, and Zorian made sure to pick off anyone that looked like they were actually making a dent in the horde or trying to organize the defenders.

With most of the threats neutralized, he went back to the gate and banished the cloud of sleeping gas that clung to the place so he could reach the mages he'd incapacitated.

What he found from their minds was encouraging. First of all, the four he'd incapacitated were the only ones that knew how to contact Quatach-Ichl. That was why the other defenders came to beg them for help in the previous restart – they weren't asking for permission to summon Quatach-Ichl, they literally didn't know how to do it themselves. The method itself consisted of a simple sending spell, though one that required a particular keystone to actually reach the ancient lich.

He had seen the keystone in question before, he realized. It was the teardrop-shaped amulet of polished black stone that high-ranking Ibasans always wore. He thought it was a purely ornamental thing to mark their station to other Ibasans, since it gave off no magic and had nothing whatsoever etched into its surface, but apparently he was wrong. Even now he could not figure out how it was supposed to work as a keystone, and he didn't dare analyze it too deeply, lest he trip some invisible tripwire and summon Quatach-Ichl to his location. He didn't feel like receiving a disintegration beam to the face at the moment.

Also, the way to enter the gate 'properly' consisted of letting a high-ranking Ibasan step through the gate first. This signaled to the wards in Iasku Mansion that everything was fine and everyone who entered after them is with them and thus also okay by association. Zorian did not know whether these specific Ibasans were keyed into the wards themselves or if the wards were detecting the presence of the keystone they all had on

their person, and he didn't care. He simply pushed one of the unconscious Ibasans through the gate, amulet included, and stepped through afterwards. Just to be safe, he instructed his two surviving golems to immediately follow after him.

He breathed a sigh of relief when the wards failed to react to his presence and the gate didn't close. Success.

"Let's see what I can find before Sudomir realizes he has an intruder in his home," Zorian mumbled to himself, stepping over the unconscious body of the Ibasan he pushed through the gate.

He motioned his two golem bodyguards to follow after him and then moved deeper into Iasku Mansion.

- break -

Considering it was one of the invasion points used to attack Cyoria, Iasku Mansion was surprisingly empty. Now that he didn't have to dodge undead attackers all the time, Zorian had time to explore the interior and was baffled by how seemingly ordinary it was. It was an empty, but otherwise unexceptional mansion.

He encountered neither traps nor undead until he tried to move towards the very center of the mansion, where he suspected Sudomir was located. At that point he crossed some invisible threshold and he felt the wards try to probe his soul and fail. A heavy feeling promptly settled down around him as the wards concentrated their energies around him.

Knowing that the hordes of undead inside the place were making their way towards him and no longer caring about stealth, Zorian started testing the wards to see what exactly they did. He began by throwing one of his last remaining explosives in front of him and activating it to see if it would work. It did, but that didn't necessarily mean the adjustments he'd made since last time were actually working. In the previous restart, his explosives had worked just fine at first, only to suddenly fail when he faced off against Sudomir. In all likelihood, the warding scheme only turned on its heaviest defenses when Sudomir commanded it to do so, and left them dormant otherwise to conserve mana.

Trying to scry on the dimensional gate to see if it had closed when the wards turned on him failed – nothing inside the house could be targeted by any of the divination spells he was aware of. Teleporting out didn't work, and connecting a recall tether to a stone cylinder and launching it through the window as far as it could go didn't allow him to recall himself out of the place either. The wards were also filling the entire mansion with a low-powered shaping disruption field – not enough to stop him from casting things, but definitely making his spellcasting take longer and require more concentration.

He considered simply escaping outside through the windows – a surprisingly viable option, since they were very large and could be opened easily from the inside – but decided not to. Sudomir seemed pretty talkative in the previous restart, and now that Zorian knew he had a guaranteed way out, he wanted to see what would happen if he talked to the man. Maybe Sudomir was the sort of person who liked to gloat? It was stupid, but there were people like that.

Over the next half an hour, Zorian fought against an endless stream of undead. Unlike last time, he was able to conserve his dispeller grenades and other items by relying on his golems to keep some of the animated corpses busy while he tackled the rest. He was sufficiently effective at whittling down the army of undead, in fact, that Sudomir eventually decided to withdraw his remaining forces rather than see them all destroyed. Or at least that's what Zorian assumed, since all of the undead boars and black-clad corpses turned and fled at some point.

Huh. He did not expect that. He wondered whether Sudomir would even show up without Zorian being completely exhausted by his minions. Sudomir was clearly watching him, either through divinations or via some spying function embedded into the wards, so he surely knew Zorian was still dangerous to approach.

Shrugging, Zorian started analyzing the wards with the help of the ward analysis device he took from the aranean treasury. If Sudomir decided to stay away, that just meant he could deconstruct his warding scheme at his leisure, and that was still a win in his book.

Like he suspected, the wards did not like him trying to figure them out. If he hadn't already outed himself as an intruder, he was certain that his current attempt at analysis would have branded him as such immediately. Zorian expected as much – that was why he hadn't tried that the moment he stepped through the dimensional gate. What he didn't expect was for the wards to actively fight back against his analysis. The shifting of the local ward fields around him and the repeated disrupting pulses directed his way were disturbingly adaptive, too intelligently used to come from a mindless spell construct. Was Sudomir somehow adjusting the warding scheme on the fly or were the wards themselves somehow intelligent?

The air in front of him shimmered in a vaguely humanoid shape, and Zorian immediately fired a force lance at the spot. The shimmer was unaffected, though, and soon solidified into a ghostly image of a familiar man. A tall, older, muscular man, dressed in an expensive brown suit. He had a huge mustache and a smiling, sunny expression on his face.

Zorian wasn't fooled, though. While Sudomir's illusionary projection tried to give off an air of happy indifference, his smile was noticeably more strained compared to how it was the last time he had seen him.

"Hi there!" Sudomir greeted him through his projection. "I'm not sure if you're aware of this, but this is a private residence. You can't just come in here and start tearing the place apart! What did I ever do to you, anyway?"

"I'm surprised you're willing to show your face so openly, Sudomir Kandrei," Zorian stated, scanning his surroundings to make sure Sudomir was not trying to distract him with his projection while setting up a surprise attack.

"Ha! A mage of your caliber doesn't stumble into a place like this accidentally," Sudomir scoffed. "Your skills, your equipment... you already

knew who and what was here, I'm sure. The interesting question is, who are *you*? It's only polite to introduce yourself to people, don't you know?"

"Why did you help the Ibasans organize their attack on Cyoria?" Zorian asked, not interested in giving any personal information to Sudomir and not really finding the man's antics amusing. "The death toll is in the thousands, and will only grow larger by the end. What did those people ever do to *you*, Sudomir?"

"Ah. It's nothing personal, really," Sudomir shrugged, his smile dimming somewhat. "They're just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Politics can be brutal like that."

"Politics?" asked Zorian incredulously. "They're trying to release a primordial to rampage around the continent and you think that's somehow in your political interest?! I can understand how the Ibasans think this is a good thing for them, but what about you? Why would *you* want that to happen?"

Sudomir stared at him for a second with a judging look on his face.

"So you know about that too, huh?" he said, clacking his tongue in distaste. "Well, I don't think I feel comfortable discussing my goals with you, my dear home invader. However, just between you and me, I'd wager the Ibasans are too optimistic about this primordial's supposed danger level. It's going to do a lot of damage, I'm sure, but to imagine it running around the continent, destroying things at whim? Not a chance. I give it at best a week before Eldemar gathers enough troops to kill it. And that's assuming it's not just a dumb animal that will wander into the first trap they set for it."

"That's a very reckless attitude to have about the scenario," Zorian frowned. "What if you're wrong?"

"Nothing in life comes without risk," Sudomir said in a lecturing voice.

Ugh. He was going nowhere with this conversation, and the man was blatantly stalling for time. He dispelled the projection with a wave of his hand and started walking towards the center of the mansion again, his two golem bodyguards walking in front of him. There was no point in trying to analyze the wards again, since he couldn't get through the weirdly intelligent safeguards Sudomir had put in place to prevent such things.

Another ghostly projection shimmered into existence in front of him, but he dispelled it before it had a chance to speak.

"Now that's just rude!" a disembodied voice echoed all around him. No more projection this time – just sound that followed him around wherever he went. "We were having a conversation!"

There was a locked door in his way, so Zorian chucked one of his three remaining explosive cubes at it. It failed to work when he gave it a signal to explode.

"Sorry, but no explosions in my house," Sudomir's disembodied voice declared.

Zorian frowned. Just like in the previous restart. And he had adjusted his explosive to try and counter the effect too. Worrying. By themselves, anti-explosion wards were nothing new. Every important building had them. Most of the time, though, they were just basic things that could not stand up to Zorian's craftsmanship. Sudomir's wards could not only counter his basic explosives, but also his specialized work that was expressly designed to work inside a heavily warded area.

His hand instinctively grasped one of the explosive rings he carried around his neck. His old suicide method, which he opted to still carry around just in case. He quickly took off one of the rings and threw it at the door, wanting to see if *they* would work. The suicide rings were his most sophisticated work, after all, designed to work no matter what the circumstances.

The ring failed to blow up. Hmm. Maybe the wards worked on some exotic principle that totally shut down all spell formula-based explosives?

To test that theory, he threw a bottle of liquid explosive, alchemically made and devoid of any fancy spellwork, at the door in question. The bottle exploded as intended, sending dust and wooden splinters everywhere.

So alchemy-based explosives still work. Good to know.

"Just how many expendables did you bring with you?" Sudomir asked him through his voice spell. "It must have cost a fortune! I'm flattered that you spent all that money on little old me, but is that really the best use of your resources?"

After that, the remaining undead in the mansion started attacking him again, trying to ambush him from nearby rooms as he tried to navigate the confusing inner layout of the mansion. They failed to actually hurt him, but they slowed his advance to a crawl and ended up being enough in the end.

He literally ran out of time – the restart ended before he could track down Sudomir and confront him.

Oh well, there was always next time.

- break -

The next restart was largely similar to the previous one. He still contacted Deep Blue and the Luminous Advocates for mind magic instructions and

largely spent the entire restart working on his mind magic. He did make a minor deviation at the start of the restart in order to visit the the Ghost Serpent Acolytes, though.

They told him the exact same thing they had in the previous restart: the Ghost Serpent says he's bad news and that he should go away. Trying to find out why he was bad news yielded no results – the spirit the web in question worshipped refused to say what about him was 'bad news'. The very knowledge of what sort of bad news he was, was in itself bad news. He was the worst news.

Bizarre. Well, disliking someone for no reason was no crime and, short of attacking the Ghost Serpent Acolytes, there was nothing Zorian could do about the situation. And if he attacked them, then he was kind of vindicating the asshole spirit in a way, wasn't he?

His lessons with the Luminous Advocates progressed at a rapid pace. By the end of the restart, he was ready to attempt to repair the matriarch's memory packet. It worked... sort of. The packet wasn't exactly fixed, but he'd halted the degradation and bought himself another two months before it would start to decay again. That, the Luminous Advocates informed him, was the only thing that could really be done about a decaying foreign memory packet – you mentally stitch it together and it would hold for a time, but that process was in itself destructive to the packet, so there were only so many times one could repair it. Based on the size and condition of the matriarch's memory packet, the Luminous Advocates thought it could only be repaired one more time without risking its destruction.

He had two more months to get better at memory packet repairs, after which he would get one more chance to buy some time. That meant that, depending on how good the second round of repairs went, he had about four or five more restarts at most to get good enough at interpreting aranean memories to read the memories stored in the packet.

He decided he had to get some experience with reading aranean memories. *Actually* reading aranean memories, not doing simplified exercises with aranean tutors. Of course, neither the Luminous Advocates nor Deep Blue would agree to work with him on that, and he would bet that no other web could be talked into it either. No, that sort of thing was virtually always a hostile act – something you do to your enemies.

So the solution was simple. He had to find some aranean enemies.

His first idea was to go after the Sword Divers. After all, they did try to ambush him once, and he still held a grudge about that, even if they didn't remember any of it. It even worked for a time – he managed to ambush several Sword Diver patrols and captured them for memory reading.

His first two attempts to read the aranean mind ended up about as well as his first attempt at reading human minds. That is, not well at all. He improved quickly, however, and soon found out some interesting things about Sword Divers. They had a habit of attacking vulnerable mages, it turned out – they limited themselves to mages that tried to explore the Dungeon beneath Korsa, and they were very careful about whom they targeted, but they were definitely willing to attack anyone they saw as an easy target. They also lived very deep in the Dungeon, and any time they made the wrong person 'disappear', they just retreated from the surface layers until the searches and outrage died down.

And that is what the Sword Divers did when they realized someone was targeting them – they flat out abandoned the Dungeon beneath Korsa, retreating into the depths. Having read their minds, Zorian knew it would be weeks, perhaps months before they deigned to return, and he didn't dare follow after them.

So he just looted their surface money stashes (more out of spite than because he really needed the cash) and went searching for more targets.

He asked both Deep Blue and the Luminous Advocates if they knew an aranean web they wouldn't mind being targeted. Surprisingly, it was the Luminous Advocates that were more interested – he expected Deep Blue to jump at the chance, considering their neighborhood, but they were actually pretty content with their current situation. They did offer him a job, however... one that they claimed would buy him pretty much anything he wanted out of them. Basically, they wanted him to get rid of the crystal ooze that was harassing their resource gathering expeditions into the deeper parts of the Dungeon.

Crystal oozes were virtually immune to physical damage, quite fast, absorbed most forms of magical energy, could shoot arrow-like shards of crystal at things that annoyed them, and even a tiny prickle from one of their crystal blades and shards would rapidly turn a living being into a crystal statue. They were sometimes called crystal basilisks, and they were one of those nightmare monsters that nobody actually wanted to fight unless there was no choice.

Deep Blue didn't seem very surprised when he declined their offer.

As for the Luminous Advocates, they were apparently under constant threat from a web they called 'The Demon Skin Web' or the 'Howling Ones'. Those weren't their real names, but since that particular web refused to talk to any of the other ones and simply did the telepathic equivalent of screaming whenever someone tried to talk to them, the Luminous Advocates didn't know what to call them. The Luminous Advocates indicated they wouldn't mind to see them gone, or at least thinned out a bit.

Well, by the end of the restart, Zorian had found out a lot of things about them. Such as that they called themselves Challengers of the Unspeakable, and were the so-called 'old aranea' – the magicless, original webs that got conquered, assimilated or exterminated by the newer, magic-using webs originating from underneath Cyoria. They had watched all their old neighbors fall before the tide of magic-using newcomers, either through violent conquest or through magic-using immigrants, until they were the only ones left. As far as they were concerned, it was the Luminous Advocates who were 'The Demon Skin Web'.

Tragic, but Challengers of the Unspeakable were also violent killers that actively raided their neighbors, and even nearby human communities when they could get away with it. Zorian had no qualms about raiding them back.

Finally, as the end of the restart approached, he started finalizing his preparations for another gate assault. This time his golem brigade would hopefully survive long enough to actually step into Iasku Mansion along with him, giving him solid superiority over Sudomir's undead guards.

As they say, third time's the charm

48. Well of Souls

Chapter 048

Well of Souls

Far away from any established path or settlement, in a small artificial cave that Zorian had made to serve as his workshop and base of operations, there was a large wooden table. A mass of papers was strewn over it, and Zorian was staring at it with a small frown. The collection of scribbled notes and crude diagrams in front of him would no doubt look like a haphazard mess to the casual observer, but there was a pattern to the chaos. Zorian had spent a fair amount of time assembling the entire thing, and each piece of paper was exactly where he wanted it to be.

Absentmindedly tapping his pencil on the table, Zorian considered the information laid out in front of him. Everything he knew about Sudomir and Iasku Mansion was there on the table, along with any other information he thought might be relevant for the upcoming gate assault. Truthfully, he already had a plan for the event... but it never hurt to double-check things, just in case he had forgotten something crucial. There were only three more days left until the summer festival, so if he wanted to make any significant changes to the plan, this was pretty much his last chance to do so.

After his conversation with Sudomir in the previous restart, Zorian was now fairly sure that the man had his own goals he wanted to accomplish, and was effectively a third faction of the invasion force. He was not just being a loyal member of the Cult of the World Dragon or sympathetic to the Ibasans – he was hoping to gain something out of this endeavor, and it wasn't the same thing that the other two factions were fighting for.

Sadly, he had been unable to figure out what Sudomir had been alluding to when he said he supported the invasion because of 'politics'. That could mean anything, really – there was no shortage of reasons why someone might want Cyoria gone or taken down a peg. Sudomir might be trying to alter the internal balance of power within Eldemar to advance his pet cause or trying to destroy Cyoria's regional importance to boost the power of his own town and domain. He might be trying to weaken Eldemar as a whole on behalf of foreign interests or he might simply want to distract the central government by destroying a major loyalist stronghold and giving them an external enemy to focus on. The possibilities were endless and he had no way to narrow things down.

Well, no way besides repeatedly invading Iasku Mansion or attacking Sudomir directly. The former he was already doing, and the latter was hard to pull off. It was too easy for Sudomir to teleport away if Zorian decided to attack him on the job, and Zorian didn't know where the man went when not attending to his duties. Certainly not to his home in Knyazov Dveri, which was virtually abandoned most of the time. Knowing Zorian's luck, Sudomir was probably spending most of his time safely ensconced in Iasku Mansion, which was essentially unassailable before the day of the invasion.

No, his current way of going about things was definitely the correct one. Sudomir was never as vulnerable as he was on the day of the invasion, and not just because he foolishly sent virtually all of his forces to join the invasion and then left the obvious hole in his defenses completely unguarded. Iasku Mansion was obviously more than just a secret base for Sudomir, otherwise he would have been far more willing to cut his losses and run in the previous restart. There was something there – something he was unwilling to abandon, even after being metaphorically caught with his pants down and steadily backed into a corner. Zorian had a feeling that if he could find this mysterious something, he would solve the mystery of what Sudomir's real goals were easily enough.

He spent several more minutes poring over the papers in front of him, considering and discarding various possibilities, before his eyes fell on the small cluster of notes dealing with Iasku Mansion's warding scheme. His frown immediately deepened. Those wards worried him. His research told him there were several methods that Sudomir could have used to achieve the sort of reaction Zorian had experienced when he had tried to analyze the wards, but in all honesty? The most likely answer was that Sudomir had bound souls into the mansion's warding scheme. It seemed fairly obvious, considering Sudomir was clearly very necromancy-focused, and it would explain the weird ominous feelings he kept getting whenever the wards recognized him as an enemy. Most wards weren't so obvious about targeting someone.

Another point in favor of such a theory was that Iasku Mansion wasn't situated on a mana well, as far as Zorian could tell. He had spent several days wandering around the area where Iasku Mansion was located, mapping the local geomantic web and dodging winter wolf patrols, and he had found no evidence of a convenient underground ley line that could be tapped into. In other words, Iasku Mansion couldn't possibly support a warding scheme of any appreciable power. Not with conventional methods, anyway. Souls though... souls continued producing mana, even after death. It was what made them so valuable to spiritual entities like demons and was one of the reasons why undead were so much more convenient to use than golems. It would take a lot of souls to power the sort of wards that Iasku Mansion sported, but it could be done. And Sudomir clearly had no problems getting souls, considering how many undead guards he had at his disposal.

Unfortunately, the illegal nature of soul magic made it difficult to gather solid information on its limitations and peculiarities. Even if he really was dealing with a creepy soul-powered house, Zorian had no idea what that meant for Sudomir's capabilities or how to exploit it. Coupled with the fact that Sudomir no doubt had some kind of last resort defense set up at the heart of his domain, and Zorian was feeling just a little bit uneasy about blithely walking in there without knowing more about what he was dealing with.

Fortunately, he was a mage. He had a way of having his cake and eating it too.

The basic idea came from seeing Sudomir's projection. Zorian couldn't really project himself through the mansion like that, since the wards would stop him, but he could pilot his golem army remotely. That would be very impractical for most mages, but he was a telepath, and a pretty damn good one at this point. All he had to do was install a bunch of telepathic relays into each golem, along with some moderately complex spell formula work to make them understand his telepathic commands.

It worked well. No, it worked *better* than well. Maybe it was because he had animated the golems himself, and they thus had affinity to his own thoughts, but ordering them around telepathically was very fast and smooth – almost like controlling additional bodies. He could never achieve that sort of precision and coordination with verbal commands, and Zorian was wondering if there was any point in even bothering with conventional control methods in the future. Unless he was designing golems for someone else's use, verbal commands were only useful as a backup method for times when his telepathy was being disrupted.

Unfortunately, there were some problems with his idea of simply throwing his golems at Sudomir and orchestrating things from relative safety. For one thing, the fact that he wasn't there personally meant he would be unable to use any magic to help them out. There was no way to cast spells remotely through his puppets – even his mind magic didn't extend beyond the golems themselves. He also wouldn't be able to activate his dispeller grenades and other spell items with mana pulses, which had necessitated a complete redesign of his arsenal into something cruder and less versatile. Finally, there was a fairly major issue of Sudomir seeing through his setup and disrupting his control over the golems. According to the books, that was the major reason why remote control schemes weren't more popular among mages – they were too easy to disrupt if the opponent knew what he was doing. Hopefully his solution to that problem would work. Come to think of it, he should probably check up on that now...

Dropping his pen on the table with a small sigh, Zorian left the planning room (as he had dubbed it) and went to the crafting chamber where he assembled his golems and other equipment. Most of the golems were already done at this point, silently standing at the far end of the room where they wouldn't be in the way, awaiting orders. Six golems – two of them big and bulky to soak up damage, and four smaller and faster ones to serve as a backbone of his little force. He extended his mind to them momentarily, testing their responsiveness to see if the control interface had degraded since their last test. It hadn't. Good. The first dozen or so versions had been very unstable, but it seemed he had ironed out all the flaws in the latest batch. He turned his attention to the reason he came here – his last, currently unfinished creation.

It didn't look like much, in all honesty. Thin, almost skeletal, and yet smaller than even his four agility-focused combat golems. The animation core that powered it was likewise underwhelming – the golem in question couldn't do *anything* without constant, detailed instruction. It would be useless for just about any purpose... except, hopefully, for the one that Zorian designed it for.

Namely, for being his body double. The golem was specifically designed to mimic his size and proportions, with an animation core meant to synchronize with his telepathic orders as smoothly as possible. Magical sensors allowed Zorian to see and hear through it as through his own senses, and while he couldn't achieve the same amount of hand-eye coordination while using it as he could with his own body, it should be enough to throw around grenades and walk around well enough to pass as a human being.

He glanced at the nearby alchemical container, where a syrupy pink liquid bubbled softly upon a carefully regulated fire. The artificial skin solution looked pretty much done to his eyes, but the recipe he had bought claimed the whole thing needed to simmer for at least another fifteen minutes so he left it alone for the moment, putting the golems through another round of tests to pass the time.

Finally, once the fifteen minutes had passed, he dumped the artificial skin solution over the golem and quickly started molding it into something resembling himself before it solidified and became unmodifiable.

Half an hour later, he stood back to inspect his handiwork. It... was kind of bad. The golem didn't really look like him much, or even entirely human, despite his best efforts. Either he sucked even more as a sculptor than he'd thought he did or he should have taken the solution off the fire sooner, recipe be damned. But it was adequate, really – some strategic goggles, heavy clothing and maybe a large hat should be enough to hide the imperfections. It should look human enough to fool Sudomir, at least until he could face off with the necromancer in person, at which point the man's soul sight would allow him to see through any amount of disguise anyway. Hard to hide that the golem has no soul, after all.

Oh well, even if the idea turned out to have been stupid and unnecessary in the end, he regretted nothing. He'd always wanted to make a body double of himself to offload some of his more annoying duties onto, and this seemed like a step in the right direction. Animation spells could get scarily intelligent at the highest levels of sophistication, so it should be possible to design a lookalike golem that could pass casual inspection and pose as him.

Looking at the misshapen thing in front of him, though, Zorian knew he was quite far from being able to create something like that.

He'd never be able to skip family gatherings with *this*!

- break -

By now, the gate assault had become something of a routine for Zorian. He dealt with the Ibasan defenders virtually flawlessly, the only complication being that the pair of cave drakes he'd used as a distraction had fallen a little too quickly for Zorian's liking. They were big and tough, but apparently hordes of weaker opponents were a better choice for keeping the defenders busy until he could secure the gate. Still, all of his golems had survived the attack on the Ibasan base, and most of his spell item stockpile was still unspent, so Zorian considered the first phase of the attack a success. With the gate secure, the real operation could begin. He pushed the unconscious body of one of the Ibasans through the gate to fool the mansion's wards into thinking the incursion was authorized and then stepped through, his golem battlegroup trailing behind him.

The plan was simple: Zorian would remain in the gate room, guarded by one of the big golems, while the rest of his force would be sent deeper into the mansion to confront Sudomir. Zorian would be essentially projecting himself through the smallest, most human-looking golem, occasionally giving the rest of the golems superfluous verbal commands to complete the illusion. Hopefully this would fool Sudomir into thinking he was dealing with two human invaders, one of whom was just guarding the gate while the other one led a force of golems deeper into his domain, rather than just one human that was directing the golems remotely. Not only should it keep Sudomir from trying to disrupt Zorian's remote control, it should also keep Sudomir's attention firmly on the advancing golems and reduce the chance of him sending his forces around to strike at real Zorian.

The first surprise came when his golems had reached the spot where the wards had turned on him in the previous restart. This time they didn't activate. Strange. After thinking about it for a while, Zorian decided it was probably because none of the golems had souls. The detection wards were probably soul-based, just like everything else in this house.

Sadly, that only delayed the problem, as he soon encountered a locked door he had to go through to keep advancing. The golem Zorian was puppeteering didn't have anything to pick the lock with, and even if it had, it lacked the manual dexterity to perform something as finicky as lock-picking, so he just ordered the big golem to smash the door aside.

Unsurprisingly, that proved too much for the wards to ignore, and they immediately turned hostile. Zorian ordered the golem group forward, trying to get them as close to the mansion's center as possible before Sudomir scrambled his undead forces and tried to intercept them.

Curiously, the dimensional gate stayed open, despite the activation of the wards. Zorian could feel the wards' agitation as they realized he was a threat and intensified around him, but even though he triggered the wards in such a brazen manner, even though he was right there in the gate room, the dimensional opening refused to close shut. Obviously triggering the wards outside the actual gate room sidestepped the automatic shutdown contingency, but that sounded like such a silly oversight that Zorian couldn't help but think Sudomir wanted things to work like that. Surely a warding expert like Sudomir wouldn't make that sort of mistake? And even if he did, he almost certainly had a way to shut down the gate on his own initiative, independent of any automatic shutdown.

What was he missing here? Why would Sudomir *want* the gate to remain open, even if he had intruders inside his mansion?

Well, whatever. Only one way to find out. The golems pressed onwards, even as the first waves of undead began to crash into them. Zorian had plenty of spell items to burn this time, so he used them quite liberally on the attackers to great effect. His advance was steady and unstoppable, and the attacks on his golem group became increasingly frantic and disorganized as time went by. Sudomir hadn't even tried to contact him, in person or via projection.

There were far less traps than Zorian expected there would be, though in retrospect it made a lot of sense that Sudomir wouldn't seed his corridors with explosives and other destructive effects. Nobody wanted their possessions trashed by their own defenses, and the mansion was usually filled to the brim with guards anyway. When Zorian did finally encounter a real trap, it came in the form of a gas trap that rapidly filled an entire hallway with thick, yellow smoke. Considering that the gas had no effect on his golems and that the activation of the trap was soon followed by one last attack by the mansion's undead defenders, Zorian guessed that the gas was poisonous. It was a pretty good way to debilitate unprepared living foes while leaving the undead boars and warriors unaffected. The smoke also reduced visibility for anyone relying on regular sight, while the undead didn't seem affected by the resulting visibility issues.

Sudomir had clearly put in his all into this one last attack, even sending a pair of flesh golems to reinforce the more familiar boars and black-clad human corpses. The flesh golems managed to destroy two of his smaller golems before being torn apart, but the result was never really in doubt. The undead were destroyed and Zorian broke through the last door standing between him and his destination. The golem he was puppeteering stepped into the heart of Iasku Mansion, and the sight honestly left Zorian speechless.

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The room was large and cylindrical, with every inch of the walls covered with spell formula glyphs. Rather than being simply etched or painted on, however, the glyphs were made out of a shiny, silvery metal embedded into the walls. The really eye-catching thing, though, was the massive crystalline cylinder placed into the exact center of the room. It stretched from floor to ceiling, affixed to them via stone bases and thick metal bands, and emanated a soft blue glow that dimmed and brightened in a slow, regular pattern. Like a gigantic, glowing cylindrical heart.

Zorian stared at the glowing pillar and the glyph-covered wall in silence, wondering what the hell he'd stepped into. He had expected to find something interesting here, yes, but the sheer scale of the thing in front of him was rather intimidating.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Sudomir said, stepping from behind the pillar. "It took me years to build all of this. It's a work of love, and I'd really hate to see it damaged. So be a little careful with those explosives you are toting around here, okay?"

Zorian frowned at the man in front of him. Sudomir was just standing there, smiling at him cockily. It was as if he was daring Zorian to attack him. For a moment, he debated simply ordering his golems to surge forwards and crush Sudomir into paste, but he decided to hold back for the moment. He wanted to see if he could get something out of the man first.

"The cylinder is a soul storage device, isn't it?" Zorian spoke through the golem. "That's how you're powering the wards in this place. There must be hundreds of souls trapped there..."

"*A soul storage device!?*" Sudomir repeated, sounding quite outraged. His left hand twitched uncontrollably for a second before Sudomir used his other hand to still its movements. "You think all of this is just..."

He burst into laughter, like he'd just heard a very amusing joke.

Was it just Zorian or did Sudomir sound just a little bit unhinged this time?

"My dear, foolish, uninvited guest... you have no idea what you have stumbled upon here, do you? Look around you!" said Sudomir, making a sweeping gesture with his hands to indicate at the room they were standing in. "Do you really think this place is just a simple soul storage device?"

No, no, my friend – what you are looking at is a veritable well of souls containing thousands of spiritual essences, and with enough room for a million more!"

"A million souls?" Zorian asked incredulously. "Come on now, Sudomir... how would you even gather that many souls in a timely manner?"

"Cyoria has almost half a million people," Sudomir said, shrugging lightly. "If the attack on Cyoria goes as planned, most of them are going to die tonight. They will then go here to join the ones I've already gathered."

He knocked on the crystal pillar lightly for emphasis.

"What?" asked Zorian, a horrifying realization dawning on him.

"Oh yes... This place?" began Sudomir, spinning in place with his hands outstretched. "This is the equivalent of an antlion pit for souls. Everyone who dies in the vicinity of Iasku Mansion has their soul drawn here and trapped in the well. Normally, that doesn't mean much, since we're in the middle of nowhere. But now..."

"The gate," Zorian said. "It allows you to extend your soul trap over the city while the Ibasans go about killing people. That's why you haven't closed the gate, even after you realized you were under attack."

"Every moment that the gate spends closed is a moment during which souls are not flowing into the well," Sudomir said. "And, you see, there were no more attackers pouring in by the time I noticed the intrusion. Only you two... or perhaps just one? I can't see a soul on you. You didn't react at all when I flooded the corridor with breath-stealer gas, either. Not to mention how suspiciously passive the mage next to the gate is. You're some kind of fancy projection, aren't you?"

Before Zorian could say anything, Sudomir started laughing again, loudly and hysterically, his hands twitching and clenching in a disturbing manner. Zorian was pretty sure at this point that there was something very wrong with Sudomir. He had triggered some pretty radical change in the necromancer with his successful invasion. The laughter, the twitching, the unusual candidness of his responses... Sudomir looked almost drugged. Did he panic in the face of the crisis and take some ill-advised enhancement potion? Or maybe perform some spell with severe side-effects? Whatever the answer, Sudomir was steadily becoming more unstable as the conversation progressed and Zorian didn't think he would get much more out of him.

"Why? Why!?" Sudomir screamed suddenly, instantly transitioning from laughter to overdramatic despair. His skin writhed like snakes were swimming through his flesh and his eyes began to shine with a soft blue glow. Yup, he'd definitely panicked and done something stupid. "Why did you come here!? Everything was going so well, so perfectly! All those years of planning, all the sacrifices I made... I won't let you take it all away from me! I won't, I won't, I won't, I won't!"

Zorian ordered his golems to attack the man, but he had made his move far too late. Before the golems could reach him, Sudomir's body rapidly expanded and twisted, transforming into a huge humanoid monster. It was green, vaguely reptilian and had small, vestigial wings growing out of its back – like a cross between a troll and dragon.

The golems he'd ordered to attack Sudomir kept charging at their target, undaunted by the transformation, but the creature was stronger and more agile than Zorian's creations. It probably was part-troll, too, because it definitely regenerated like one when wounded. It did not take long for the smaller golems to be reduced to scrap, and the big golem wasn't doing so well either.

Zorian was just about to hit it with every spell item he had left when he found out that the troll-dragon thing could breathe fire too. The poor golem he was following didn't last a second under the heat before failing.

The big golem disappeared from his control less than a minute later. Knowing that he had no chance against this transformed, berserk version of Sudomir, Zorian stepped back into the Ibasan base on the other side of the dimensional gate and then tried to analyze the gate to see how it worked.

Predictably, the gate soon detected his tampering and shut itself down. Of course. He kind of figured that would happen. Well, at least that way Sudomir couldn't get to him, and he'd also located one of the traps Quatach-Ichl had placed on the gate to prevent tampering with it. It would take a fair number of restarts, but he felt he could locate and dismantle the protection on the gate with a bit of trial and error.

He didn't have much time to consider things, though, because Quatach-Ichl showed up soon after the gate closed to see what was happening. Zorian activated his restart switch rather than confront him.

- break -

At the start of the next restart, once he had a chance to calm down and think about things, Zorian decided that Sudomir had to be dealt with somehow. Originally he'd gone after the man because he had seemed like an easier target than the Ibasan leaders and probably knew a lot of their sensitive secrets, but the revelation about his soul gathering operation really disturbed Zorian. He had no idea what one would need hundreds of thousands of souls for, but it couldn't possibly be good. Politics, he'd said. Hmph.

Still, this soul trap of his... it should be very obvious to someone who knew what to look for. Large-scale magic like that couldn't be hidden easily. Was that why Sudomir had gotten rid of every soul mage in the region? So they couldn't stumble upon his twisted masterpiece and report him to the government? If so, then dealing with Sudomir might simply be a matter of reporting the man to central authorities and having them deal with everything.

He didn't need this kind of distraction at the moment, though – the matriarch's memory package was steadily degrading and he was running out of time. Thus, for the next two restarts he continued doing what he had been doing thus far: visiting aranean webs in order to learn more about memory packets and the aranean mind. He still made two gate assaults at the end of each restart, but he no longer tried to access the soul well in the center of the mansion. He didn't see the point – he completely lacked the expertise to make sense of that thing, so he doubted he would learn anything from studying it. Instead, he simply explored the rest of the mansion, building a map of the place and trying to see if there was anything else interesting about it. He didn't find much, though. Certainly nothing that could compare with the soul trap in the central room.

He also tried to make sense of the teardrop pendants the Ibasans wore around their necks, also without much luck. Analyzing them did not bring down Quatach-Ichl's wrath on him like he had feared, but there was nothing there to indicate he was holding a functional keystone. The only thing he could think of was that the material itself was perhaps the key. Zorian couldn't identify it, and it was totally indestructible to casual efforts. It kind of reminded him of Quatach-Ichl's skeleton, which was also black in color and incredibly resistant to damage.

Although the Luminous Advocates remained his primary aranean teachers in these two restarts, he also checked out the eight webs he was referred to by the Silent Doorway Adepts. Sadly, only three of those were in any way useful to him: The Mind Temple, Perfect Phantasm Crafters and Adherents of Contemplation. Zorian chose to learn from the Mind Temple in the first restart and the Perfect Phantasm Crafters in the second one. The Adherents of Contemplation were too fond of riddles and non-answers for his taste.

The Mind Temple were all about memory, though more focused on honing and organizing their own memories than reading and modifying other people's ones. Still, they had quite a lot of expertise when it came to memory packets, even if what they taught him was centered more about him making his own memory packets than repairing foreign ones. His skills at making memory packets were good enough by now that he would never really forget anything he specifically tried to remember. If nothing else, that should drastically reduce the number of notebooks he had to write and store at the end of each restart – the alteration method was still useful for transferring other people's notes across the restart, such as Kael's research, but most of his own needs were now better served by directly organizing his memories with mind magic.

The Perfect Phantasm Crafters had a very indicative name. They specialized in making illusions – ones made out of real sound and light, as well as simple tricks of the mind. They couldn't really help him with his memory package problem, but Zorian would also have to actually interpret the information inside the package once he opened it, and Perfect Phantasm Crafters knew a lot about the difference between human and aranean minds. They had to, if they wanted their illusions to work on humans.

However, as helpful as the Perfect Phantasm Crafters were in that regard, there was ultimately only one thing that consistently helped him to understand aranean thoughts – beating up aranea unconscious and forcibly rooting through their minds. Even getting Lukav to make him an aranea transformation potion and assuming their shape for a few hours hadn't helped him as much.

At the end of the second restart, he tried repairing the matriarch's memory package again. It was the last time he would be able to extend the deadline, and he was hoping to get four or five extra months before he had to open it.

Instead, he got three.

Damn it.

- break -

Though he had only three more months until he had to open the matriarch's memory packet, Zorian decided to stop seeking lessons from the aranea and simply go back to Cyoria, taking Kiruelle with him as usual. There was no point in seeking the lessons at the moment, since he could no longer repair the packet and the only thing that could really improve his ability to understand it was attacking aranea and reading their minds. He didn't need to set aside an entire restart to do that. Besides, he wanted to ask Kael about his opinion of Sudomir and his operations, since the morlock was the only friendly necromancer that Zorian knew.

He didn't tell Kael about Sudomir and his soul trap immediately, though – that was bound to be rather upsetting to the boy, considering that a lot of Kael's friends and acquaintances were killed by Sudomir and probably ended up in that soul well of his. Not really the best topic to broach just after you told someone all about the time loop and the Ibasan invasion that was going to hit the city in less than a month. He would let Kael browse through his notebooks in peace for now and broach the subject later.

Unfortunately, coming back to Cyoria meant that he had to suffer through Xvim's stupid exercise sessions again. Levitate these marbles, make them glow different colors, assemble them into different shapes... so boring. Wait, fuse two marbles together? What? Xvim usually didn't give him any alteration-based shaping exercises during these sessions. But no matter, he had already tried that shaping exercise on his own, so it was still trivial to perform it.

Xvim frowned at him. Should he be worried or celebrate that he induced that kind of reaction out in the usually imperturbable man?

Worried, it turned out. Xvim's demands immediately became atypical following that. Zorian was told to levitate water, to freeze it solid, to make a perfect cube out of ice and then quickly cut it in half without shattering it, to reshape a coin, to burn images into wooden panels, to make a coin spin, to shape candlewax, to hold his hand over a candle flame without getting burnt, to make dice fall on one specific side Xvim called out, to repair a damaged watch, to wilt a flower, to teleport a snail...

Quite a few exercises were utterly beyond Zorian, especially the latter ones. Others he could do, but not with the surety that he knew Xvim demanded of his charges. And yet, Xvim did not triumphantly stop once he'd found something that Zorian was incapable of and then tell him to practice that until he got it right. Instead he just moved on to something else, apparently just testing him to see where his limits were.

“Tell me honestly,” Xvim said. “Are you truly Zorian Kazinski?”

“Yes?” Zorian said, baffled. “Why would you ask that?”

“You are too good,” Xvim told him bluntly.

What? Now he decided he was too good at this? Bizarre. What did he do to perturb Xvim so much? He couldn’t really remember doing anything more impressive than usual.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Zorian said. “I am definitely Zorian Kazinski, though, no doubt about it.”

“Then how do you explain your shaping skills?” Xvim asked. “They are completely implausible for your age and known background. No matter how talented you may be, your shaping skills are just too... *thorough*... to be anything but a product of years of practice.”

“I started early,” Zorian tried.

Xvim gave him an unamused look.

“I’m going to be perfectly honest with you, mister Kazinski,” Xvim said with a sigh. “I know it was me who taught you those shaping skills you are currently displaying. Not all of them, but definitely the ones that you have learned properly. Not only do you display some tells that I don’t think anyone other than me would have taught you, but you also seem to know me well enough to anticipate my requests before I even speak them.”

Oops. He hadn’t even realized he’d been doing that.

“The thing is, mister Kazinski,” said Xvim, leaning forward and fixing him with a small glare, “I don’t remember ever teaching you. And I assure you that I have a *very* good memory. I would like an explanation, if you don’t mind.”

Zorian was silent for nearly a minute, thinking of how to answer that. He could just play dumb, but he had a feeling that Xvim wouldn’t let this go and the most likely explanation for the confusion was that Zorian had used mind magic on Xvim in the past. Considering that he was, in fact, a highly capable mind mage, and that this would be hard to hide under determined scrutiny, it was in his best interest not to let things degenerate into actual legal investigation.

He could just hit the restart switch and start over, but... that felt a little excessive at this point. He could always do that later if the situation continued to deteriorate. Plus, activating the switch so early in the restart might bring unwanted attention from Zach and Red Robe.

Would it be so bad if he told Xvim the truth? The man knew how to protect his mind, and probably wouldn’t go around telling everyone who would listen that his student claimed he was a time traveler. As much as Xvim annoyed him, he was a capable adult mage that clearly knew a lot about limitations of magic and how to go about developing it. He could be quite useful if he could convince him he was telling the truth.

“I’m waiting, mister Kazinski,” Xvim said.

“Alright,” Zorian relented. “The truth is that we’re all trapped in a time loop of sorts. The whole month leading up to the summer festival repeats itself endlessly, but most people forget everything that happened when time resets itself. But some people remember, and I am one of them...”

Xvim listened to Zorian’s story in silence, neither asking questions nor professing disbelief. Zorian didn’t tell the man everything, of course – he said nothing about the invasion that happened at the end of the restart, for instance, and he kept information about himself and his abilities to a minimum. Definitely not telling the man who suspected him of messing with his mind that he was more than capable of doing just that!

Eventually, Zorian’s explanation wound down and silence descended upon the room. Xvim seemed to be lost in thought for the moment and Zorian was content to wait for the man’s reaction.

“So,” Xvim said eventually. “You are saying that we have been having these practice sessions for several years now, except that I forget all about them every few weeks.”

“Yes,” Zorian confirmed.

“That must have been a miserable experience for you, then,” Xvim observed candidly.

“Err...” Zorian fumbled, unsure how to respond to that.

“I am still not sure whether to believe you about all this,” Xvim said. “It seems quite unbelievable. However, assuming you are indeed telling the truth, I feel compelled to apologize for the actions of my... previous selves. You see, I make it a point to be very demanding with my charges for the first month or two of our mentorship.”

What?

“What?” Zorian asked incredulously, scarcely believing what he was hearing.

“It builds character and weeds out the unfit,” said Xvim, giving him an unrepentant shrug. “Moreover, most of the students being sent my way need to be humbled somewhat, for their own good. Unfortunately, a ‘time loop’ does not play well with such ploys. I wouldn’t have put you through

several years of that kind of treatment if I had any control over the situation.”

Zorian was torn between wanting to laugh and slugging the man in the face. He subjected every student to several months of being an utter jerk as a test of character? That was so stupid! How could he possibly think that was a reasonable thing to do?

“I cannot possibly put into words how much I want to hit you right now,” he told Xvim seriously.

“We’ll talk about expanding your vocabulary later,” Xvim told him dismissively, before depositing a pen and a piece of paper in front of him. “For now, please list a few things I can check to confirm your story.”

Shooting Xvim one last glare, Zorian picked up the pen and started writing. This was going to be one long restart, he could already tell.

49. Substitution

Chapter 049

Substitution

Time travel was a hard thing to prove. It was ‘known’ to be impossible among mages, and proof to the contrary usually boiled down to possession of impossible knowledge and skills. Unfortunately, that often simply wasn’t convincing enough. There existed a nigh-infinite number of ways to gather information with magic, none of which required time travel, and impossible skills could just as easily mean you were not who you claimed you were. There was little that Zorian could tell Xvim that couldn’t be explained with something more mundane than time travel.

Still. While Zorian had no idea whether Xvim was actually going to accept his story, he was confident that the information he’d written down on the sheet of paper in front of him would at least give the man some pause. The restarts varied greatly in how they developed, but some things always remained the same, which meant that Zorian could give Xvim a multitude of small predictions about the upcoming days. Things like what was going to be written in the newspapers, what magical stores would announce special sales in preparation for the summer festival and what students would end up leaving the academy because of the monster incursions. It helped that it had been less than a week since the restart had begun, so events didn’t have the time to diverge too much yet.

Individually, each of the things he’d written were easy to explain. When taken as a whole? He would have to be the best damn spy in the whole city to acquire that kind of information, and it *still* wouldn’t explain how he’d known about some of the more sudden events on the list.

He handed the list to Xvim, who quickly scanned it and then pocketed it with a silent nod. He told Zorian that he would try to verify his claims over the weekend and that Zorian should visit him again on Monday.

And that was that. A decent outcome, all things considered. Zorian halfway expected Xvim to criticize his penmanship and tell him to start over and write properly this time around. He bid Xvim goodbye and left.

He was in the process of walking back home, idly trying to think of a good way to broach the topic of Sudomir’s soul well to Kael, when he spotted a green-haired girl waving at him in the distance. Surprised and distracted as he was, it took him several seconds to realize who he was looking at, even though green hair was pretty damn rare and therefore a huge giveaway. It was Kopriva Reid, one of his classmates.

He waved back uncertainly, wondering what that was about. It was common courtesy to greet your classmates when you meet them outside the academy, of course, but this wasn’t the first time Zorian had encountered Kopriva outside the academy and she had never reacted like this in the past. She’d give him a nod if they passed each other by or say hello if he did it first, but never try to attract his attention like she just had. Which made sense, really. She was almost a total stranger to him, just like most of his classmates. So why was she…

Oh. Nevermind, he was going to find out what she wanted soon enough. She was crossing the street and making a beeline towards him.

Zorian studied her as she approached, trying to see if he was in some kind of trouble. He felt no hostility or apprehension emanating from her, so probably not, but Kopriva always kind of intimidated him. Less so since he got stuck in the time loop – before he used to actively avoid her whenever possible – but even in his current situation he’d rather not tangle with someone from House Reid. He was still vulnerable to being drugged senseless, and that was kind of their specialty.

He clearly wasn’t the only one who found her intimidating, either. She was a tall, shapely girl – something Zorian could attest to at the moment, what with her getting ever closer to his position – but very few people had tried to court her over the years. Even Benisek refrained from making a pass on her, which was pretty damn amazing. Zorian was pretty sure that Akoja was the only other girl in their class who Benisek had never tried to flirt with.

“Zorian, you can’t believe how glad I am to see you here,” she said once she’d finally gotten close enough. He raised his eyebrows at the statement. “You live together with Kael, right?”

“Yes,” he confirmed, curious what that had to do with anything.

“Good. I agreed to meet with him about a business deal today and he gave me the directions to this ‘Imaya’s place’ where you two live, but… I seem to be misremembering something because I can’t find it,” she said. “Could you give me some directions here?”

“I can do better. I’m on my way there myself, so if you don’t mind I can just walk you there,” he said.

“Great! I was hoping you would say that,” she grinned at him. “Lead the way, then. And don’t mention to anyone that I got lost, okay? That was pretty freaking embarrassing, I don’t know how I messed up so badly. If Kael asks, we just… met on the way by accident. Kind of true, anyway.”

Zorian nodded in acceptance and they both set off towards Imaya’s place. He couldn’t help but frown at Kopriva slightly, though. Business deal? Was this what he thought it was?

Unfortunately, Kopriva noticed the look and misconstrued its meaning.

“What’s that look for?” she asked defensively. “You don’t approve of me coming to your place or something?”

"It's not like that," Zorian assured her hurriedly. Man, she was prickly. "It's just that when Kael told me he was going to find someone to buy those 'rare' alchemical ingredients from, I didn't expect this to be the result. I thought he would go to someone... well, *older*."

When Kael had told Zorian that he had to get ahold of a fair amount of normally restricted alchemical ingredients to continue with his research, Zorian had thought the morlock would go to some shady shop or something, not try to broker a deal with one of their classmates. Then again, Zorian had to admit that that the idea wasn't stupid as such. House Reid, of which Kopriva was a member, specialized in growing magical plants and processing them into alchemical ingredients. It was also a public secret that they were heavily involved in the sale of drugs and illegal alchemy products in general, and through that maintained deep links with organized crime groups. There was a highly publicized trial against the House a few years back, since several smuggling rings were found to be led by 'exiled' members of the House, but nothing came out of it in the end. House Reid was responsible for a sizeable proportion of Eldemar's herb fields, greenhouses and forest preserves, some of which nobody except House Reid knew how to tend to, so the government wasn't willing to antagonize them too much.

So yes, there was some logic to Kael approaching Kopriva to acquire the needed ingredients, though Zorian was still very surprised it had worked. He would have expected Kopriva to act outraged at the implication that she was engaged in criminal activities, fearing some kind of trick. That's what Zorian would have done in her place. He would have to ask Kael how he had done it later, just in case there was some secret to it that he should know about – he did intend to make use of criminal networks himself in the near future, after all.

"Wait, you're in on that?" she asked, surprised.

"Yeah. We're in a partnership of sorts," Zorian said.

"Huh," she said, giving him a speculative look. "I would have never guessed you were involved in something like this. You just seem so straight-laced, you know? Then again, you're a pretty driven guy, and my grandfather always said that nobody ever got powerful by following the law."

Such sage wisdom from the older generation.

"To tell the truth, I would have never guessed you'd be involved in something like this, either," Zorian said. "I mean, weren't you annoyed when Kael approached you about this? Doesn't it bother you that one of your fellow students automatically assumed you were involved in your family's 'other business' simply because you're part of House Reid?"

She snorted derisively.

"Everyone assumes that anyway," she said. "They're just too polite to say it out loud. At least most of the time. Besides, I made some uncharitable assumptions about him as well. I wouldn't have acknowledged any random offer, you know? If *you* had been the one to approach me, I would have told you to go to hell. And possibly punched you, if you didn't back off after that. But since Kael is a morlock, I assumed his offer is actually genuine. Morlocks have a reputation of their own, you know..."

Ah. So *that's* why it had worked so easily.

Kopriva then tried to talk him into telling her what he and Kael needed so much restricted material for and how they had gotten the money to pay for it. Zorian actually answered the first, saying it was for benign medical research (totally true, unless Kael was misleading him) but refused to answer questions about the money. He took the chance to ask her if she was planning on reporting them to someone, reading her surface thoughts to make sure she was telling the truth. She denied that – truthfully, as far as he could tell – and seemed more amused than insulted by the accusation. She didn't really believe they wanted the materials for medical research, though. Zorian didn't bother convincing her he was telling the truth.

After that, the conversation shifted to other, more casual topics. Mostly academy-related, as that was a relatively inoffensive subject, but Kopriva sometimes pried into his private life when she saw a convenient opportunity to do so. It was interesting, as she hadn't been this talkative in the previous restarts when she'd joined his combat magic group.

Eventually they reached their destination, at which point Kopriva met Imaya. His landlord had either never heard of House Reid or had an even better poker face than Zorian had thought, because she looked positively overjoyed about Kopriva's visit. She insisted that Zorian was rude not to offer Kopriva something to eat and drink before dragging her away to hash out a deal.

"Food before work," Imaya said in a lecturing voice. "That's the rule."

Since Kopriva seemed actually excited at the prospect of eating some homemade cookies, Zorian went along with it. He wasn't in that much of a hurry.

He really shouldn't have been surprised when Kopriva asked Imaya for a glass of beer, or when Imaya gave them both a glass in response. He covertly transmuted the liquid into something non-alcoholic while they weren't looking, but that just made the stuff taste even viler than it usually did, so he may have shot himself in the foot there.

In the end, while the deal was successfully concluded, what was supposed to be a relatively short visit ended up taking most of the afternoon. Kopriva even ended up meeting Kirielle, with whom she got along surprisingly well – he would have to talk to his sister later about what was acceptable for conversation around the green-haired girl, since Kopriva said she would drop by again next week to deliver the materials. He should probably have a talk with Imaya as well, just in case the older woman really had no idea who she was dealing with.

Ultimately, though, Zorian did not worry about the whole thing too much. The deal was largely arranged by Kael, for Kael, with Zorian's role

being mainly to pay for it all. As such, he felt it was only proper to let the morlock boy take care of it while Zorian focused on something else.

Gods knew he had too many things vying for his time as it was.

- break -

Zorian's plan for the weekend consisted of two solid days of aranea fighting and accompanying memory reading to practice for the eventual opening of the matriarch's memory packet. Sadly, the plan didn't survive collision with reality. His first target – the Burning Apex web in the vicinity of Cyoria – turned out to be a rather poor choice for aggression.

They were a martially-inclined web, proficient in both magic and mental combat, and had spent most of their existence in fierce competition with the neighboring webs. The patrol he ambushed seemed like easy targets to him, but they ended up being anything but. They worked together flawlessly, had some sort of mental attack that could partially pass through his mental barriers and had prepared the battlefield beforehand. They ended up maneuvering him into a pre-existing explosion trap and detonated a boulder right next to him. He managed to shield himself against the bulk of the blast, but he still ended up with a severely wounded arm and a multitude of minor scrapes. Plus he had a raging headache from when he failed to shield against their telepathic attacks properly.

He activated his recall stone and fled.

The damage was nothing really serious, he later found out, but it would take several days before he was completely healed, even with the healing potions that Kael was supplying him. Since embarking on further campaigns against the aranea while in less than top form struck him as a terrible idea, his plans would have to be delayed. Damn it.

At least Kael was happy. Ever since he had found out that Zorian could teleport all over the country as he pleased, he had been trying to talk Zorian into taking him to the northern wilderness so he could gather herbs, mushrooms and other materials for his research. Zorian had been decidedly against it, considering it to be a waste of time... but since his plan was already shot to hell and he couldn't do much at the moment, he figured he would grant Kael's wish just this once.

Accordingly, Sunday found Zorian wandering around the forest with Kael. Zorian had expected his role would be to simply teleport Kael around and protect him from anything that sought to kill them, but Kael was feeling talkative that day and insisted on explaining everything he was doing to Zorian. Every time they encountered one of the plants Kael was looking for, the morlock boy told him why the plant could be found in that particular place, what it was useful for, and how to harvest the plant correctly. All of which was very important information that was not easy to get ahold of – one could not find this sort of thing in most books, as people were reluctant to share this sort of information. It was all too easy to overharvest specific magical plants if too many people were doing it, so there was a tendency among herbalists to guard their secrets tightly and only pass them on to their apprentices. Even so, quite a few magical plants went totally extinct over the centuries due to unchecked exploitation, making potions they were used for impossible to make in modern times.

So yes, it was a good thing to know all this. And yet...

"I still don't see why you wanted to do this so badly," Zorian complained as he used a knife to harvest some sort of river grass. The thing was tricky to harvest correctly, since one had to cut it quickly and in exactly the right place or its alchemical properties would be completely ruined. Not an easy thing to do with one wounded hand. "We could have just bought all of this in a store and saved ourselves so much time. Yes, I know it would have been rather expensive, but I could afford it. Easily. Money is less of a problem for me than time."

"I'm afraid you are wrong," Kael said, shaking his head. The morlock boy was crouching not too far from Zorian, staring at a large boulder like it was the most interesting thing in the world. Zorian felt the urge to ask Kael what the hell was so interesting about that rock, but eventually decided he didn't want to know. "The things we are gathering are very hard to find in a store. They tend to be snapped up by wealthy, influential alchemists who buy them straight from the people who gather them in the wild. They never reach the shelves."

"Really?" Zorian asked, surprised. "Strange. You'd think someone would just start cultivating them if they're in such high demand. You know, like House Reid and so many others are already doing for other useful magical plants."

"Not every plant can be grown in controlled conditions," Kael told him. "Many of them cannot survive outside their natural environment for whatever reason, and that environment is either impossible or uneconomical to mimic artificially. Others will grow just fine, but will lose whatever essence makes them useful if not taken care of in just the right way or exposed to very specific conditions. Some of them can be transplanted into gardens and survive, but will never grow or reproduce afterwards. Some of them grow so slowly that nobody can be actually bothered to wait for them to grow to maturity."

"Okay, I get it," Zorian said, interrupting his lecture. "Magical plants are very hard to domesticate. I actually knew that already but the ones we're gathering just don't seem all that special to me, you know? But if you say otherwise, I will take your word for it. I'm not a botanical expert by any means."

"Neither am I, but I do know a few things about the topic. My adoptive mother insisted I had to know these things if I wanted to be a real alchemist," Kael said, rising to his feet and discarding the clump of moss he had been scrutinizing up until a moment ago. "Are you done with those? Do you need some help?"

"Here," Zorian said, handing Kael the river grass he harvested. "I think I got all of them correctly but you should probably check to make sure."

Kael glanced at the small bundle in Zorian's hands and immediately discarded three of the stalks that Zorian had apparently ruined without realizing it. How Kael could recognize that on first sight, Zorian had no idea.

"We're done here, I think," Kael said, looking around for a second. "I don't think we'll find anything else here without a lot of walking around. Do you think you can teleport us to the next section of the forest now?"

"Sure. My mana reserves were replenished a while ago," Zorian said.

"Let's go then. Deeper into the wilderness this time around. We haven't been attacked by anything truly dangerous the entire day and I want to see if I can find some ghost ivy or moonflowers," Kael said, gesturing northward.

Zorian nodded, unperturbed by the somewhat increased danger. While there were quite a few creatures that could kill them that deep in the forest, he should be able to notice them in time and teleport them to safety. A minute later they popped over to their new destination and Kael started looking around to assess their surroundings.

"Teleporting is so very convenient," the white-haired boy commented. "I can't wait to learn how to do that. How long do you think it would take me to learn how to teleport like that?"

"I don't know. A year or two?" Zorian speculated. "If you work hard on your shaping skills, that is. As little as a couple of months if you work with me to create a training regimen for you like I'm doing for Taiven."

"Ha. I might take you up on that at some point," he said. "I'm wasting a lot of your time and nerves as it is, though, and I don't want to be greedy."

"You've been a lot of help over the restarts," Zorian assured him. "You've earned some consideration from me, as far as I'm concerned."

"I see," Kael said speculatively. "In that case, I'd like to pester you a little about those disappearances happening around Knyazov Dveri. Many of these people had been my friends and acquaintances, and their fate rests rather heavily on my mind. I know you have been busy in these past few restarts, but did you perhaps look into the matter at some point?"

Well. He hadn't planned on having this talk during this particular outing, but he supposed this was as good a moment as any to tell Kael about Sudomir's soul trap thingy.

"Actually, about that..."

- break -

Zorian had fully expected Kael to freak out when he heard what Sudomir was doing in his isolated forest mansion, and he was not disappointed in that regard. If anything, Zorian greatly underestimated how furious the morlock boy would be by the end of the story. Kael, in a rather stunning display of recklessness, wanted them to go visit Iasku Mansion immediately so he could inspect Sudomir's soul trap. It took almost an hour for Zorian to convince the other boy that this was a spectacularly bad idea – Zorian was still wounded, Kael was not thinking straight, and neither of them had done any preparations for such an expedition.

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"You realize what this means, right?" Kael asked him. It was apparently a rhetorical question because Kael immediately answered it himself. "Every one of those times you died during the invasion, your soul was likely sucked into that thing along with everyone else's."

"Yeah, so?" asked Zorian. "The time loop mechanism clearly doesn't care about that. It just plucks my soul out of the pillar and goes on to do its thing like usual."

Though now that Zorian thought about it, that in itself might be a clue as to how the time loop really functioned. It could be that the time loop mechanism was just so powerful that it could casually extract his soul out of a giant soul prison that probably had a million safeguards against someone doing that very thing... but it could also be that the way it all worked just sort of sidestepped the problem. If the time loop really destroyed everything whenever it rolled back time, it might not really matter where his soul ended up in the end, so long as it's still intact.

"Yes, and the collection process is apparently sufficiently benign that you have suffered no soul damage from being exposed to it multiple times," Kael said. "That's good to know, at least. It definitely puts some of my fears to rest. But Zorian, I... I'm honestly not sure how much I can help you with this. When you really get down to it, I'm really just a dabbler in soul magic, and Sudomir is clearly an expert at the field. He has also delved deep into areas of soul magic that I wouldn't have even touched, so even if I were an expert I might not have been of any help. I'll see what I can find out in the next couple of days, but in all likelihood you're going to have to find someone else to help you deal with Sudomir."

"I don't suppose you have any recommendations?" Zorian tried.

"I already gave you a list of people I know who dabbled in soul magic and, well, Sudomir already got most of them," Kael shook his head sadly. "Sorry. Maybe try that warrior priest that Lukav is friends with? He clearly has considerable experience with soul magic and he sounds like he could help. In fact, the priesthood in general might be your best bet. They regularly go after people like Sudomir, and have both the qualified experts and the experience necessary for something like this. I'm pretty sure they won't just dismiss your claims out of hand. They take reports of necromancy very seriously, and your accusations should be easy to prove – just teleport someone in the vicinity of Iasku Mansion and let them see

the evidence themselves.”

“That’s an interesting idea. I might actually try that in the next restart, if you really end up being unable to help me in any way,” Zorian said. “Though I’m worried about that escalating into something huge and attracting Red Robe’s attention. Sudomir is connected to the invasion pretty tightly, I don’t think the Ibasans would stay secret for long if Iasku Mansion came under attack like that.”

“Honestly, that might actually be a good thing,” Kael speculated. “Red Robe thinks you are part of an army of time travelers out to get him, right? If so, it might actually be suspicious if you *don’t* periodically do something big like that.”

“Well, maybe,” Zorian said. “But it’s still a huge hint to Red Robe, telling him where to look to find out more about his opposition. I feel it’s too dangerous to expose myself to danger like that.”

After a while, they ran out of ideas to bounce back between each other and uncomfortable silence descended between them. Kael’s inability to help much against Sudomir clearly kept eating away at him, gradually worsening his mood, and Zorian didn’t know what to say to cheer him up. He doubted Kael even *wanted* to be cheered up. Eventually, Kael decided to simply cut their expedition short and asked Zorian to teleport them back home.

The gathering trip was over.

- break -

Monday came, and with it his meeting with Xvim. Xvim had never told Zorian when exactly he should drop by for their talk, so Zorian decided to come see him once his classes were over and he had no other obligations. Xvim, as it turned out, had other ideas. The man ended up causing a small stir by barging into Zorian’s first class of the day to pick him up, evidently impatient to talk to him. He had no idea whether this was a good or bad thing, and Xvim refused to discuss anything until they were safely seated inside his office.

“So,” Zorian asked. “What’s your final verdict?”

Instead of answering, Xvim took a palm-sized stone orb out of his drawer and handed it to Zorian.

“Channel some mana into this orb,” Xvim told him.

The moment Zorian did so, the stone sphere lit up in a soft yellow glow. That was very familiar to Zorian. It reminded him of those basic training orbs they were given during their first year at the academy – the ones that helped students learn how to reliably channel their mana into the target. What was the point of making him do something like that again?

Wait...

“Is this thing testing my mana signature?” Zorian asked curiously.

“Yes,” Xvim confirmed. “Everyone’s personal mana is unique. You can hide or change your mana signature, but you cannot *mimic* someone else’s to the best of my knowledge. The most you could do is trick the orb into giving a false positive, but I’d be able to tell if you were tampering with it in that fashion. It seems you really are who you claim you are, mister Kazinski. I expected as much, but it would be sloppy not to check.”

“First it was a lock keyed in to my mana signature, and now this. How exactly did the academy acquire my mana signature? I don’t remember giving it at any point,” said Zorian, handing the orb back to Xvim.

“Every time you used one of these training orbs during your first year,” said Xvim, waving the stone orb in front of Zorian’s face, “you were effectively giving the academy your mana signature. It was just a matter of locking the orb down to preserve it for future use.”

“And that’s legal?” Zorian frowned.

Xvim nodded. “Required by law, even. The government likes to have everyone’s mana signatures on hand for investigations. It greatly simplifies a lot of identity disputes and the like.”

“Right,” Zorian sighed. “So now that we’ve established I’m indeed Zorian Kazinski...”

“Yes, the ‘time loop’ problem,” Xvim said, putting the orb back into his drawer. “I assume you are aware of the prevalent opinion regarding time travel?”

Zorian nodded.

“They say it’s impossible,” he said. “I know. But that’s theory-“

“And a lot of failed experiments,” Xvim interjected.

“-and my personal experiences say otherwise,” continued Zorian, ignoring Xvim’s interjection. “Whatever ‘prevalent opinion’ says, I can clearly *see* that time travel is possible. It’s just a question of whether I’ve convinced you I’m telling the truth or not.”

“You’ve convinced me there is something to your story, at least,” Xvim said. “But I’m afraid I’m going to need more convincing before I actually

accept the idea of a time loop. Do you think you could clarify some things for me?"

The next hour and a half consisted of Xvim questioning Zorian about the rules that governed the time loop and the events surrounding it. The questioning was detailed enough that Xvim probably realized Zorian was hiding some things from him, but the man never called him out on this. He also never wrote anything down, simply staring at Zorian and listening to his explanations in silence. It was honestly all a little unnerving.

"The material world has been cut off from the spiritual realms?" Xvim asked, raising an eyebrow at him. "And you didn't feel this merited an inclusion in that list of things you gave me at the end of our Friday meeting?"

"Well, what would that prove?" Zorian defended himself. "Nothing about that says specifically 'time travel'."

"No, but it helps ameliorate one of the major issues that has been bothering me about this scenario," Xvim said, staring at him. "Namely, the incredible scale of the event you're describing. You've described the time loop as a cosmic phenomenon – it doesn't just wrench your soul into the past, it literally rolls back time for everything *except* you and your fellow time travelers. That's an implausible claim. The universe is very big and magic as we understand it has sharp limitations. But if the time loop had to cut off the material realm from the spiritual sphere to do its work, then that means it is somehow limited in scope, and that makes the whole thing a lot more believable to me. Did you speak to an astronomer to see if there were any irregularities in the stars and planetary orbits?"

"No," Zorian frowned. "Why do you think there would be irregularities?"

"Because any responsible spell designer tries to minimize the costs of the spell, regardless of how much mana he has at his disposal," Xvim told him. "If I was in charge of building a spell that does what you describe, I wouldn't have bothered extending the effect beyond what I absolutely had to. Why burn resources unnecessarily? No one has ever set foot on the other planets, much less the distant stars. You could simply replace the heavens with an illusionary screen and be done with it. Most people would never know the difference."

"But astronomers might," Zorian guessed.

"Yes. Especially if the spell originates from the time of the first Ikosian emperor like you said it might. There were no telescopes back then, and even professional starwatchers relied on their eyes to note the changes in the heavens. An illusion good enough to fool them might not be enough to do the same today," Xvim said.

"I guess it's worth a try," Zorian said dubiously. "Though I'm honestly kind of skeptical that will go anywhere. I'm pretty sure you can't just isolate our planet from the rest of the celestial bodies without breaking everything horribly and killing us all in the process."

"There has to be a limit somewhere," Xvim said. "I'll talk to the couple of astronomers I know and see what they tell me. In the meantime, make a note somewhere to include the spirit world severance factoid in your list the next time you try to convince me that the time loop is real. It should do wonders for your credibility. Also, make sure to sign the list with this."

Xvim took out a slip of paper from his pocket and handed it to him. Written on it in neat, perfect writing was a long string of letters and numbers. The whole thing was completely random and nonsensical as far as Zorian could tell.

"Some kind of coded message?" Zorian mused out loud.

"Something similar. I've made a lot of contingencies over the years, including ones for when I expect to have my memories edited against my will and want to send messages to my future self," Xvim said, surprising Zorian. That was... quite paranoid. And also a good idea – he should probably make his own version of that. "You will have to memorize the whole thing perfectly for this to work – if even a single number or letter is out of place, the whole thing is ruined."

Zorian took several seconds to commit the code to his memory and then immediately created a memory packet around it, permanently preserving it for flawless recall in the future.

"Done," he said, handing the slip of paper back to Xvim. "What now?"

Based on the various adventure novels Zorian had read as a child, he kind of expected Xvim to promptly burn the paper slip in his hand to prevent it from coming into the wrong hands. But no, Xvim just put it back into his pocket and gave Zorian a searching look. Disappointing.

"That, mister Kazinski, is something that *I* should be asking *you*," Xvim said. "I was originally worried that you might be an imposter and that you might have been editing my memories. Regardless of whether or not you really are a time traveler, you have effectively put those fears to rest. Truthfully, I have no right to demand anything more from you. What now, indeed."

"Well, you *are* technically my mentor and you're supposed to advise me about how to develop my magic," Zorian tried, hoping that Xvim would actually do his job properly for once. He was curious how Xvim's teaching looked when he was not putting his charges through some messed up dedication test.

"Unfortunately, this is probably not the best time for that. I would need to thoroughly test your skills to see how I can best help you, and I've kept you away from your morning classes for too long as it is," said Xvim. "I should have something ready for you when we meet again on Friday."

"Not another batch of shaping exercises, I hope?" Zorian couldn't help but asking.

"No," Xvim said, smiling slightly at the question. "While I definitely intend to correct any obvious deficiencies in your magic base and raise your shaping skills to acceptable levels, I'm actually thinking of advancing your dimensionalism studies as far as they can go. That is, after all, the magical field that deals with things like time manipulation, which makes it uniquely relevant to your situation. It is a hard and demanding field of study, but if you could endure several years of my trials and keep coming, you doubtlessly have the required patience to succeed at it."

Huh. That actually sounded kind of nice. The first part sounded a little ominous, but he would reserve judgment until he actually saw what that entailed in practice. He didn't actually mind the idea of being taught some shaping exercises, so long as Xvim didn't resort to the same frustrating grind that he had employed in the past, and actually explained to Zorian how he was supposed to go about performing the exercise.

In any case, the meeting was very much finished at this point, so Zorian said his goodbyes and left Xvim's office.

It was probably the first time he had ever left that place feeling better than he had when he entered it.

- break -

Over the next few days, the aftereffect of Zorian's failed campaign against the Burning Apex web gradually faded away, leaving him completely healed. Kael was still poring over his necromancy books and tinkering with some kind of spell item he was building, and refused to talk to Zorian about Sudomir. He claimed he was pursuing a lead and that he would discuss things with him when he was ready. Zorian had a feeling that Kael was a little annoyed with him over his handling of the soul trap reveal, but he really couldn't think of what he could have done so much better. Maybe Kael didn't like that Zorian had waited so long to break the news to him? On the other hand, Taiven had reacted much better when he had told her about the time loop this time. She was a lot more receptive to the idea if he didn't wait for her to have a breakdown before telling her.

All in all, the recovery period was a bit boring and Zorian found himself searching for something to pass the time with. Just for fun, he recreated Kirielle's drawings that he had stored in his mind and showed them to her. She frowned a lot while inspecting them, especially at the ones that clearly depicted the interior of Imaya's house and its inhabitants, but she did not seem willing to claim them as her own work. Instead, she criticized the technique of whoever drew them and suggested improvement, which amused him. She then asked him where he got them, and was annoyed at him when he insisted that he conjured them fully formed out of his head, which was also amusing.

Somehow, the resulting argument led to Kirielle giving him an impromptu drawing lesson and Zorian was bored enough at the time to go along with it. According to Kirielle, he was actually decent at drawing, which surprised him. She even claimed he could get as good as she was if he was willing to work on it. Considering how swamped with everything he always was, he doubted he would ever find the time for something like that. Then again, perhaps he could use an actual hobby...

It was during one of those slow days that Zorian went to the academy library in search of a book that talked about Eldemar's internal politics. Partly because he couldn't shake off the feeling that Sudomir's offhand comment about how he was working with the invaders because of 'politics' wasn't *completely* false, and partly because his recent musings about House Reid made him realize just how rudimentary his knowledge about Eldemar's power structures really was. He doubted he would really find an answer as to what Sudomir was referring to, but it probably wouldn't hurt to educate himself a little on the issue.

In theory, Eldemar's internal situation was relatively simple. The country was a monarchy, with the power of the Crown kept in check by a Council of Elders – a gathering of nobles that were ostensibly supposed to advise the monarch and help them govern the country efficiently. The seats were hereditary, each held by a different Noble House. That was why they were 'Noble' – they had a seat on the Council of Elders, and were thus involved in the direct governing of the country. A regular House, while usually afforded a fair amount of special privileges and autonomy, did not have a say in how the country as a whole was run.

Of course, reality was far more convoluted than that. The Crown and the Council of Elders clashed all the time, the Houses routinely overstepped their bounds if they thought they could get away with it, organizations like the Mage Guild and the Holy Triumvirate Church wielded considerable influence of their own and powerful independent actors tried to play all sides for their own benefit. And that was not even getting into the issue of semi-autonomous entities like the shifter tribes or the Free Port of Luja.

Basically, the matter was complicated and Zorian's initiative didn't accomplish all that much. He was just about to give up and go home when he stumbled upon Tinami. Or rather, she stumbled upon him – he was stationary, with his back turned to her, and the only reason he knew she was there was that he could recognize her mind through long exposure to her during previous restarts. He was content to ignore her at first, pretending he didn't know she was there... but since she was sufficiently curious to look over his shoulder to see what he was reading, he decided to say hello in the end.

"Hello, Tinami," he said, not bothering to turn around. She immediately jerked back in surprise at the words. Ha. Surprise successful. Taking care to wipe the smile off his face, Zorian turned around to face the girl. It was only polite to look at someone when you were talking to them, after all. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"N-no, sorry," she said, stumbling for a moment but recovering her composure quickly. "I was just curious about what you were reading. And I just have to ask: 'Splinter of Splinters'? Really, Zorian? That's kind of..."

She paused for a moment, clearly searching for a polite term to use.

"Why would you ever read such trash?" she finished eventually.

Zorian looked at the book in his hands. He hadn't noticed anything too bad in the book thus far, though admittedly he wouldn't call it *good*, either.

Frankly, the only reason he was idly reading through it was because one of the other books he had already read and liked listed it among its sources.

"I'm trying to find out an answer to a political question, but I know very little about politics," Zorian answered honestly. "So I'm mostly just reading things at random, leafing through whatever book catches my attention."

He placed 'Splinter of Splinters' back on the shelf. The book was boring as hell anyway.

"What kind of topic are you looking for?" Tinami asked him.

"I'm trying to find out a political reason why someone would want to burn Cyoria to the ground," Zorian told her bluntly. "Hypothetically speaking, of course."

"Are we talking about external or internal forces?" Tinami asked, completely unperturbed by his admission.

"Internal," Zorian clarified. "I'm pretty sure the number of external enemies that want the same is numberless."

"Not really, no," Tinami said. "Cyoria supplies critical products to the entire continent. I think only Sulammon and a handful of others would be glad to see it completely gone."

"What about Ulquaan Ibasa?" asked Zorian curiously.

"Them?" Tinami scoffed. "Who cares what they want? They can't do anything to us except raid our shipping. And as long as Eldemar controls Fort Oroklo, even that is just a minor nuisance."

Zorian hummed non-committedly. He couldn't really fault Tinami for that logic, since he would have likely said something similar before he had experienced the invasion and found out who was behind it.

"Fair enough," he said. "So what I'm getting from all of this is that you know a thing or two about politics, yes?"

"I am an heir of one of the Noble Houses," Tinami shrugged. "I'm required to know this sort of stuff. So yes, I suppose I do."

"Excellent. Then, do you think you can recommend me a book about Eldemar's internal politics that isn't... 'trash', as you say?" he asked her.

He expected her to either say no or give him a title or two to look for. What he did not expect was for her to drag him across the library for over fifteen minutes in search of something that met his exact criteria. By the time Tinami was done 'suggesting' things to him, he'd ended up with three different books, one of which was a huge scary tome that made Zorian sleepy just looking at it. He was starting to think he had made just a tiny bit of a mistake when he had asked her for help in this matter.

"Sorry, I went a little overboard," Tinami apologized, sounding honestly apologetic.

"It's fine," Zorian sighed. "Though I'll be honest with you – I really doubt I'm going to read all of this."

He shook the stack of books in his hands for emphasis.

"If you must pick one of the three to read, read 'Time of Tribulations,'" Tinami told him. Oh good, that wasn't the big one. "That's the important one. The Splinter Wars and the Weeping completely rearranged the political landscape everywhere in Altazia, but especially in Eldemar. Without understanding what aftershocks they caused and how countries dealt with them, you will never really understand Eldemar's politics."

"I see," Zorian said quietly. That did make a lot of sense – the Splinter Wars essentially created Eldemar in its current form, and the Weeping actually originated from Eldemar. Nobody at the time realized just how dangerous it was, in the early days of its spread, so it had significant effects on the country. It would be surprising if those two events *hadn't* changed things greatly. "I guess it has something to do with the significant death toll of mages those two caused?"

"Sort of," Tinami said. "It has to do with replacing them. Before the Splinter Wars, far more mages belonged to an established House or had at least one mage parent. First generation mages like yourself were... well, not rare exactly, but far less common than they are now. After the Splinter Wars and the Weeping, though, a lot of those Houses and families went extinct or bankrupt, unable to deal with the chaos of the times or the loss of critical members. The last thing Eldemar wanted to do was downscale their operations due to lack of mages, so somebody had to replace the dead. The result was a lot of first-generation mages flooding the magical market in previously unseen numbers."

"So?" Zorian asked. "I guess I'm a little biased, being a civilian-born student myself... but why is that a problem?"

"Not a problem as such, no," Tinami said carefully. "But it definitely changed the politics of the country beyond recognition. First generation mages are educated and supported by the Mage Guild, and by extension the Crown of Eldemar. When Houses and other autonomous groups clash with the Crown, first-generation mages overwhelmingly side with the Crown. The influx of civilian-born mages helped Eldemar bounce back from the Splinter Wars and Weeping incredibly quickly, but it also strengthened royal power and made the Mage Guild far more important than it used to be, and that scares a lot of factions."

"Interesting," Zorian hummed thoughtfully. "How does that relate to Cyoria and people who want to see it burn, though?"

"Well, Cyoria is absolutely critical for first generation mages who want to make it big," Tinami said. "Most other mana wells have sharp limits on the amount of mana they produce, and thus have tight regulations about who can perform what magical business in the area. They're usually controlled by some established group or even a House, and aren't very friendly to newcomers unless they're willing to become someone's underlings. The Hole, on the other hand, spews incomprehensibly vast amounts of mana into the air every single second. Far more than anyone could really use up. There is never a shortage of ambient mana in Cyoria, so nobody cares about how many mana forges, research facilities and various other facilities are built in the city. Unsurprisingly, the city is absolutely flooded with first-generation mages, which makes it a major loyalist stronghold. It's so important to the central government, politically speaking, that some people call it the second national capital. Anyone who has an axe to grind against either the Crown or the Mage Guild might want to see it gone. Though I rather suspect that anyone expressing the desire to see it literally burned to the ground is just being overdramatic. Our external political situation is sufficiently dangerous that no one really wants to weaken the nation too much, and Cyoria is both a major population center and a magical powerhouse."

"So, what I'm getting from your explanation is that people who most want to see Cyoria gone probably come from various Houses that dislike their historical importance being eroded," Zorian said. Sadly, that didn't explain Sudomir's remark as far as Zorian could tell – he had no idea whether Sudomir was a first-generation mage, but he definitely wasn't a part of a House. "But the thing is, there are plenty of Houses, even Noble Houses who have their headquarters stationed here. Yours, for example. Or House Noveda."

"Not every House likes every other," Tinami shrugged. "There are plenty of them that would hold a celebration if every Aope spontaneously died in their sleep."

Ouch.

"But it's funny you would mention the Novedas. You know what happened to them, right?"

"They all died except Zach," Zorian said immediately.

"Yes, and then the Crown placed Tesen Zveri as Zach's caretaker, and he sold off nearly everything they owned to his friends and associates for pocket change while paying himself a huge caretaker fee. Few people will outright say so, but the man basically looted the entire House of everything they had. And the Noveda were very, very wealthy," Tinami explained. "If Zach wasn't such an idiot, I'd imagine he'd be extremely bitter about the city authorities that were complicit in the deed. I could totally imagine myself wishing for Cyoria to burn down to ashes, if I were in his place. At least on an emotional level."

Huh.

"You know," Zorian said. "I think I want to hear more about that story..."

50. Containment

Chapter 050 Containment

The idea that Tesen Zveri had been stealing from Zach was not entirely surprising to Zorian. For one thing, he'd known for quite a while that Zach and Tesen did not get along, what with Zach occasionally thrashing the man at the beginning of the restart for no apparent reason. For another, Zach had explicitly told Zorian in one of the restarts that he did not approve of how Tesen had been managing his properties. It did not take some great genius to see that this was more than just a simple difference in opinion. Theft was one of several explanations that Zorian had considered as a possible explanation, but he could never quite figure out why Tesen would risk his reputation for what was surely just pocket change to someone of his stature.

As it turned out, Zorian had been thinking too small. Tesen wasn't siphoning some money off the Novedas' accounts here and there – he just plain went after everything they had. Surprisingly brazen. What kind of forces stood behind Tesen that would allow him to be so shameless about abusing the trust he was given? What kind of machinations and political maneuvering had compelled the royal family to assign such a hostile caretaker to the last surviving member of a House that had been so loyal to them in the past?

All in all, when Zorian had asked Tinami to tell him more about Zach's caretaker and his looting of House Noveda's properties, he'd expected quite a story. Something lengthy, complex and dramatic. What he got instead was a rather underwhelming tale of simple greed and corruption.

The appointment of Tesen Zveri to the position of Zach's caretaker was completely devoid of controversy at the time the decision was made. Tesen Zveri was the patriarch of Noble House Zveri, who had been close allies of House Noveda, and his reputation had been quite good at the time. Thus, when Tesen nominated himself for the position of Zach's caretaker, few people had any objections. He was a high-ranking nobleman, a powerful mage and an ally of the House that he was supposed to care for – who could really contest his appointment?

Unfortunately, Tesen's greed turned out to be stronger than his sense of obligation or respect for his deceased allies. From the moment he had acquired the rights to manage the Novedas' property, Tesen wasted no time in abusing them as much as possible. Most of their property ended up being sold to members of House Zveri at laughably low prices, and the profits made from those sales largely went to Tesen himself in the form of exorbitant 'caretaker fees' that he paid himself for doing such a fine job at managing things.

"And nobody protested about that?" Zorian asked incredulously. "The Crown? I heard House Noveda were big allies of the royal family. Or one of the Novedas' many vassal families and contractors, they must have had *some* power and they surely couldn't have liked what Tesen was doing. Or hell, other Noble Houses – at least some of them must have felt sympathetic to Zach's cause."

"House Noveda was indeed a close ally of the Crown," Tinami confirmed. "But so is House Zveri. And unlike Noble House Noveda, Noble House Zveri survived the upheavals largely intact. For the Crown to go after Tesen would have meant alienating one of their major remaining allies at a time where they could ill afford to do so. I suspect the Crown was unpleasantly surprised by Tesen's behavior, but decided to look the other way out of practicality."

She paused for a second, frowning slightly as she considered things.

"Plus, I hear Tesen generously donated some of the artifacts and funds from the Novedas' treasury to the Crown," she eventually continued. "Actually, he was rather generous about spreading the Novedas' wealth around in general. I imagine that's how he quieted most of the criticism."

"I see," Zorian hummed thoughtfully. "They have their slice of the pie, so now they're no longer inclined to protest too much. Still, if Tesen had been as blatant about things as you said, you'd think that somebody would have tried to do something. Some people just don't care about money. Or at least not enough to let something like this go unchallenged."

"Ah, well, I make it sound really obvious but it's really not," Tinami said. "The truth is that Tesen was always going to end up selling off a lot of Noveda properties and halting many of their activities, even if he had been acting in good faith... the problem was more about who he sold things to and at what prices. He was supposed to slim down Noble House Noveda to a strong, manageable core. Instead, he used virtually all of their wealth to enrich his family and further his political career, leaving only a tiny sliver to Zach. But that's not something that is immediately obvious to casual inspection. You would have to launch an investigation into the matter to prove anything, and that would give Tesen plenty of time to mobilize his connections and shut you down before you get anywhere..."

Well, if it actually took some digging to realize what Tesen had done, then that would certainly help explain some things. Such as why none of their other classmates seemed to know about Zach's situation. Most of them were terrible gossips, so if Zach's situation was widely known, Zorian would have known about it too by now.

Though really, considering how readily Tinami was telling him all this, he wondered how it was possible that she'd never told this to the rest of their class.

He decided to just ask her about it.

"Well, if we were having this talk a year ago or so, I wouldn't have told you all this," Tinami told him. "Back then we had Zach in our class, and I wouldn't have wanted to say anything before talking to Zach about it. But now Zach is no longer in our class, so it doesn't matter anymore."

Ah, yes – since Zach fled Cyoria at the beginning of the restart, just like he always did in recent restarts, it made sense to assume he had given up on the academy. His poor showing during their first two years of education probably made the theory even more plausible than it would otherwise be...

He wondered whether Zach had known what Tesen had done to his inheritance before the time loop. He had a hunch the answer was no, since nothing about Zach's pre-loop attitude indicated that he was in any way concerned about his future or angry at his guardian, but he could be wrong. Maybe Zach was a very good actor.

"How much do you think Zach knows about all of this?" Zorian asked Tinami.

"I don't know," she said. "I only tried to sound him out once, and... uh, I guess I was too oblique because he thought I was hitting on him."

Zorian couldn't help it. He laughed.

"It's not funny!" she protested.

After several more minutes of questions and answers, Zorian found out that Tinami couldn't really give him any details about Zach's situation. She knew about the situation in general terms, but the specifics were understandably hard to come by. The conversation did, however, give Zorian an idea – what if Zach wasn't the only one that had happened to?

"Oh yes, that sort of thing is not exactly a rare occurrence," Tinami said when he shared the notion with her. "A lot of weakened Houses and smaller families ended up being dismembered like that in the aftermath of the Splinter Wars and the Weeping. Most countries had too many things on their plate to go after every shady thing that was happening, especially if the people doing the dismembering were closely aligned with the government or some other powerful faction. In fact, compared to the fates of some other heirs, Zach is fairly lucky. Some of them were quite literally looted of everything they had. Once their 'caretakers' were done with their properties, they were basically thrown out on the streets with nothing but the clothes on their backs. The Novedas are still a Noble House though, so Tesen couldn't really go that far. He needed to have some smokescreen in case someone started throwing accusations. So Zach still has his mansion and can live off a healthy trust fund, and Tesen can point to that if somebody tries to charge him with anything."

Interesting. Zorian highly doubted that Zach wanted to see Cyoria burned to the ground just because the city's leadership was complicit in the looting of his House – the other boy seemed too good natured for that – but he could totally imagine some of the other, less fortunate and thus less forgiving individuals wanting to strike back at the people who had profited at their expense. No matter who'd get caught in the crossfire. Could Red Robe be one of the people in that position? That would help explain why the other time traveler seemed to want Cyoria destroyed so badly...

Well, he had no way to confirm that, so that would remain just an idle thought for now. Though, once he opened the matriarch's memory packet, he should probably try to track down those kinds of people living in Cyoria and check up on them. Just in case.

His talk with Tinami did not last long after that. They both had things they needed to be doing, and he was getting the impression that Tinami was starting to get a little suspicious of Zorian's fixation on the topic. Surprisingly, she wanted to meet with him again... or maybe not so surprisingly, since she implied she wanted to ask a favor of him. After agreeing to another meeting, Zorian said goodbye to the girl and went back home.

The moment he arrived back at the house, he realized he had stepped into pandemonium

- break -

After coming back to Imaya's place, he found that Kopriva had dropped by and brought the alchemical ingredients Kael had asked for. Normally that would be excellent news, but it turned out that her timing had been somewhat... unfortunate.

She wasn't the only person to have dropped by at Imaya's house that day. Rea and Nocka had also decided to come over, Nocka so she could play with Kirielle, and Rea so she could have a drink and chat with Imaya. Then, Taiven arrived as well, wanting to discuss something with Kael. Thus, when Kopriva had come over to deliver the package, Kael was locked in his basement with Taiven and Imaya was busy talking to Rea. The job of letting Kopriva into the house fell to the three remaining inhabitants of the house – Kirielle, Nocka and Kana.

Kopriva had already met Kirielle, but not Kana. Kael didn't want their classmates to know he had a daughter, so he had kept her out of sight the last time Kopriva had come over. But Kael wasn't there, and Kirielle couldn't keep a secret if her life depended on it, so when Kopriva asked Kirielle to introduce her friends, she thought nothing of revealing Kana's true identity.

At that point the rest of the household got involved, with Kael freaking out and trying to convince Kopriva to keep Kana's existence a secret, Kirielle repeatedly trying to apologize to Kael, Kopriva being visibly amused, and Imaya trying to run damage control. Amusingly, it turned out that Taiven hadn't known Kana was Kael's daughter either – she just sort of assumed she was Imaya's daughter, despite her having the same sort of vivid blue eyes that her father had, and never sought confirmation about it from anyone.

Sadly, everyone was too caught up in the drama to pay attention to the packet of alchemical ingredients that Kopriva had brought over... well, everyone except Nocka. She decided that this mysterious packet was very interesting and worthy of examination. Unfortunately, either Kopriva had failed to secure the ingredients properly or Nocka had examined the package too enthusiastically, because she managed to breathe in a bit of hallucinogenic dust from the package and started losing control over her form. Her eyes became slitted like a cat, she grew a tail and claws and started hissing at people who tried to examine her to see what was wrong.

That started the second round of drama, with Rea being upset that her daughter was basically outed as a shifter and that Kopriva had left

‘dangerous substances’ within reach of children, Kopriva trying to defend herself, Kirielle assuring Rea that it’s okay because she already knew her friend can ‘turn into a kitty’, Rea being angry at Nnochka for being so indiscreet, and poor Imaya playing peacemaker for the second time that day.

At this point Zorian had come back from his talk with Tinami and was told what happened in his absence.

“I was only gone for a couple of hours,” Zorian complained. “Damn, you people work fast.”

He was immediately faced with a plethora of unamused looks.

“Okay, look,” he said placatingly. “I think you’re all making mountains out of molehills here. First of all, I’m pretty sure Kopriva has no intentions of spreading rumors about Kana amongst the student body...” Mostly because he’d read her mind to make sure. “...and I don’t think anybody here really minds Rea and Nnochka being shifters, either.”

“What makes you think I’m a shifter as well? She could have inherited it from her father for all you know,” Rea protested, folding her hands over her chest.

Zorian ignored her remark.

“Really, the only semi-serious issue was that Nnochka ended up drugged,” said Zorian.

“I swear I secured the package properly,” Kopriva mumbled.

“Nnochka probably punctured something with her claws,” Rea admitted with a sigh. “She likes to use her claws to remove wrappings and such.”

“Nevertheless, the package was here because of me... and Kael, but that’s beside the point. The point is, I feel somewhat responsible for what happened. What do you think would be an appropriate compensation for this?”

“Oh, there is no need—“ began Rea, only to get cut off by her own daughter.

“I want a doll,” Nnochka slurred. The effects of the alchemical dust she breathed had faded, but were still far from gone. “Like the one Kiri has. She said you made it.”

“I made a doll for Kiri?” Zorian asked, before he realized what Nnochka was referring to. “Oh wait, you mean Kosjenka. That’s technically not a doll, but whatever. Assuming your mother agrees, I don’t see the problem with that.”

“Is this ‘doll’ going to explode if treated roughly?” Rea asked suspiciously.

Not an unreasonable fear. Some magical items held a substantial amount of mana inside of them and could thus easily detonate if handled roughly. In this particular case, though, that would never happen. He didn’t trust Kirielle around explosives any more than Rea trusted Nnochka around the same.

“No, it will just stop being animated,” Zorian said. “The golem is powered by ambient mana and made mostly out of wood, so there is nothing in there that could explode if it breaks.”

“Then no, I have no objections,” Rea shrugged. “Though really, this is quite unnecessary. Nnochka is just milking this for all it’s worth and I wouldn’t blame you at all for simply telling her off.”

“Mom!” Nnochka whined. “You’re supposed to be on my side!”

Zorian was distracted from the spectacle by a burst of emotion coming from Kana. The little girl was fidgeting like crazy in Kael’s lap, clearly waging some internal war with herself. Though she was as silent as ever, Zorian could feel through his empathy that her attention was squarely on him. She wanted to... tell him something?

“Let me guess, you want a doll too?” Zorian said, taking a wild guess at what was bothering her.

Kana nodded so fast her head looked like it was going to fall off.

A round of laughter from everyone present followed that exchange.

“Alright, alright,” Zorian sighed. “I get it. Two new golem-dolls coming up. I’ll be busy in the near future, but they should be done over the weekend.”

Now that he thought about it a little bit, this sort of development wasn’t that surprising. Kirielle had been making both girls jealous of her new toys for a whole week now, so it made sense that they’d want one of their own if they thought they could get away with it. They were probably just too polite to ask for one in previous restarts, or simply couldn’t think of a good way to ask.

“Damn it, now I’m getting a little jealous,” Kopriva groused. “Why don’t *I* get a doll too?”

“You’re too old to play with dolls,” Zorian told her, rolling his eyes.

“You can play with Kosjenka when you visit,” Kirielle offered.

“Aww,” Kopriva grinned, ruffling Kirielle’s hair. “You’re a sweet kid. It’s hard to believe you’re related to someone like Zorian.”

Hey...

“Brother is really great,” Kirielle protested, pushing Kopriva’s hand away from her hair so she could straighten it back into place. “He’s like a hedgehog. He gets nice once you get past his prickliness.”

Ugh. And they were just getting started, too. After completely defusing a tense situation and promising to make expensive toys for a couple of little girls? Truly no good deed goes unpunished.

- break -

Friday came, and with it Zorian’s next meeting with Xvim. This time, however, Xvim didn’t want to hold their session inside his office – instead, he led Zorian to a restricted training ground he had reserved for the day. They would be doing ‘serious magic’, Xvim claimed, so his office was no longer sufficient for their purposes.

“I have talked to some astronomers since we last met,” Xvim began, unlocking the door of the training ground and shooing him inside. “I have nothing conclusive yet, but the results thus far are not encouraging. There have been no significant deviations among the celestial bodies. Additionally, the planets in particular are being closely watched because of the upcoming planetary alignment. It is unlikely they are illusionary – the affected area likely includes the entire solar system.”

“Provided it is, in fact, limited by area,” Zorian pointed out.

“Yes,” Xvim agreed easily. “That is true. However, while my forays into astronomy have met with rather disappointing results, I’ve found something interesting while researching time magic. Tell me, have you ever heard of Black Rooms?”

“What, the ones that let you spend several years inside while only a day passes outside? Those actually exist?” Zorian asked incredulously.

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“No, those ones are definitely fake,” Xvim said, shaking his head. “But ones that can stretch a day into a month do. And the interesting thing is how they achieve that kind of extreme time dilation effect. Time magic has sharp limits in how effective it can get – even the most powerful hastening effects can only speed up time four to five times before they hit a wall. At that point, no matter how powerful and skillful the mage is, the boundary between two temporal flows starts to unravel.”

“So how can Black Rooms speed up time by a factor of thirty, then?” Zorian frowned.

“By isolating them from the rest of the world,” Xvim said. “That’s why they’re called Black Rooms. They have to completely enclose the area and seal it off. This greatly lessens the stress of the temporal boundary, but it also makes it impossible to interact with people outside while the Black Room is working. Once the time dilation is engaged, nothing goes in or out until the effect is broken. Material supplies, magical communication... nothing goes through. Even contact with the spiritual planes is blocked.”

Zorian frowned. “I see. So there is precedence for powerful time magic to require an enclosed area to function properly. But from what I understand, the principles behind the Black Rooms would require the affected area to be literally enclosed in a physical box.”

“The time loop is clearly a more advanced piece of magic than the Black Rooms, so it’s likely it uses a more subtle method of sealing off the area of effect,” Xvim responded.

“I suppose,” Zorian said, acknowledging the possibility. “I’m curious, though – how come Black Rooms are such a mystery? I only knew of them as rumors up until this point. Surely Eldemar would not hesitate to use them openly if they’re so effective?”

“In addition to needing tremendous amounts of mana, Black Rooms are very difficult to use properly,” Xvim said. “Due to the way they’re cut off from the outside, one has to plan each use very carefully – if the organizers failed to account for something critical, the whole operation is essentially ruined, and a lot of time and mana has been wasted. Black Rooms cannot be turned off and on at will, and the mana cost of an operation has to be paid in full at the start. I understand there is a lot of controversy surrounding the Black Rooms, with many people disputing their actual usefulness and claiming they’re a huge waste of money. Some of the more spectacular failures associated with them do not help their reputation.”

“Oh?” Zorian asked, intrigued.

“Initially, Black Rooms could not prematurely terminate the time dilation field once it was turned on,” said Xvim. “Once the Black Room was on, whoever was inside was stuck until the spell wore off.”

Zorian winced. Yeah, that had been bound to end poorly.

“At least one group died of thirst after an administrative mix-up caused the organizers to stockpile too little water into the area before activation.

Another group almost died of starvation after some form of insect snuck into the food supply and managed to ruin most of it before the infestation was detected. Even if everything was done properly, you are still essentially imprisoning several people in a small, cramped space where they have no privacy and little to entertain themselves with. Fights were common, with several experiments culminating in a bloodbath. In one memorable case, the entire group managed to mutually kill each other off – there were literally no survivors once the Black Room finally opened.”

“What about sending individuals?” Zorian asked.

“Most people can’t handle total isolation for long,” Xvim shook his head. “Besides, it costs exactly the same to run a Black Room for one person as it does for several of them, and the more people you send in, the more work can get done.”

After that, Xvim asked Zorian to demonstrate some of his flashier magic – mostly combat magic and landscape alterations, but also teleportation, which actually worked unimpeded within the training ground, unlike in most of Cyoria. It made sense, considering Xvim had told him during their last meeting that he intended to teach him dimensionalism.

After a while, his mentor decided he’d seen enough and motioned him to stop.

“You seem to have no specialty that I can see,” Xvim said.

“Well, I guess my specialty are spell formulas,” said Zorian. “But that is not exactly something I can demonstrate quickly and at whim.”

“Just as well,” Xvim said. “I know comparatively little about spell formulas and would be ill-equipped to evaluate your skill in the field.”

Wait, Xvim actually *didn’t* have expertise in something related to magic? Some of Zorian’s amusement and surprise at the notion must have shown on his face because Xvim actually decided to provide an explanation.

“I understand why so many mages are fascinated with spell formula, but I always found them to be somewhat distasteful myself,” Xvim said. “They are a crutch, most of the time. With a proper mastery of a spell, you wouldn’t need them.”

“Right,” Zorian scowled. He understood why someone obsessed with perfection in mana shaping would have low regard for magical aids that sidestepped the need for that, but there was more to spell formula than making spell rods and such...

“I’m not criticizing you, mister Kazinski,” Xvim said. “Just explaining my lack of interest in the discipline. You can go far if you really master your specialty. But enough of that – when I said you don’t seem to have any specialty, I meant in regards to mana shaping fields. You seem to be a generalist when it comes to those, yes?”

“I seek out whatever magic is relevant to me at the moment,” said Zorian. “But yes, in general I try to master a little bit of everything. As far as I can tell, the main reason people specialize is time constraints. I’m not quite immune to that, but I’m pretty sure I can get good at several fields instead of just one.”

“The path of an archmage,” Xvim nodded. “I approve. For someone in your situation, aiming for anything less would have been a waste. I’m glad I don’t have to convince you of that, at least.”

Huh. Did Xvim just praise him for something? In any case, this reminded him of something he had been wondering for quite a while...

“Are *you* an archmage?” Zorian asked Xvim.

“An archmage is not an official rank that someone assigns to a person,” Xvim said. “It is simply a term for a mage who has mastered several fields of magic to such an extent that they could outdo a typical specialist mage when it comes to those fields. I suppose the term could be applied to me, but it would be shockingly arrogant of me to claim it on my own. One is only ever a real archmage when other people start referring to you as such, and not many people use that term to describe me. Then again, not many people know about me in the first place, and I prefer it that way...”

So that would be a yes, basically. Surprising that a person like that would be willing to work as a teacher at the academy – people like Xvim were incredibly rare and in high demand. Then again, Xvim did say he liked being an unknown, so perhaps a relatively quiet job like this one was just what he wanted.

“Do you have a specialty?” Zorian asked. He figured that since Xvim was in a relatively good mood at the moment, he might as well milk it for all it’s worth and try to find out more about the man.

“Defense against magical attacks of all sorts,” Xvim said. “I actually teach an advanced class on the topic in your fourth year of education. Of course, if one aims to defend against something, they must first get to know it. And thus, I have become familiar with many a type of magic. But let’s get back to *you*, shall we? I have to say, for one aiming to become an archmage, your way of going about it is somewhat... suboptimal.”

“How so?” Zorian frowned.

“For instance, your way of choosing which mana shaping exercises to practice,” Xvim said. “While practicing a wide selection of different exercises like you’ve been doing is certainly useful, it is not really the best avenue of approach for a generalist mage. You would have been better served by focusing on raw mana manipulation and sensing. Such basic shaping exercises are time consuming and give no short-term benefits, but the cumulative effect of their mastery decreases the learning time of every spell and improves spellcasting in general.”

"I haven't really heard about such shaping exercises," Zorian said, feeling a little lost.

"It's not something a specialist mage would care much for," Xvim said. "And most people who write books are specialists. Your age works against you here – most people don't start dabbling in those exercises until they're much older, no matter how talented they are, so the people you spoke to probably didn't think you'd be interested in those. Young mages like you have plenty of low-hanging fruit with much faster payoff to amuse themselves with."

"Right. So what are we talking here exactly?" Zorian asked. "I'm drawing a blank as to what sort of 'raw mana manipulation' I could be doing as an exercise."

"Well, one major deficiency I noticed in your skills is that you don't seem to perceive mana around you to any appreciable extent," Xvim said. "And I'm guessing your ability to perceive your personal mana flow is hardly any better than that of the rest of your classmates. For someone of biological age, that would be entirely adequate, if rather disappointing. In your case, it really is inexcusable."

Zorian was tempted to ask whether it was inexcusable by Xvim's standards or the more sane standards of the rest of the world. But he didn't. This was absolutely fascinating and he had largely gone numb to Xvim's barbs by now.

"From everything I've read, mana sensing is a rather advanced skill that even long-time mages struggle with."

"Yes, but you seem to be rather bad at it, even accounting for that," Xvim noted. "I'm guessing this is a consequence of spending so many years in Cyoria, which is awash in ambient mana. It's good for training, certainly, but it instills a certain amount of... wastefulness in young mages."

Zorian didn't need empathy to notice the distaste on Xvim's face when he said that.

"On top of that, it is very difficult to practice perception exercises in a place like this," Xvim continued. "The ambient mana suffuses everything, dulling your senses. It would be far better to practice mana sensing somewhere outside the city to start with. This training ground is specially warded to keep the majority of the ambient mana out of it – did you notice that?"

"No," Zorian admitted with a frown. Though now that Xvim mentioned it...

"This is what I meant when I said your ability to sense mana is deficient," Xvim said. "You should have noticed it right away, the moment you stepped into the training ground. But no matter, that's why I'm here – to help you overcome your many flaws and become the best you can be. In any case, while the exercises I'm about to teach you would be normally rather hard to practice outside of this training ground, you are capable of teleportation. I suggest you simply teleport into the countryside outside of the city when you want to work on your ability to sense mana. Now pay close attention to what I'm about to do..."

- break -

At the end of the session, Zorian was honestly feeling a little overwhelmed by Xvim's program. While the man was less of an asshole in this restart, he was still a very demanding teacher who pulled no punches when he seriously taught people. He had ended up showing Zorian more than twenty exercises aimed at improving his ability to sense mana, both inside and outside of him, and he expected Zorian to work on them for several hours every single day. On top of that, Xvim also showed him several exotic teleportation variants that Zorian was also expected to learn by their next meeting and gave him a deceptively simple shaping exercise related to dimensionalism.

The exercise involved taking a random rock and trying to form a so-called 'dimensional boundary' around it. Apparently, the formation of such a boundary was the first step in just about every piece of magic dealing with time and space – the teleportation spells he loved using so much formed a boundary like that around him every time he used them, and would fail instantly if something prevented the spell from creating it. Like a ward, for instance. Getting better at shaping the boundary could easily improve just about every dimensionalism spell he cared to cast in the future.

The problem was that the dimensional boundary was completely invisible to normal senses, making the exercise really hard to practice. How do you create and shape something you can't see and can only vaguely feel via crude feedback your personal mana gives you? He didn't think he could get the hang of that exercise any time soon.

Of course, if his ability to sense mana – especially his personal mana – was on a higher level, the exercise would have instantly gotten a lot easier. Zorian was pretty sure Xvim had only given him that exercise to drive the point home how important mana sensing was and how much his lack of skill there was holding him back. Ugh.

Days went by quickly. Kael was still working on the Sudomir problem, but Zorian had plenty of things to hold his time, so he left his morlock friend in peace. His attacks on aranea webs were restarted, though this time he was less ambitious and picked a bunch of minor webs instead of a relative juggernaut like the Burning Apex. Accordingly, his attacks went a lot better and his aranea memory reading skills got lots and lots of practice. Since he was already rooting through the memories of defeated araneas, he decided to kill two birds with one stone by searching their minds for interesting mind magic skills. He found nothing really revolutionary, but every minor trick and variation of a known technique he learned from his fallen foes added up to something in the end.

He met with Tinami again, like he agreed to. Like she hinted at in their last meeting, she wanted to ask him for a favor – specifically, she wanted him to give her his family tree. A weird request, but apparently she was collecting that information from all of her classmates for a 'personal project'. His cynical side insisted that this was a code name for 'secret Aope information gathering operation', but who knew really. Maybe she was just really interested in people's lineages in addition to spiders. In any case, Zorian saw no reason not to humor her and promptly cobbled up

something for her in his notebook. The execution was a bit lacking, unfortunately, since his knowledge of his family tree was a bit sketchy. Especially on his mother's side, since she hated talking about her witch mother and anything related to her.

Tinami didn't care about how sketchy it was, though. If anything, she seemed to be even more excited about it when she found out Zorian had a witch among his ancestors. Considering the origin of Noble House Aope, he probably shouldn't be surprised about that.

Despite the incident with Kopriva's alchemical supplies, Rea kept coming to Imaya's home and bringing Nochka along with her. If anything, Rea's friendship with Imaya seemed to have only become firmer in the wake of revelations about her shifter nature. Meanwhile, Nochka and Kana were proud owners of their own toy golems – Nochka had asked for her golem to be given a feminine form like Kosjenka's, and named it Rutvica, while Kana was a bit of a surprise in that she wanted her toy golem to look male. And have white hair. Zorian had no idea what she called it, but Kirielle and Nochka seemed to have decided its name was Jaglenac amongst each other.

In other news, Kana seemed to have realized that Zorian had some method of understanding her thoughts, because these days, whenever she wanted to have her desires known, she simply dragged him off from whatever he was doing so he could interpret for her.

And here he'd thought she was a little angel. Turns out he just hadn't had anything she'd wanted up until now.

Finally, as the end of the restart began to approach, Kael finally decided he'd run out of options. He asked Zorian to teleport him in the vicinity of Iasku Mansion so he could try to analyze the soul trap. He didn't think that would accomplish much, but there was little else he could think of.

Zorian agreed, and decided to take Taiven along with them. Mostly because he intended to try to analyze the soul trap himself, from the perspective of a spell formula specialist rather than a soul mage, and he needed someone to defend them against the iron beaks and winter wolves patrolling the wilderness around the place. Taiven had no objections, and even relished the chance to fight something, so they were off.

They only stayed a short while, and Zorian had to break off his analysis to help Taiven defeat the flock of iron beaks that had started to harass them, but it was enough for Kael to decide the whole thing was beyond him.

Kael was very quiet and subdued after that.

The next day he'd made an excuse to drag Zorian out of the house and asked him to teleport them to the north of Knyazov Dveri so he could visit his wife's grave.

"We're here," said Kael, pointing at the small abandoned cottage just ahead of them.

"Finally," Zorian mumbled, breathing heavily. He felt sorry for Kael, he really did, but when Kael said the place was 'not far from the main road', he didn't quite think the morlock boy meant this. An hour-long trek, uphill, along a bumpy, narrow forest path was not what Zorian would describe as 'not far'. Also, how the hell was Kael not affected in the slightest by the journey? The boy didn't look all that fit to him...

Once they reached the cottage, Zorian took a minute to catch some breath and looked around. Kael immediately went to the back of the building to tend to the two simple, earthen graves that stood there.

"Pretty isolated place," Zorian noted, wandering over to help Kael get rid of the grass and weeds that had completely overrun the place. "No offense, but why did you end up burying your wife here, of all places?"

"I didn't have much choice back then," Kael said. "There was only one village in the vicinity, and they're very backwards, superstitious folk. They'd never let a witch and her daughter get buried in their cemetery along with their own dead. And even if I could make them accept it somehow, they'd just vandalize it the moment I wasn't looking."

"Disgusting," Zorian frowned.

"It's fine," Kael said, shaking his head sadly. "This was their home. It somehow feels appropriate for them to be buried here."

"So this other grave...?" began Zorian.

"Fria," said Kael. "My mother-in-law, and also my teacher. She died just before Namira did."

Namira, Zorian learned, was the name of Kael's deceased wife. The crude gravestones (that Kael had presumably made for them) said their last name was Tverinov. Apparently Kael had assumed their family name when he married Namira. That was pretty interesting – it was not unheard of for a husband to take on his wife's name, but it did not happen very often. Usually only civilians who somehow managed to marry into one of the Houses did that.

Then again, maybe it was a witch thing. He knew that one of the reasons his mother and grandmother did not get along was that mother decided to take father's family name instead of the other way around. Considering that mother's choice seemed very conventional in the grand scheme of things, his grandmother's objections had always seemed strange to him.

They both stood there in silence for a while, not saying anything. Finally, after several minutes of comfortable silence, Kael spoke.

"I'm sorry," Kael said suddenly.

"For what?" Zorian asked curiously.

“I wasted your time,” Kael sighed.

“What?” Zorian asked incredulously. “You just wanted to visit your wife’s grave, there is nothing wrong with that.”

“No, I’m talking about Sudomir and his soul trap,” Kael said. “I kept stalling for over two weeks and I have nothing to show for it. I should have given up long ago, but...”

“Ah,” said Zorian. He’d kind of figured out that wasn’t going anywhere after the first week or so. “That. It’s fine, really. Are you sure there is nothing new you can tell me?”

“Nothing,” Kael said, shaking his head. He then reached out into the inner pocket of his jacket and pulled out a small notebook. He handed it to Zorian. “Here. I wrote down everything relevant I could think of into that notebook. Keep in mind that this is literally just me making wild speculations, though – I have no way to know if anything I wrote there has any basis in reality.”

“Right,” said Zorian pocketing it for the moment. There would be time to read it later. “Still, even if it’s just speculation, it’s clearly not *nothing*.”

“I guess,” Kael said. “But I still feel pretty useless.”

“Why?” Zorian asked curiously. He had known for a while that Kael was frustrated by his inability to offer help against Sudomir, but he never really understood why Kael felt so deeply about that.

“I don’t know,” admitted Kael. “Maybe it reminds me of how Fria and Namira contracted the Weeping, and I could do nothing except helplessly watch as they wasted away. Or maybe I’m overthinking things. I heard it’s a bad idea to psychoanalyze oneself.”

Zorian couldn’t help but wince visibly. Kael didn’t often refer to his personal tragedy, so sometimes it was hard for Zorian to keep in mind how traumatic these deaths must have been for his morlock friend. He had never lost anyone he personally cared about to the Weeping, but he’d heard that those who fell to the disease suffered horribly before the end.

It was at times like this that Zorian really understood how the specter of that epidemic still hung over many people’s lives. It had only been a handful of years since the Weeping, after all, and many people were still mourning their dead.

“I hope you don’t think less of me for asking this,” said Zorian. “But how did you end up as a married father at thirteen, anyway?”

Kael burst into laughter.

“What?” he asked, greatly amused. “All these restarts and you never thought to ask me this before?”

“Well, I never seem to find a good opening to—” Zorian fumbled, caught off guard by the rapid change in Kael’s demeanor.

“Sometimes, Zorian, you’re just too considerate,” Kael said, shaking his head with a final chuckle. “I’d have asked by the end of the third restart for sure if I was in your place. And by the way, you’re off by two years. I was actually fifteen when I got Kana.”

Zorian gave him a strange look.

“I’m older than I look,” Kael explained. “I’m two years older than the rest of our class, but Ilsa said that doesn’t really matter.”

Huh. He’d never have guessed Kael was two years older than him.

“Anyway,” Kael said. “There is not much to say. My mother died in childbirth and my father resorted to alcoholism soon afterwards, so I learned to stay away from the house most of the time. The village children didn’t want to associate with a morlock, so I ended up wandering the wilderness a lot, looking for things to sell for extra cash. One day I stumbled upon Namira in the forest and she led me to this place to meet her mother. Eventually Fria found out about my situation and offered to take me in. I agreed, of course.”

“What, you weren’t scared away by rumors of witches making potions out of children’s blood?” Zorian asked jokingly.

“Well, the rumors also said morlocks like me ate people, so I didn’t put much stock in them,” Kael said. “Anyway, I soon found out that Fria’s motives weren’t entirely motivated by compassion. She wanted an heir, and Namira did not have much talent for magic.”

“I thought witch magic was heavy on the potions and very light on anything that would require actual shaping skills?” asked Zorian.

“It is,” confirmed Kael. “And Namira was still horrid for it. She didn’t have the instincts or the mentality for it. Since Fria really didn’t want her secrets to die with her, she needed to teach her magic to someone from outside the family. And she chose me, because... well...”

“Namira fancied you?” Zorian guessed.

“Yes,” Kael sighed. “She actually made it an official condition for teaching – if I wanted her magic, I had to marry her daughter. But really, I’d have agreed to marry Namira even if she didn’t provide any incentive for me to do so.”

Kael spent the next half an hour telling Zorian small, inconsequential stories about his life in the cottage next to them. It seemed to help his mood immensely. Finally, he took a deep breath and signaled to Zorian that they should go back to Imaya’s place before the inhabitants got worried.

"I have made no mention of Sudomir's soul trap in my research journals," Kael said suddenly, just as they were about to leave. "If I ever ask you about him or the disappearing soul mages in the area, just lie to me. Say you have no idea what is happening or something. It's not like I can do anything about it and it makes it completely impossible for me to focus on my work. I felt horrible these past few weeks, and I failed to get anything done on the alchemical side of things."

Zorian stared at him for a second before nodding in agreement.

"Consider it done."

51. Out of Control

Chapter 051 Out of Control

The new restart began in the same manner as all of his previous restarts – with Kirielle mercilessly jumping on top of him to wake him up.

“Good morning, brother!” Kirielle yelled on top of him. “Morning, m- Hey!”

With a simple act of will, Zorian seized Kirielle telekinetically and levitated her into the air. She stopped her customary morning greeting with a startled yelp, her hands grasping around her in a panicky attempt to find some sort of purchase and stop her ascent. She struggled in vain. Perhaps if she had been expecting Zorian to levitate her off of him, she could have grabbed onto something in time, but she had been caught completely by surprise and was entirely at his mercy. After a few moments of wild flailing, she seemed to realize this and pouted at him.

“That’s not fair,” she complained, looking down on him from her vantage point above him. “Since when can you even do that?”

Zorian ignored the question, instead studying the magic he was using to levitate her with his mana perception. He was still a long way from mastering even the most basic forms of mana perception, but an entire month of Xvim’s tutelage was definitely showing its results. Even a rudimentary ability to sense his own mana flow helped immensely when performing unstructured magic like he was currently doing, allowing him to notice and correct minute flaws in his technique that would have otherwise destabilized the whole undertaking. It was somewhat embarrassing that he had neglected such a potent skill all this time, but maybe it was fortunate he had done so. It was Xvim’s guidance, as much as the shaping exercises themselves, that was responsible for his rapid growth in the skill, and he would have wasted a huge amount of time if he had tried to piece things together on his own.

Taking advantage of his momentary distraction, Kirielle suddenly started struggling again, swiping at him with her hands in an attempt to reel herself back down. Zorian promptly floated her further up in the air, causing her to miss his covers by a few hairs.

“Oh, come on!” she whined. “Zorian, don’t be such a jerk! Put me down!”

Zorian gave her an evil smile and started to float her sideways, away from the bed...

“Slowly!” Kirielle quickly clarified, catching on to what he intended to do. “Put me down *slowly!*”

He thought about letting her fall and then telekinetically catching her in the last moment before she hit the floor, but quickly discarded the idea. He wasn’t *that* confident in his unstructured levitation skills... or his timing, for that matter. He gently floated Kirielle down to the floor and got out of bed.

Unfortunately, Kirielle was rather fascinated by her brief experience with magical levitation, and was instantly upon him, bombarding him with an endless stream of questions. Well. That kind of backfired on him. He just couldn’t get her to calm down...

“How long can you keep doing that?” Kirielle asked.

“I don’t know,” Zorian said. And he really didn’t, but he was hoping that if he answered some of her more inconsequential questions, she would eventually give the matter a rest. As such, he tried to give her a more detailed answer. “It would depend heavily on how docile you were being and whether I had something else disrupting my concentration. At least an hour, assuming I had your cooperation.”

“Great!” Kirielle said happily. “In that case, I have an idea!”

- break -

Zorian slowly descended down the stairs, trying not to make too much noise. The idea, after all, was to surprise Mother, and he couldn’t exactly do that if...

“Zorian, get down here already!” his mother shouted, the sound of her footsteps making it clear she was rapidly approaching the bottom of the stairs. “Your breakfast is getting... cold...”

She entered the main hallway where the stairway was located and then stopped to stare at the spectacle. Zorian himself was fairly unremarkable, but Kirielle was floating in the air beside him instead of using the stairs.

There was a brief moment of silence as the two sides stared at each other, one in surprise and the other in expectation of an eventual reaction. In the end, though, it was Kirielle who eventually broke the standoff. The little imp just didn’t have the patience to stick to the plan.

“Mom, I’m flying!” Kirielle announced loudly, waving her hands up and down in mimicry of flapping wings.

Mother opened her mouth for a second to say something but then thought better of it. She silently rolled her eyes and turned her back on them, mumbling something uncharitable about mages and children.

“When you’re done playing around, come and eat,” she told Zorian, before disappearing into the kitchen again.

Zorian and Kirielle shared a glance. Conveniently enough, with Kirielle floating beside him as she was, they were actually at the same eye-level.

“It was totally worth it,” Kirielle opined.

Yeah. Yeah, it was.

- break -

“Thus it so happened that Sumrak’s quest for restoring his lost memories took him to Korsa, where he descended into the tunnels beneath the city in search of the mythical Scorpion Swordsmen, and the even more mythical Orb of Memory which they guarded,” Zorian spoke dramatically. “Little did he know, however, that the Scorpion Swordsmen were not nearly as honorable as the myths had made them out to be, and that his journey into the depths beneath Korsa would be his most dangerous adventure yet...”

Zorian swept his hand through the air with a flourish, and the illusion that was there promptly dissolved into ectoplasmic smoke, only to reform into a completely different illusionary scene.

Kirielle sat on the edge of her seat, listening in rapt attention. Over the various restarts, Zorian had more or less worked out what sort of things Kirielle found impressive and interesting, so it wasn’t very difficult to keep her attention these days. Which was good, because it made the long train ride at the start of the restart a lot more bearable, for both of them, than it would have otherwise been.

Only half of his attention was on the story he was telling, though – he was also considering what to do in this new restart. More specifically, he was considering whether to have another relatively quiet restart like the previous one had been, or if he should notify the Triumvirate Church about Sudomir’s soul trap. The first option seemed more sensible – he had only two more restarts (including this one) to raise his skill at interpreting aranean memories to levels necessary to open the matriarch’s memory packet, and he couldn’t afford to get distracted too much. Aside from that, the second option was very attention grabbing and had the potential of leading Red Robe straight towards him if he did it even slightly wrong.

The choice seemed obvious, but Zorian was getting concerned. Red Robe was being too quiet. Sure, the third time traveler may be laboring under the delusion that there’s a whole army of other time travelers out to get him, but Zorian would have still expected Red Robe to make some kind of move by now, even if strictly through proxies. That Zorian could detect no trace of Red Robe’s actions was slowly making him more and more paranoid. It didn’t help his peace of mind that both Taiven and Kael were even more certain than Zorian that Red Robe was planning something big rather than simply laying low. Stirring the hornet’s nest a little by exposing Sudomir to the authorities just might create enough waves to reveal what Red Robe was planning...

In addition to that, pointing the authorities towards Sudomir was bound to do wonders for his investigation into the invasion and their leadership. There was no way that an investigation into Sudomir would not point them towards the Cult of the World Dragon and the Ibasans. That was almost certainly going to save Zorian months of work, if only because he could watch carefully who they’d arrest and then investigate those people on his own in future restarts. And if he could actually gain access to written records and the investigators’ memories? Absolutely priceless.

His main problem with trying to map out the organization of the invasion was that he was just one person and had to conduct his investigation under utmost secrecy. An official investigation would not labor under similar limitations. In fact, Zorian suspected that no matter how skilled and experienced he became over the restarts, he would never really be able to match the investigative power of the entirety of Eldemar and its counter-intelligence agencies. People who worked there had dedicated their whole lives to this sort of thing, and he knew for a fact that Eldemar had mind images of their own under their employ. They could discover things that Zorian wouldn’t even think of looking for, because he didn’t possess the necessary background to know which questions to ask.

The more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea. He would have to be very, very careful, but this could be just what he needed to connect everything together.

Yes, he was definitely approaching the Church when they arrived in Cyoria...

“Hey, don’t space out now!” Kirielle protested. “You haven’t finished the story. We just got to the *good* part!”

“Sorry, sorry!” Zorian apologized hurriedly. He found it kind of amusing that what Kirielle considered ‘good parts’ usually involved fighting of some sort. Well, that or usage of some kind of epic magic. “As I was saying, the Scorpion Swordsmen had just led Sumrak to the supposed secret area where the Orb of Memory rested on a pedestal, beneath the Holy Stalactite, when suddenly his guides turned on him...”

- break -

Though Zorian had resolved to approach the Triumvirate Church about Sudomir, his first action upon settling a little in Cyoria was not to go to the nearest temple – it was to track down Xvim and tell him about the time loop. He saw no point in wasting time by waiting until Friday to confront him, as the sooner Zorian told him about the time loop, the sooner Xvim would accept it as true and start working with him again. In fact, Zorian had hoped that Xvim would be even easier to convince this time, since he was in possession of the password thingy that Xvim had given him in the previous restart.

Unfortunately, ‘easier’ didn’t mean effortless. Despite the password (that Zorian was certain he had memorized correctly), Xvim was highly suspicious of him. It took several hours’ worth of questions before he was willing to accept Zorian’s story even provisionally, and he didn’t seem terribly convinced even then. He told Zorian they would talk more on Friday and then basically kicked him out of his house.

Maybe he should have waited until Monday and spoken to Xvim in his office instead of visiting him at his home...

No matter. Depending on how things went with the Church, he might actually need a free week to set things up properly.

The next day, he went to a temple. Specifically, he went to a temple he had already visited in the previous restarts – the one with the nice green-haired priest and the future-divining high priestess. There was no particular reason to pick that temple over the others other than familiarity, but he didn't think it would matter. Whatever temple he went to, they would still report to the same parent organization.

Batak was as polite and welcoming as always – he immediately greeted Zorian upon his arrival at the temple and ushered him inside. After serving them both some tea and engaging in some small talk, he probed Zorian for his reason of coming.

“It's unusual to see a young man like you visit our temple,” Batak remarked. “Do you do this often?”

“Well, no,” Zorian admitted. “To be honest, I tend to avoid temples. I've had some bad experiences with them in the past. But I wanted to report something and ask for some advice, so here I am.”

“Oh? What kind of bad experiences?” Batak asked curiously.

Of course he wanted to know about *that*. Zorian would have thought that ‘something to report’ would have aroused Batak's curiosity more, but apparently not.

“It's a bit of a long story,” Zorian sighed. “The first thing you have to keep in mind is that I am an empath.”

“As in, you can sense other people's emotions?” asked Batak. “A useful gift.”

“When trained,” Zorian nodded. “But as a child, I had no control over it. I didn't even *know* I'm an empath. All I knew was that being around large groups of people made me sick and dizzy. And back in my home town of Cirin, the temple was usually packed full of people. The few times my parents brought me there, I ended up fainting and causing a bit of a stir...”

“That's unfortunate,” Batak said sympathetically.

“Not as unfortunate as the old priest's reaction was,” Zorian said, shaking his head. “He really took my reaction personally. He decided that I have some kind of ‘bad blood’ that was repelled by the holiness of the temple.”

“Bad blood?” Batak asked incredulously.

“My mother was of witch lineage,” Zorian clarified.

“Ah,” Batak said in understanding. “That makes more sense. While I don't condone the man's reaction, it was not entirely unreasonable to believe you have some witch-descended bloodline issue going on with you. Lineages were very important to witches, and they loved inheritable magic abilities. Many of their influential families had some kind of bloodline power to draw on.”

“Wait,” Zorian frowned. “Then my empathy...”

“It is entirely possible,” Batak nodded.

Damn. So it was possible that the bigoted old priest could have actually been right about him, at least in a way? Because if his empathy really was something he had inherited through his witch lineage, then ‘bad blood’ really did have a hand in his fainting episodes...

He didn't know whether to be amused or bitter about that.

“I thought empathy was fairly generic, as far as special powers go,” Zorian said. “Lots of people have it, relatively speaking.”

“Special powers don't pop out of nowhere,” Batak said. “Most are a product of potions, rituals, spiritual possession and the like. But sometimes these powers can get transferred to a person's descendants while staying dormant for a generation or two before resurfacing. It's a bit of a public secret, but when a child is born with a magic power ‘out of nowhere’, that almost always means the child has some interesting things hidden in their family tree. In regards to empathy being relatively common, well... I'm guessing that there are more people with, shall we say, *interesting* backgrounds than most people would be willing to admit.”

That was very interesting, because witches were endemic to Altazia, but empaths could be found all over the three continents inhabited by humans. Zorian didn't think all those empaths in Miasina and Hsan drew their roots from some witch born in Altazia. Assuming that Batak was indeed right and ‘random’ empaths originated from an ancestor that deliberately made themselves psychic, that would mean that lots of people managed to turn themselves psychic over the course of history.

In other words, there was some kind of reliable method of turning normal people into psychics circulating around. It couldn't be too easy, since empaths were still rather rare, but clearly it wasn't impossibly hard either.

The tale has been illicitly lifted; should you spot it on Amazon, report the violation.

There was also the matter of his family. If his psychic nature was indeed some kind of pseudo-bloodline thing, then his mother and siblings were bound to have it as well, if only in a dormant fashion. He knew that most of them were not full-blown psychics, since he would have felt it if they

were, but maybe Daimen was. His oldest brother did have an uncanny ability to understand people...

Well, there was no way to confirm it one way or the other. Daimen was in Koth, and Zorian didn't think he could reach him even if he dedicated an entire restart just to get there. Unless he found a way to instantly reach another continent or something, they would never meet while the time loop lasted.

In any case, even if the rest of his family weren't fully psychic, there may yet be a way to awaken their dormant mind magic talent. It was surely easier to unlock a dormant magic ability than to create it out of nowhere, so he couldn't help but wonder if it was possible to, say, make Kirielle psychic in a relatively easy and painless fashion. Not that he would do that, as the idea of a psychic Kirielle absolutely terrified him, but maybe once she was older and able to handle the power responsibly...

"Anyway," Batak continued after a short pause, "I believe you said something about wanting to make a report and needing advice?"

"Yes," Zorian said. He then withdrew a blank, sealed envelope from his pocket and handed it to Batak, who frowned at him.

"An anonymous report?" Batak mumbled to himself.

Personally, Zorian didn't feel this was very anonymous. Anonymous would have meant sending the letter through normal mail, without ever having to meet face to face with anyone. Unfortunately, as much as Zorian liked that idea, that would have gotten him nowhere. Such a report would not be taken seriously at all, and would likely be thrown into the trash before it ever reached someone important. If he wanted the Church to actually do something, he had to talk to an actual priest and have them vouch from him that his report had been made in good faith.

"I have to ask, is this absolutely necessary?" Batak said, concerned.

"The information contained in the letter concerns the crimes of a highly influential person with plenty of subordinates," Zorian said blandly. "If my name is known, I would fear for my safety."

"I see," Batak sighed. "Very well, I will forward your report to my superiors as it is. I must warn you, however, that they are not terribly fond of anonymous reports. They are seen as unreliable. Rest assured that your concerns will be looked into, but it may take some time before the Church investigators get around to it."

"How long is 'some time'?" Zorian frowned.

"A few weeks. Possibly months, if something more urgent comes up," Batak said.

Damn. So much for that idea. It seemed he would have to go with his plan B – talking to Alanic Zosk. He had wanted to avoid doing that, since he kind of doubted that the old warrior priest would just leave him be without any questions afterwards, but it seemed he had no choice. If he absolutely had to make a face-to-face report to someone, Alanic was probably his best shot. The man was almost certain to believe him and *probably* cared enough about Zorian to keep his identity secret.

He could always just end the restart prematurely if things got too out of hand.

"Well, with that out of the way, what can I advise you about?" Batak asked, pushing the letter to the side of the table.

"Souls and necromancy," Zorian told him bluntly.

"Oh," Batak said, suddenly sitting a little straighter. "That is... quite an unusual topic to ask about. Young man, the only advice about necromancy I can give you is: don't use it."

"I wasn't planning to," Zorian shook his head. "What I want to know is why somebody else might do so. And also why they would feel the need to gather thousands of souls and keep them imprisoned in a giant crystal pillar."

Batak gave him a blank look, glanced to the side of the table where Zorian's sealed letter was innocently resting, then gave Zorian another blank look. Then he placed the letter in front of him again and wrote 'URGENT' on top of the envelope in big, blocky letters before setting it aside again.

Well. Zorian still intended to go talk to Alanic, since he had no idea how much influence Batak's little remark would have on his superiors, but he was still touched by the gesture.

"You probably know this, but souls are very mysterious things," Batak said seriously. "They have many functions, most of which we can't even understand, much less influence. But their most important function is not, as many mages believe, that they allow one to produce and shape mana. It is the fact they serve as a living, breathing record of everything a particular entity *is*."

Zorian raised his eyebrows in incomprehension.

"The gods originally gave souls to living beings in order to record their thoughts and forms, so that their lives may be preserved after death and their deeds properly judged in the afterlife," Batak said. "For that reason, the gods, who had intimate knowledge of how souls worked, were capable of many miraculous things. So long as they had access to a person's soul, they could bring them back to life, even if their bodies had been reduced to ash and scattered into the winds. They could peer into their soul to examine their entire life from the moment they were born. They could restore a person's youth by regressing their forms to the state they once possessed. According to some stories, they could even create an identical copy of a

person, indistinguishable from the original in every way.”

“Copies of people?” Zorian frowned.

“It is not that strange,” Batak said, waving his hand dismissively. “The simulacrum spell does something very similar. While simulacra are in no way flawless, they are sufficiently real that some people have argued the use of the spell is inherently unethical. They believe that every time a simulacrum disperses, a person dies.”

“Do you?” Zorian asked.

“No,” Batak shook his head. “Naturally, I follow my Church’s dogma, and it states that only things with souls are considered people. Simulacra do not have them. But this is a digression, and I am not an expert on such magic. What is important is that soul magic has the potential of giving earthly mages godlike powers over their fellow man. It is little wonder, then, that many people have coveted such power over the years. Their efforts have been mostly in vain, but that doesn’t stop necromancers from committing atrocity after atrocity in an effort to unlock mysteries of the soul.”

Zorian considered this information for a few moments. The idea of souls as divine recording devices was totally plausible to him, since he could clearly see that simply sending his soul back in time could keep his memories intact. Which was rather curious, now that he thought about it – it was common knowledge that human minds were stored inside the brain. Was his soul overwriting his brain cells upon the start of every restart or was something yet more exotic going on there?

Though there was something about that story about gods making copies of people that was nagging him in the back of his head. He felt like he was missing something important.

“So why is soul damage so catastrophic to the body?” Zorian asked curiously. “Clearly the connection between the body and soul is not just one-way.”

“Clearly,” Batak agreed. “But nobody really understands the nature of that connection and the way it works. It is known that souls cannot think or feel when not embodied in something. The soul needs a body, even if it’s just an ectoplasmic shell... but the body equally needs a soul. It’s likely that such a catastrophic reaction to soul damage has a lot to do with a person’s life force, however.”

Zorian wracked his brains for a moment, trying to remember what life force had to do with anything. If he remembered correctly, life force was simply a special type of personal mana that wasn’t part of a mage’s mana pool and was used exclusively by the body to keep itself living and resist foreign magics. Since the amount of life force rarely varied much between humans, and couldn’t be used to power spells, the academy instructors hadn’t spoken much about it.

Wait. That was it, wasn’t it? Life force was something every living being had and depended on to stay alive. And it was basically just an exotic form of mana. And the outer portion of the soul – the part that can get warped and mutilated – was the one in charge of regulating a person’s mana flow. If a person’s soul was damaged, that would cause their very life-giving energies to spin out of control...

“I understand now,” Zorian nodded. “Though, if I could trouble you for a few more questions...”

Two hours later, Zorian wrapped up his conversation with Batak and left the temple. Strangely, the green-haired priest actually expressed a wish for Zorian to drop by some time for another chat. Strange. Zorian would have expected the man to be rather leery of him after discussing such a topic. He gave Batak a non-committal response, unsure whether he should take the man’s offer, and left for home.

- break -

The next day, Zorian went to Knyazov Dveri to talk to Alanic. Since he had saved Lukav from Sudomir’s schemes and helped Alanic drive off his own attackers, he figured that the man would be well disposed towards him and inclined to listen to what he had to say. Just to be sure, however, Zorian had made a little detour before talking to the warrior priest – he went to the house of Vazen, the merchant that did Sudomir’s dirty work, and stole all the incriminating evidence from his safe.

In the end, though, Alanic didn’t even look at all those papers Zorian had brought him. The moment Zorian started talking to him about a mansion full of undead and the soul trap surrounding it, he demanded that Zorian teleport him to the place immediately. Not tomorrow or in an hour or when he was done looking through all the gathered evidence – *immediately*.

So Zorian did just that, internally grumbling about all the effort he had wasted into preparing his case. Wasn’t Alanic in the least bit afraid that Zorian would teleport him into some sort of pre-arranged trap? No, apparently he wasn’t.

Once Zorian teleported them to the edge of Iasku Mansion’s ward, Alanic just stood still and stared in the direction of Iasku Mansion in total silence. This continued for quite a long time.

“Uh, are you okay?” Zorian finally said, unable to restrain himself any longer. “Shouldn’t you be casting spells to confirm my story?”

“There is no need,” Alanic said calmly. “I can feel the spiritual sinkhole tugging at my soul easily enough.”

Zorian looked at Alanic in alarm.

"We're in no danger," Alanic assured him. "The effect is weak and the souls of living beings are tethered to their bodies too strongly to succumb to it. It's only because my awareness of my own soul is so high that I can easily spot it. You have some measure of soul awareness too, I see, but too little to notice such things."

So a sufficiently good soul mage could tell that the soul trap existed just by entering its area of effect? No wonder Sudomir considered everyone with a hint of aptitude in the field a threat to his plans. Even if most of the people he killed and kidnapped weren't on the level of skill that Alanic displayed, it only took one to blow his conspiracy wide open.

Suddenly, Zorian noticed a group of dark dots flying towards him and swore internally. Damn iron beaks.

"I hate to interrupt you, but some of the mansion's guards are already coming towards us," Zorian told Alanic. "If we don't leave, we'll soon be flooded with winter wolves, undead boars and the like. I speak from experience."

"Oh, so you've done some sneaking around the place already?" Alanic asked curiously.

"Had you read all the information I brought you, you would have known that," Zorian grumbled.

"Worry not, we'll get back to the information later, when we start organizing an assault on this place with the army."

Zorian gave Alanic a surprised look, startled.

"What?" Alanic laughed. "Did you think we were going to infiltrate this place? No, we're bringing soldiers, artillery and several mage combat groups and sieging the place into submission. And you're going to help me investigate the rubble."

"What, I don't get any say in this?" Zorian asked, unable to keep a bit of challenge from creeping into his voice. Damnit, this was exactly what he was afraid of...

"Don't complain," Alanic told him. "I know what you're going to say: you don't want to be involved. You want to go home and pretend this has nothing to do with you, right?"

"Well, yeah," Zorian admitted. "I gave you all the information I know, what more do you want from me?"

"I truly doubt you've really told me everything you know. And the army will be doubtful as well," Alanic sighed. "They will want to find you, and they would eventually succeed at doing so. If, on the other hand, you are clearly working for *me*, they will be leery of going after you. Strange as it may sound to you, you are far safer beside *me* than you are on your own."

As if to punctuate his claim, Alanic pointed his hand at the approaching iron beak flock and snapped his fingers. A dazzling beam of electricity erupted from his palm and struck the leading bird. In the blink of an eye, the beam arced from one bird to another, jumping from target to target.

In but a moment, a twenty-strong flock had been reduced to a rain of charred corpses and blown-off feathers that descended on the forest canopy.

Okay, he had to admit, that was very impressive. Especially since he knew that Alanic was a fire specialist. It would seem his specialization wasn't as narrow as Zorian had thought.

Still...

"How would the army even know I exist unless you tell them about it?" Zorian argued.

"I'll have to tell them about it," Alanic said, shaking his head. "I'm not much of a liar, and they can be rather shrewd and persistent. It wouldn't take them long to figure out that I'm working with someone else, and they will naturally want to know who that person is."

Ugh. How annoying. Should he just dismiss this restart as a failure and start over?

...No, not yet. Maybe he could get this to work.

"I need to stay anonymous," Zorian eventually said.

"We will work something out," Alanic said dismissively.

And that was that. From that moment onward, Alanic considered him his subordinate.

- break -

Zorian had to admit, it was kind of amazing how quickly Eldemar could mobilize its forces once it identified a serious threat. It took only four days for them to organize the assault on Iasku Mansion and mobilize the necessary troops. The Triumvirate Church was involved too, sending two groups of twelve warrior priests each to support the several hundred soldiers and nearly fifty mages that Eldemar itself threw at the problem. Four huge war golems and thirteen magic-enhanced cannons served as heavy support.

Zorian himself was not involved much in the preparations. He mostly just silently followed Alanic around, clad in a face-concealing robe that the

warrior priest had given him. The few times he had to speak, he did so exclusively through a magic orb that could translate his thoughts to speech. He had made it himself, surprising Alanic somewhat. Apparently Zorian's standards were a little skewed again, and what he thought was a mildly-useful trinket was actually something that was worth quite a bit of money in stores and took some practice to learn how to use.

From what Alanic had told him, the rest of the force thought he was some kind of elite investigator in the employ of the Triumvirate Church and were more than a little intimidated by him. Alanic seemed endlessly amused by that. In any case, very few questions had been asked about his presence, but the restart was still young and Zorian didn't dare hope that could last. At least for now, though, his identity was secure.

He really felt out of his depth in all of this, though. This wasn't what he'd had in mind at all when he had decided to make the Church aware of Sudomir's schemes. Hell, Sudomir himself was probably long gone now – there was no way he hadn't noticed all the preparations going on around him.

He told Alanic as much one day, but the warrior priest didn't share his opinion.

"Sudomir has invested a lot of time and money into that place," he said. "There's no way he's going to abandon it without a fight. Four days is not enough for him to evacuate his possessions from that place, and he probably had less than that. I doubt he noticed the preparations straight away."

"If you had moved more carefully in the start, you could have probably arrested him before he realized what was happening," Zorian said.

"Not at all. You can't just suddenly arrest a popular and influential mayor like Sudomir like that," Alanic said. "You need solid evidence, or else people will cry foul. What you gathered is a good start, but nowhere near enough. Attacking a mansion full of undead is a lot easier to justify, and I'm sure we will find plenty of evidence to convict him inside."

Zorian shook his head, not really convinced, but he didn't argue the point further. He would just have to wait for the assault to see how things went. Alanic and the army might be right, after all.

- break -

Considering the amount of forces the army planned to bring to bear on Iasku Mansion, there was no way to really launch a surprise attack on the place. Even with the use of teleportation, it would take quite a while to bring everyone over to their destination and assume proper positions. As such, the initial phase of the plan called for three groups of mages to arrive first and erect a large-scale teleport ward over the entire region – hopefully preventing Sudomir from simply teleporting out when he realized the sheer scale of the assault heading his way.

Well, that part of the plan went off without a hitch. Unfortunately, erecting the anti-teleportation had been like kicking over the hornet's nest – almost as soon as the wards solidified, endless streams of undead started pouring out of the mansion, as well as from the storage facility next to it. Skeletons, undead boars, flesh golems, massive abominations of stitched human flesh (Zorian didn't even know Sudomir had those; then again they were just up-scaled versions of a normal flesh golem) – the amount of reanimated soldiers Sudomir had at his disposal was mind-boggling. Zorian could only presume that he hadn't faced such hordes in his own incursions on Iasku Mansion because by that point most of these joined the invaders in their attack on Cyoria.

Caught off-guard by the ferocious counter-attack, the army struggled to organize its forces. Fortunately, these were all disciplined and experienced soldiers, and they came here fully expecting to fight against undead hordes. It would take a lot more than this to demoralize them.

Cannons fired again and again into the approaching horde, thinning the ranks considerably. The four solid-steel war golems, although far inferior in numbers to the giant flesh-stitched monstrosities mixed into the undead ranks, proved to be far superior to them in strength and durability. The giant flesh golems failed to make a breakthrough, being thrown back again and again until they fell apart. Nonetheless, the chaos of that initial exchange meant that a lot of mages and ordinary soldiers fell to the horde. Ten mages and more than 50 normal soldiers became casualties in the first ten minutes of the battle.

After that, however, the army had had enough time to get a grip on the situation. As had the mages. After some initial difficulty, they finished some kind of multi-mage spell and a pair of giant fire vortexes suddenly sprang into existence in front of the approaching horde.

Almost like living beings, the two vortexes wove through the undead ranks, sucking up reanimated bodies into their center, where they were burnt to a crisp. The strange thing was that instead of growing weaker with time, the vortexes only seemed to be getting stronger with every undead body they consumed.

The few reanimated corpses and flesh golems that survived the artillery, war golems, and fire vortexes were met with a hail of grenades and high-caliber bullets wielded by normal soldiers and none of them survived to make contact with the assault force.

And then the top of Iasku Mansion exploded upwards. For a moment Zorian thought that Sudomir had perhaps once again panicked in the face of a determined attack and did something to screw himself over, just like he had during their last encounter, but then something inside the resulting dust cloud roared.

Something huge. The roar reverberated through the area, creating a shockwave of force that blew away all dust and debris shielding the top of Iasku Mansion from sight. As such, Zorian was treated to a sight of a massive metal platform that was almost entirely taken up by an equally massive skeletal dragon. Its gleaming white bones glowed with countless lines of yellow light that signified a staggering amount of spell formula etched onto the long-dead bones, and instead of being hollow, its ribcage seemed to be crammed full of some kind of metal machinery and likewise looked rather sophisticated in nature.

What.

What!?

Why did Sudomir have that thing!? Why hadn't he ever given any indication he had something like that in the past!?

The skeletal dragon didn't care about Zorian's internal incredulity and muttered curses. Its entire surface lit up with a pale yellow light, creating some sort of ghostly mimicry of a membrane over its wing bones, and then it lazily took flight.

It set off straight towards where Zorian and Alanic were standing.

The battle for Iasku Mansion had begun.

52. Things Fall Apart

Chapter 052

Things Fall Apart

Zorian was caught thoroughly off-guard by the appearance of the skeletal dragon. After all, he had already explored Iasku Mansion during the previous restarts, and thus thought he knew what kind of forces Sudomir had at his disposal. He could hardly believe he'd managed to miss something so big and dramatic. On top of that, the way in which the skeletal dragon revealed itself was very loud and dramatic, and it clearly knew where to find Zorian, since it immediately set off towards him...

Well, probably not towards him specifically – in all likelihood, it just went after the assault force leadership, trying to perform a decapitation strike. Not a bad idea, since most of said leadership was concentrated in one command area. Granted, such an attack needed a proper strike force – one that could somehow bypass the frontlines to reach the command area in the back, and one that was strong enough to overcome the defenses protecting it – but the skeletal dragon coming after them probably qualified. It could fly pretty fast, after all, and it was clearly infused with very potent magic.

Unfortunately, the leadership of the strike force included Alanic, from whom Zorian never strayed much due to the role he'd assumed in front of the rest of the assault force. So now he had a huge dragon skeleton coming straight at him.

"Safest place in the entire battlefield, my ass," Zorian mumbled gloomily, just loud enough for Alanic to hear him.

The stern priest said nothing, instead focusing on casting a spell of some sort. An anti-spying measure, if Zorian interpreted his chants and gestures correctly. Zorian supposed that Alanic was disturbed at the ease with which Sudomir had managed to pinpoint their command area, and was trying to prevent further surveillance.

Glancing around him, Zorian noticed that the other mages in the command area were also hurriedly casting spells. The command area became a hurricane of activity in a flash – well, even more so than it already had been during the opening clashes of the assault. Despite this, Zorian remained still, aware that any contribution of his would likely cause more harm than good. He could barely understand what was going on around him, so how could he make sure he wasn't getting in the way? Unless one of the mages asked for his assistance, he would refrain from doing anything.

The dragon had barely started its flight towards the command area when a thick black cloud rose into the sky from the forest around the mansion. Iron beaks. Their numbers blackened the sky and filled the air with ominous cawing that could easily be heard all the way to where Zorian was standing. Sudomir probably intended them to serve as a distraction for the skeleton dragon.

The swarm of magical corvids quickly separated itself into five smaller flocks and descended upon the assault force, sending a rain of knife-like feathers at the Eldemarian soldiers. In response, one Eldemarian war golem pointed its metal palms at the approaching iron beaks and a series of explosions erupted in the midst of the flock, killing hundreds of birds with each detonation. The regular soldiers were not defenseless either, and soon brought out some kind of grenade launcher devices and started firing potion canisters into the air. They detonated into flashes of light and electricity, effortlessly scything through the attacking birds. Despite this, the iron beaks kept coming, their numbers seemingly endless. If anything, the death of so many of their kin only made them fiercer and angrier, if the increased volume of cawing and feather attacks was any indication.

Zorian frowned and shifted in his place uneasily. He had been uneasy with the trajectory of the whole restart for a while now, feeling he had completely lost control over events a while ago. Seeing the scene in front of him, that unease only grew stronger. The Eldemarian forces might even lose at this rate. Should he end the current restart and start over?

No... no, not yet. He was taking a bit of a risk, since dying here meant getting sucked into that soul-gathering pillar that Sudomir had in his mansion, but he wanted to see how things would develop. At the very least, he wanted to see how the battle would end. Maybe Sudomir had more surprises in store for them, not just the undead dragon currently flying towards him.

And speaking of the skeletal dragon, Zorian had expected it to swoop in and try to tear them apart in melee combat. Most skeletons could not manage much beside that. Evidently, though, the spell formula and machinery used in this skeletal dragon's construction were not there just for show. Still on its way towards them, the dragon skeleton opened its maw and fired a thin yellow spell beam at them from within the depths of its skull. The beam was faint and translucent, but Zorian knew better than to assume this made it weak. It crossed the distance between the dragon and the command area in an instant, losing little of its coherence in the process.

Thankfully, the mages in charge of the defense had good reflexes – in the brief moment between when the skeletal dragon opened its maw and the beam flew out, they managed to erect a barrier to tank the blow. Unlike the barriers that Zorian was familiar with, this one wasn't a thin layer of force – it was a thick, gelatinous wall of ectoplasm that distorted everything seen through it.

The undead dragon's beam impacted the wall and blew a huge crater in its surface, easily digging through more than half of its thickness. However, the nearby material in the rest of the wall quickly flowed into the hole, filling it up in a matter of seconds. Soon, the whole thing looked as if it had never been damaged in the first place.

The dragon fired the beam two more times, trying to overwhelm the defense by targeting the same spot on the wall through continuous fire. It failed. It simply could not deal enough damage to counteract the wall's regenerative abilities.

Undaunted by the failure, the skeletal dragon continued flying towards the command area. The two fire vortexes that were created to deal with the

initial undead horde, still going strong, moved to intercept the creature. The dragon actually swerved from its trajectory to confront one of the vortexes, breathing some kind of massive dispelling wave at it. Although the flame of the vortex grew noticeably dimmer in the wave's passage, it resisted dispersal. At the same time, volley after volley of spell projectiles started homing in towards the undead dragon as it entered the range of defending mages. The spells hurled at it were very diverse – just about every one of them was different from the rest in some fashion. After a while Zorian realized that they were testing the dragon's wards to see if there were any obvious weaknesses in its defenses.

Unfortunately, the attack spells hurled at the skeletal dragon were about as successful as the dragon's long-range attack on the command area was – which was to say, they weren't. Part of the problem was that the skeleton dragon was surprisingly agile, swooping through the air with incredible grace, and a part of it was that it had its own forcefield to protect itself. It was just a simple force aegis, nothing fancy, but there was a reason why the aegis series of spells was so popular among mages – they worked pretty well. A layer of force like that could stop anything that a physical obstacle could... and most spells couldn't go through solid objects.

Still, the spell volleys continued to come, and the two fire vortexes did their damnedest to engulf the dragon and drag it into their fiery depths. Though the vortexes looked like energy constructs, they could evidently exert plenty of physical force, because they managed to completely halt the dragon's advance. Their attempts to do actual damage nonetheless proved completely ineffectual. The skeletal dragon seemed to possess inexhaustible quantities of mana for the purposes of powering its defenses, and everything that connected with it was shrugged off. It was probably powered by captured souls, much like the mansion it was defending.

But the skeletal dragon's advance had been halted, and no defense was truly perfect. One of the mages found a spell that was remarkably good at burning through the thing's shield (some kind of disc made out of purple fire that glued itself to the surface of the shield and kept draining it) and eventually the first layer of the skeleton dragon's defenses fell. Unfortunately, the undead dragon seemed to have realized it had found itself in an unenviable position and promptly intensified its struggles. It fired one attack after another at the fire vortexes, occasionally sending an attack or two at the other threats targeting it, causing both vortexes to disperse.

And then it fired its yellow beams again, but this time it didn't aim them directly at the command area or the rest of the Eldemarian forces. Instead, it fired the beam at the ground in front of its targets, dragging the beams across the landscape. Huge amounts of dust and gravel were thrown into the air, reducing visibility and disrupting many of the spell volleys coming after it. Many of the spell projectiles fared poorly when aimed through dust clouds, detonating prematurely or veering off course.

By now, Zorian was completely certain that he was not dealing with a mindless automaton like most of the undead were. The decisions made by the skeletal dragon clearly indicated there was a sapient mind driving its actions – either the construct itself was not as mindless as your average skeleton or Sudomir was personally piloting it through some remote link, much like Zorian had been piloting his golems the last time he'd invaded Iasku Mansion.

If the dragon was not a mindless undead, then that meant it was potentially vulnerable to mind magic. He tried to extend his mind sense far enough to check up on the idea, but the dragon was still too far away for that.

"Can you lure it closer?" Zorian asked Alanic. "I know it's dangerous, but I might be able to disable it if I can get close to it."

"We're already working on it," one of the mages close to them said suddenly, cutting into the conversation before Alanic could say anything. "We have a surprise of our own prepared for it once it gets close enough, but we can't be too blatant about luring it here or it will realize something is wrong and keep its distance. What do you have in mind?"

"I want to try attacking its mind," Zorian admitted.

"Oh? A mind mage, huh?" the man asked him rhetorically, giving him a speculative look. "Could work, I guess. Tell me when you think the moment is right and we'll try to give you an opening."

Zorian didn't really understand what kind of opening they thought they could give him when it came to mind magic assault, but he nodded in assent anyway.

While most of the mages had been trying to deal with the undead dragon, the rest of Eldemar's forces had been busy dealing with the iron beaks assailing them. At some point, isolated packs of winter wolves and war trolls had joined the iron beaks in their counter attack, but somehow Eldemar's forces were still holding. After a few minutes, Zorian noticed that some of the mages were teleporting away and returning with extra forces and realized how – apparently Eldemar had been prepared for the possibility of the assault going wrong and prepared reinforcements to be brought in as needed. A small but steady stream of new mages and mundane soldiers constantly kept trickling into the area to strengthen the existing forces.

"It's coming!" the mage that had previously spoken with Zorian shouted. And indeed, the undead dragon had clearly decided it was done playing around and made a beeline straight at the command area once more. The man turned to Zorian. "We'll hit it with a dozen paralysis bolts the moment it comes close enough. It probably won't do anything, but it should tie up some of its mental defenses. The moment I give you the signal, do your thing. You have one attempt, and then we'll go with our plan."

Zorian concentrated at the approaching enemy, extending his mind sense as far as he could in the skeletal dragon's direction. The dragon fired beam after beam at the barrier protecting the command area, and the damage done to the wall was noticeably growing more severe as it got closer. At point blank range, it could probably cut through the wall of ectoplasm and deal actual damage to the command area... provided it still had enough power to punch through the rest of the defensive wards that had been erected around the area when the place had been made. Still, even if the wards could hold out against the beams for a time, they surely would not last long. It was best to stop the thing as quickly as possible.

The skeleton dragon accelerated as it got closer, clearly intending to ram the wall with its entire mass, trusting its durability. The moment it had entered Zorian's psychic range, however, he knew he had it. He could sense the mind behind the dragon clear as day. It was shielded, but Zorian could immediately tell it was not enough to stop him from breaking through. He didn't have much time, though, the dragon was traveling pretty damn fast and-

Twelve bright blue bolts suddenly converged at the approaching skeletal dragon, cast by the mages around Zorian. This close, their target could not dodge, even with its amazing aerial acrobatics, and its force aegis had been exhausted long ago. The moment the bolts had struck the undead dragon, their combined force smashed the mental shield protecting its mind like a hammer striking an egg. For a fraction of a second, the dragon's skeletal form even grew rigid, continuing to fly forward due to existing momentum but temporarily paralyzed by the combined effect of those twelve bolts. But although the paralysis itself had been shrugged off almost instantly, that was immaterial – the important thing was that its mental shield had been stripped away from it, leaving it completely unguarded.

Zorian immediately launched a barrage of psychic knives straight at the mind that controlled the dragon. The controller recoiled in pain and shock, caught by surprise by the brutal assault, and Zorian took advantage of its weakened influence on the undead dragon to seize control of it for a moment.

In an instant, the skeleton dragon changed the direction of its flight downward, plowing straight into the ground with all of its considerable speed. Mountains of dust and gravel erupted into the air as it dug a deep trench into the ground below, slamming into several trees (the trees came out worse in the collision) before gradually coming to a halt some distance from the command area.

For a moment, everyone around Zorian halted and turned towards him in silence.

"Holy hell," somebody said. "That actually worked."

"It's still intact," Zorian said tersely. "And the controller is still fighting me for influence. All I can do is keep it still for the moment, and even that isn't going to last long."

Indeed, while the undead dragon's controller had been caught off guard by Zorian's move, the fact was that trying to attack a controller through the puppet they were controlling was not an easy thing to do, even for him. It greatly lowered the speed and power of Zorian's mental attacks, and the controller had already restored their mental defenses by now and was doing his damnedest to reassert control over the skeletal dragon. The blasted thing clearly had some kind of powerful control array built into it, because Zorian was quickly losing the battle for control over it.

"You've done more than enough," Alanic said, before turning to one of the army leaders around him. "Fire the living metal rounds."

Behind the command area, four hidden artillery emplacements opened fire, each one unerringly hitting the immobile skeletal dragon. Instead of exploding, the projectiles erupted into a tangled mess of silvery threads that wrapped themselves around the skeletal dragon, seeking to entangle it firmly.

"Originally we wanted to use this to force it down to the ground," Alanic told him. "But this is even better. Once the living metal roots itself into the ground, that thing will never set flight again. How long do you think-"

Zorian felt the mind behind the dragon finally wrench control of the body away from him, and the immobile form of the skeletal dragon suddenly began to struggle and thrash against the metal threads.

"Nevermind," Alanic sighed. "I guess we'll have to do this the hard way."

Though the undead dragon struggled fiercely, the metal threads appeared unbreakable. They writhed and coiled like some kind of metallic worms, constantly seeking purchase on the long-dead bones. Far from freeing itself, the dragon's struggle seemed to only leave it in direr straits, as the threads took advantage of its shifting and thrashing to bind it more firmly. It tried to render the threads inert by breathing a dispelling wave at them, cycled through four different magical fields (also doing nothing to the threads), before finally trying to fire its deadly yellow beam at the nearby command area. Unfortunately for it, the threads had restricted its movements too much by that point, and it could no longer point its head in the proper direction.

Frustrated, the dragon roared, much like it had when it had first revealed itself. This close, its roar was more than just an intimidation tool – the sound was loud enough to rupture one's eardrums and the kinetic shockwave created by the roar itself could easily send an unprotected man flying. Fortunately, the command area was warded against such relatively minor damage and Zorian simply had to endure some painful ringing in his ears in the aftermath.

Eldemarian forces started to rain spells and artillery shells at the dragon, apparently unconcerned with the possibility of damaging the living metal threads that were keeping the undead dragon chained to the ground. For good reason, it turned out, as nothing seemed to do any damage to them. Or perhaps any damage dealt to them was immediately healed – the living metal thing they were made of seemed to be a very morphic, malleable material.

Sudomir didn't seem to like the predicament his fancy undead superweapon found itself in, because not long after the attack barrage started, several massive magical projectiles were launched into the air from Iasku Mansion. They ascended high into the sky before descending down to the earth again, travelling across a parabolic trajectory and crossing immense distances in the process – far beyond what normal magic was capable of.

Zorian was reminded of that very first invasion (that he could actually remember), and the fake fireworks that served as a beginning of the invasion. It was the same thing. He could instantly tell he was dealing with artillery magic. Spells like those took a long time to cast and used incredible amounts of mana to power them, but they had both extreme range and extreme damage potential.

Zorian wasn't the only one who had immediately figured it out. Almost immediately, the leadership of the assault force decided to abandon their current position – two of the projectiles were aimed at the command area, and nobody was sure whether the existing defenses would hold out against even one. Fortunately, artillery spells like these ones were very slow, making it easy to move away before they hit. Fundamentally, they were intended to be used against static targets, and were ineffective against things that could move out of the way. But Zorian suspected that Sudomir never intended for them to actually die – he just wanted to disrupt their attack on his pet undead dragon. A ploy that was quite successful, as Eldemarian forces scrambled to get out of the way of the descending artillery spells.

But Eldemarian mages didn't just passively run away. Even as they shifted their forces to escape from the blast areas, they began to cast artillery spells of their own as retaliation. Soon, several new artillery spells rose in the air, targeting Iasku Mansion. Sudomir had still struck first, though, so by the time they were halfway to their target, the artillery spells that had been launched from Iasku Mansion reached their destination. One of them was, amazingly enough, targeting the skeletal dragon. It seemed Sudomir was gambling on the idea that his dragon was tougher than the living metal threads that kept it restrained.

The world erupted into fire, light and noise.

Almost immediately afterwards, the skeletal dragon flew out of the dust cloud created above its former prison. It was missing one of its legs, and some of its bones were cracked, the spell formula inscribed on them growing dim, but it still moved. Some of the living metal threads still clung to its bones, stubbornly refusing to let go, but there were too few of them now to do anything more than annoy it. It seemed that Sudomir had gambled correctly.

The world exploded again as Eldemarian artillery spells reached their destination as well. A shining golden dome of force intercepted the projectiles, shielding Iasku Mansion from devastation, but it was left dim and flickering in the aftermath.

The undead dragon immediately turned back, retreating towards Iasku Mansion. Its retreat seemed to signify a general retreat, because the surviving winter wolves and war trolls also fled back into the safety of their base.

As for the iron beaks, their numbers had been cut down to less than half, and the moment they saw the skeletal dragon fleeing from the assault force they scattered in every direction, flying away from Iasku Mansion at maximum speed. Scanning the minds of several frantic iron beaks flying above him, Zorian could tell they had no intention of ever returning to this place. Whatever force Sudomir had used to keep them on his side was apparently insufficient to make them ignore the massive losses they had suffered in this battle.

The first battle for Iasku Mansion was finished, but nobody was fooled into thinking the rest of the siege would be easy.

- break -

Over the course of the next several hours, Sudomir did his best to stall Eldemar's forces as much as possible. His surviving forces launched constant raids on the assault force, doing little damage at this point but successfully breaking the army's forward momentum. The skeletal dragon, in particular, was still a menace – it no longer made bold, frontal attacks like the one it had performed in the beginning, but it made sure to go after any perceived weakness or recklessness. In addition to that, the area immediately around the mansion was full of hastily erected traps, both magical and mundane, as well as ambush parties composed out of those familiar black-clad undead corpses that Zorian had met before in Iasku Mansion. Finally, the defensive wards on the mansion were running at maximum power, burning through whatever mana reserves they had stockpiled to resist the constant artillery bombardment that was being directed at it ever since Sudomir had launched his artillery spells at the assault force.

At first, Zorian felt that this kind of stalling action was a perfectly sensible decision on Sudomir's part. He was probably buying himself enough time to evacuate his Ibasan buddies back to their other bases through the dimensional gate in his basement, and would probably escape through it himself at the end. But as hours went by, it became obvious that Sudomir really intended to fight the assault force to the bitter end for some reason. He could have surely escaped ages ago if he really wanted to.

Regardless of how determined Sudomir was to defend his mansion to the end, the outcome had already been decided at the end of that first battle. As hours passed, the noose kept tightening around Sudomir's neck. The forest around the mansion was burned down to cinders to prevent further ambushes and traps, Sudomir's stockpile of undead minions eventually started to run out and the mansion's wards were clearly on the verge of breaking.

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And then Sudomir did something that Zorian would have never expected him to.

He surrendered.

Even more amazingly, his surrender was not some kind of trap like Zorian suspected it was when he first heard about it. In the end, Sudomir really did open the gates of his mansion and powered down the defensive wards, letting himself be captured. That... just didn't make sense to Zorian. He could have escaped easily enough – the Ibasans inside the mansion certainly hadn't stayed – Eldemarian forces found plenty of evidence that a

lot of people had been living inside the mansion until very recently, but no-one other than Sudomir himself was still present. Even if the Ibasans had shut the gate on him, Sudomir could have surely just ridden into the sunset on his fancy skeletal dragon.

Zorian waited for a while to give the Eldemarian investigators a chance to explore Iasku Mansion, and then went to confront Alanic about his concerns.

“What is there to be confused about?” Alanic asked him. “If Sudomir had persisted in his resistance, we would have collapsed his stronghold on top of him and he would have died. Nobody wants to die, least of all a necromancer.”

“But the gate we found in his basement . . .” Zorian began.

“Yes, shocking stuff,” Alanic frowned. “It does seem strange that he did not retreat through the gate along with his unknown allies, doesn’t it? But you have to remember, just because they cooperated doesn’t mean they were actually friendly to one another. It could be that he expects better treatment as an Eldemarian captive than as a long-term guest of his so-called allies.”

“Even so, it shouldn’t have been too hard to flee from the battle if he was determined,” Zorian insisted. “He could have flown out, for instance. Gods know we couldn’t have really stopped that pet undead dragon of his if it had simply flown off in a random direction.”

“No, but we could have tracked it,” Alanic said. “But yes, you are probably right. He could have fled. But that would have meant that we would have leveled this place to the ground. Sudomir seems to be very attached to this place. It seems this is his life’s work, and he is loath to see it gone.”

He cares about his soul trap thing so much?

“Isn’t it destined for destruction anyway?” Zorian asked, frowning. “Surely Eldemar is not going to let a giant soul trap remain intact?”

Alanic stared at him for a few seconds before sighing heavily. “They’re definitely going to release the souls trapped within. Too many people know about them by now, and it would be a huge scandal if it became known they let so many innocent souls remain trapped in that thing. At the very least, I’m sure I can get the Triumvirate Church to apply pressure on Eldemar to do so. Unfortunately . . . I cannot guarantee that the device itself will be destroyed. Sudomir’s work is utterly repugnant, but also very impressive to some people. It’s entirely possible he can reach some kind of agreement with Eldemar’s government.”

“Agreement?” Zorian asked incredulously. “How could that possibly work? I know that Eldemar has some secret necromancers under their employ, but Sudomir is . . .”

“I know,” Alanic said, raising his hands in a placating gesture. “But it would be completely in line with Eldemar’s previous behavior to retool this place into a secret research facility and then place Sudomir ‘under house arrest’ here. He would be forced to work for Eldemar, and all manner of restrictions would be imposed on him, some of them ethical in nature, but that is obviously a far lighter punishment than a monster like him deserves. I’m almost one hundred percent certain that this is what Sudomir is aiming for.”

“I see,” said Zorian unhappily. He knew that Eldemar was no image of perfection and goodness, but he was still unpleasantly surprised that they would be willing to work with someone like Sudomir.

Then again, they still didn’t know that Sudomir wasn’t just practicing illegal magic, but was also actively betraying the country to foreign enemies. Zorian suspected that Eldemar would be a lot less willing to make use of Sudomir once that little fact came out . . .

“Of course,” Alanic continued, “if I were to find out something particularly damning about the man before Eldemar’s black divisions have a chance to sequester him to one of their compounds for questioning, then such an agreement might become politically unworkable. There is only so much that can be swept under the rug, after all.”

Zorian gave Alanic a suspicious look.

“Meaning . . . what, exactly?” Zorian asked.

“Your ability to target Sudomir’s mind through his bone dragon puppet was very impressive,” Alanic noted. Huh, so it *was* Sudomir who had been piloting that thing. Zorian had wondered about that. “Even if it was for but a moment, you must be a pretty good mind mage to have achieved that.”

Wait, Alanic was offering him a chance to root through Sudomir’s mind for information? Why yes, Zorian was very much interested.

“Say no more,” Zorian told Alanic, trying not to show his enthusiasm. “I’ll be happy to help you interrogate him.”

“Come with me, then,” Alanic said, turning around and motioning for Zorian to follow after him. “Mind you, we’ll only have an hour or so alone with him. This isn’t exactly an official interrogation and there is only so much I can bend the rules . . .”

Zorian didn’t really care. Frankly, he had a strong feeling he was going to have to terminate this restart prematurely sometime soon anyway, so getting into trouble like that was no big deal. He was just happy this opportunity had fallen so neatly into his lap. He thought he would actually have to try and scheme to get access to Sudomir. He followed after Alanic, mentally preparing a list of questions he wanted Sudomir to answer.

“How come you didn’t just pump him full of truth potions and interrogate him that way?” Zorian asked. He knew that Alanic had done that sort of

thing in previous restarts, so it was a bit strange to see him hold back in that regard now.

"That leaves too many traces in the victim's metabolism," Alanic said, shaking his head. "I did say I'm bending the rules here, didn't I? I need to be able to play dumb when Sudomir accuses me of using magic to force answers out of him."

"Right," Zorian nodded. "Sorry for being dumb, but I have no experience in things like these, so you'll have to be a little patient with me."

"An expert mind mage that has no experience in things like these," Alanic stated blandly, visibly rolling his eyes. "Right."

Zorian decided not to respond to that. There was no way he could explain how he had really gotten his mind reading skills, so it was best to stay silent and quietly appreciate the way Alanic was not questioning him about that. For now, anyway.

Sudomir looked surprisingly good for someone who had gotten captured by an Eldemarian assault force. He was wearing shaping-disrupting manacles on his wrists and an exploding collar around his neck, but other than that he appeared completely unharmed. He seemed jittery and impatient when they came in, giving Alanic a sour look but not saying anything. Reading his surface thoughts, Zorian found out that Alanic had already been here a couple of times to ask the man questions, and Sudomir was already sick of him. The man refused to discuss anything with Alanic, apparently aware that there was something fishy about him being sent in as an official Eldemarian interrogator.

Zorian shrugged and got to work. He didn't try to be subtle – he immediately performed a powerful mental attack on Sudomir, ruthlessly crushing his mental defenses and sending feelers deep into his mind. Sudomir clutched his head in pain, powerless to resist. This close to Zorian, and with his ability to cast spells suppressed by the manacles he was wearing, Sudomir had little hope to expel Zorian from his mind. He couldn't even scream or shout for help, since Zorian had prevented him from doing that.

The only difficult thing was making Sudomir speak his answers out loud for Alanic's benefit. He didn't want the warrior priest to know just how effortlessly he could root through someone's memories, but forcing the man to do something was far harder than simply interpreting Sudomir's thoughts and memories... and also, Sudomir was under compulsion not to speak about certain topics. It turned out he had gotten clever and placed a geas on himself before surrendering, placing restrictions on his ability to discuss some things. Stuff like his cooperation with the Ibasans and the planned invasion of Cyoria. This was, of course, completely unacceptable. A big part of reporting Iasku Mansion to Alanic was Zorian's desire to blow the whole conspiracy thing wide open, so the geas definitely had to go.

Zorian was not really a soul mage, so simply removing the geas was out of the question. Fortunately, he didn't have to do that to neutralize it. Mind magic was a known bane of the geas-type spells – a geas couldn't prevent a mind mage like Zorian from lifting information straight from someone's mind, and it could not compel one to follow an order they could not remember ever receiving. One of the reasons why geas were not more popular throughout history was that if the recipient of the geas was unwilling to play along, they could simply pay a mind mage to purge their memories of the restriction they labored under. The geas would still technically exist, but the compulsion to honor it would be gone.

The geas Sudomir had placed on himself was very fresh, less than a day old, and thus it took less than five minutes for Zorian to make Sudomir forget it ever existed. He didn't even bother notifying Alanic of its existence.

In any case, once the full scale of Sudomir's activities started to come to the surface, Alanic decided that he no longer cared about keeping the interrogation short and covert. The interrogation lasted for hours, and only ended because Zorian was afraid he might permanently cripple Sudomir's mind if he kept rummaging through it incessantly. During those several hours, Zorian found out a wealth of information about the Ibasan invaders, Cult of the World Dragon and Sudomir. Most of this information involved the identities of collaborators and places where evidence could be found to doom them all – this was the sort of information that Alanic was most interested in, and Zorian saw no reason not to give it to him. In fact, he intended to visit some of these people himself in some future restarts, but for now he would simply step aside and let Alanic go after them.

For Zorian, though, some of the more interesting pieces of information he got from Sudomir concerned the man's reasons for doing what he did. The core of everything seemed to be the fact that his wife died. To be fair, Sudomir was an unscrupulous necromancer even before then, but it was only after his wife contracted the Weeping and passed away that he'd really lost it. Rather than accept her death and move on, he extracted her soul and tried to bring her back to life. He failed, naturally. Apparently it was not a simple thing to make a dead soul think again, to say nothing of actually restoring it to a semblance of life. Eventually he bound his wife's soul to Iasku Mansion, restoring a measure of her mental faculties in the process. That was why the warding scheme of the place could intelligently respond to scans and attempts to bypass it, and also the reason why Sudomir had been utterly unwilling to see it destroyed. He would rather let himself be captured than abandon his wife's soul to eventual destruction.

In fact, the biggest reason why Sudomir agreed to help the Ibasans was that Quatach-Ichl promised to give him the ritual needed to turn his wife's soul into a lich. A normal lich creation ritual required a living person to work correctly, but Quatach-Ichl claimed he could modify it to work on the disembodied soul of Sudomir's wife too. Whether Quatach-Ichl was lying about that was anyone's guess.

The other reason for helping the Ibasans invade Cyoria, the 'politics' part that Sudomir had mentioned in the past, was that Sudomir wanted to legalize necromancy. After all, his wife was soon to come back to life as a lich, and he certainly didn't plan to die of old age if he could help it either, and it was impossible for him to hide things like that in the long term. Especially if he intended to keep his political position, which he definitely did. Thus, he wanted to make Eldemar drop some of the restrictions surrounding soul magic, or at least to make some special exceptions for him in particular. To that end, he felt he needed to make Eldemar weaker (so they would be desperate for his help) and himself stronger (so he could be the savior they were in desperate need of).

The actual details of Sudomir's master plan eluded Zorian, as they were too complex and convoluted for him to figure out in a mere couple of hours. And frankly, Zorian didn't care that much. He found the whole thing crazy to start with, and felt that it was all just an excuse anyway –

Sudomir helped the Ibasans because he wanted his wife back. Everything else was just him lying to himself.

Zorian also encountered a couple of other interesting facts while searching Sudomir's mind, such as the means Sudomir had used to control the iron beaks. Apparently it was a mixture of kidnapping their chicks to hold as hostages and dominating some of the more influential members of the flock. Iron beaks were fiercely protective of their young and intelligent enough to understand a hostage situation, and also didn't seem to realize their leadership structure had been magically subverted, so this ploy worked surprisingly well. Zorian still wasn't sure if it was possible to do anything with this information, but he filed it away for future musings.

Eventually, the topic of the interrogation drifted to the issue of primordial summoning (well, more like Zorian guided it there, but whatever) and Zorian decided to see if Sudomir knew the answer to a question that had been bothering Zorian for quite some time.

"Why does the Cult of the World Dragon need a shifter child to complete the ritual?" Zorian asked.

"Children. Plural," Sudomir said. He had mostly stopped struggling against Zorian's mental probes by now, since it hurt a lot less that way. Currently he mostly focused on trying to shift the interrogation away from sensitive topics. Too bad for him that Zorian knew a great deal about what he and his allies had been doing in the past several months. "The ritual needs at least five shifter children to work. Ideally more."

Zorian frowned. Five children?

"What happens to them?" Alanic asked.

"Sacrificed, of course," Sudomir said, rolling his eyes. His thoughts told Zorian that he considered that a very stupid question. Ask an obvious question, get an obvious answer.

"Why so many?" Zorian asked. "And why children? Why *shifter* children?"

"There is only so much primordial essence one can extract from any particular shifter," Sudomir said. "And that essence gets progressively more integrated into the shifter's body as they age, making it next to impossible to extract. Only very young shifters have any significant amount of free floating primordial essence in their bodies."

What?

"Explain," Alanic told him.

Sudomir sighed. "Simply splicing a foreign soul into your own won't make you a shifter. At least, not the kind people are familiar with."

A stream of disjointed flashes flew across Sudomir's mind and Zorian dived deeper into his memories to investigate. Sudomir knew this stuff because... he had been doing research into shifters for years now. He had captured dozens of shifters, experimenting on them in a brutal fashion to see what makes them tick. He even made several attempts to produce one, the most successful one being his production of the Silver One. Disturbingly, though, the Silver One wasn't a human granted the ability to turn into a winter wolf, but the opposite – he had grafted a human soul onto a winter wolf, granting him increased intelligence and ability to turn human if he so wished. That... why would he do such a thing!?

Zorian took a deep breath and pushed the thought out of his mind. While horrible, Sudomir's shifter experiments were basically a drop in the bucket as far as Sudomir's crimes were concerned. Asking him about it would just waste the little time he had left with the man.

"In order to make the transformation so flexible and thorough, the ancestors of modern shifters had to use something more," Sudomir continued. "Specifically, they used a bit of primordial blood they had recovered from the creature imprisoned beneath Cyoria. That particular primordial was noted for its shapeshifting prowess, and thus served as a potent catalyst for their own rituals. It is one of the reasons why their shifter rituals are so hard to acquire for outsiders. Even if they can procure the instructions for the ritual, they still need the blood of an existing shifter to perform it, because they're the only ones with primordial essence coursing through their blood."

"The cultists want to use that primordial essence as a key to open the prison," Zorian mused out loud.

"Yes," Sudomir confirmed. Zorian could feel that the man liked talking about this topic, as it shifted the interrogation away from his misdeeds onto someone he didn't much care about. Although he was technically a member of the cult, Sudomir didn't seem to have any emotional attachment to his fellow initiates. "In a way, that essence is still a part of the primordial, and can thus be used as a tool for bridging the gap between our world and the pocket dimension where the primordial has been imprisoned."

"Pocket dimension, huh?" Alanic said.

"That is why they call it a 'summoning' ritual," Sudomir said. "Technically, the primordial isn't on the same plane of existence as the rest of us. The gods made a special extra-dimensional prison to shove it into. Such pocket dimensions always have a place where they touch our reality, though, and the cult has long ago found where the anchor point for the prison is."

Zorian was forced to terminate the interrogation soon afterwards, but before he did so, he made sure to memory wipe Sudomir of his recent memories. As far as he was concerned, the interrogation had never taken place.

As they left, Alanic commented on the fact Zorian was not using any words or gestures to perform his mind magic. His tolerance for Zorian's peculiarities was probably steadily approaching the breaking point, and he would soon demand some kind of explanation. Unfortunate, but the lack

of gestures and chants was not something Zorian could fake – he was pretty sure an expert mage like Alanic would notice if he tried to make something up to mask his ability.

By the time he'd finally gone back to Cyoria, it was already evening and Kirielle was sound asleep. Imaya remained awake to wait for him, which Zorian found a little bizarre – he had already made up an excuse yesterday for the fact that he would be absent for an entire day, and told her not to wait for him. She cared a bit too much about her tenants for a landlord, in his opinion.

As he went to bed, he couldn't help but wonder what kind of chaos was going to follow in the wake of the fall of Iasku Mansion. He supposed he would find out soon.

- break -

In the next couple of days, Alanic left him alone and refrained from getting him involved in further investigations. That didn't mean that he and the rest of Eldemar's authorities were idle, though – in the days that followed, Cyoria was rocked by one scandal after another as important people started getting arrested and brought in for questioning left and right. Zorian paid close attention to who was getting arrested, even though he actually already knew most of them due to his interrogation session with Sudomir.

Aside from paying attention to the arrests going around him and the reactions they were causing, Zorian also executed several attacks against various aranean webs to continue accumulating experience needed for interpreting the matriarch's memory packet. He was good enough at picking his targets at this point that he had few issues with actually subduing aranean patrols, but he found the experience very draining in an emotional sense. He was basically attacking random aranea for no reason whatsoever, all because he needed a victim to practice his memory reading on, and it was hard not to feel like a villain. Some of the aranea begged him to stop or repeatedly tried to talk to him instead of fighting back. He simply withdrew whenever he encountered such individuals, seeking out more aggressive individuals that actually fought back against his unprovoked aggression, even though that was infinitely more dangerous and definitely not the most efficient strategy.

A few days more passed before Alanic had finally contacted him, using a letter, of all things. The message was short, basically telling him that some people were asking about him, but that he was successfully dodging their questions for now. The letter warned Zorian not to draw further attention if he wished to remain anonymous, since people were already interested in him. Fair enough. He had already decided he would terminate the restart in a few more days – he just wanted to wait for a little while longer to see if something interesting would happen, since he didn't think the arrests had reached a critical point yet.

By this point Kael had moved into the house and Zorian had already told him about the time loop and given him his research notebooks, so he decided to tell him a little about Sudomir and the information he had learned from the man. He omitted any information about Kael's friends and acquaintances, since the morlock had told him to keep that secret from him, but that still left a lot of stuff to talk about.

"Oh? Shifters have the essence of a primordial inside of their bodies?" Kael said, surprised.

"That's what the man said, at least," Zorian nodded. "I can't help but wonder how this extraction thing works. Do the cultists really have to kill those kids to get this 'primordial essence'?"

"Almost certainly," Kael nodded. "It sounds like it's part of their life force. It would make sense for something that is inherited from parent to child. Regardless of method, removing someone's life force is never benign. Ritual sacrifice is simply the fastest way to perform blood magic on them, but even if the cultists used something fancier, the results would likely be the same."

"Blood magic?" asked Zorian curiously. "You know what that is?"

"Ah, right, you probably don't know. The mage guild does tend to suppress that information, doesn't it?" Kael mused. "Blood magic involves using people's life force, usually to fuel various spells. Life force is really potent, much more so than regular mana, so the temptation is always there. Of course, not only are blood magic rituals incredibly dangerous, using your life force also has terrible effects on the body. Thus, most mages who dabble in it prefer to use other people's life force instead of their own. You know all those stories about villains that ritually sacrifice people for power? They're basically doing blood magic."

"Oh. So that's blood magic? Kind of underwhelming," Zorian said. "I thought it would be something incredibly arcane and sinister, considering how obsessive the mage guild is about purging any mention of it from books."

"Blood magic is very easy to do, so long as you have a steady stream of sacrifices," Kael said. "And there is little variation in the amount of life force between different humans. Any random civilian will do as a sacrifice. It's a very quick if bloody road to power, and the mage guild is afraid that if the information about blood magic was freely available, you would see blood mages popping up all over the place. I've also heard that blood magic can be used to 'steal' other people's bloodlines and special abilities, and you can imagine how all those super-special Noble Houses would feel about *that*. The mage guild cracks down on it very viciously, and blood magic produces too many victims for a practitioner to hide for long."

Before Zorian could continue the conversation, a series of explosions started to erupt across the city, causing them both to run outside to see what was happening. They found the rest of the inhabitants of the house to be unhurt but confused and frightened by the detonations, though Zorian already had a pretty good idea what was happening.

His suspicions were confirmed when he climbed to the roof of the house and took a look at the city around them, only to see vast swathes of it burning and many of the streets overrun with war trolls and hostile mages.

The Ibasans and the Cult of the World Dragon had decided to launch their invasion early.

- break -

The next several hours were a blur. Though the invaders didn't have the support of iron beaks and the undead normally provided by Sudomir, and though Cyoria's forces were far more prepared for foul play this time around, the invaders still had a lot of firepower and did their best to cause huge amounts of damage. Though he wanted to go out and explore this unusual invasion, Zorian couldn't bring himself to abandon the rest of the household alone and undefended to the invaders. Instead he stayed at home, eliminating small groups of invaders that had decided to target this area of the city and occasionally using divination to spy on other parts of the city when things were relatively quiet.

Interestingly, despite him eradicating at least six battlegroups, Quatach-Ichl never showed up to deal with him. Presumably he was a lot busier this time around, and couldn't afford to deal with a minor issue like him.

To be honest, he didn't understand what the Ibasans were trying to accomplish by launching this premature attack. At least their original plan to attack during the summer festival had a chance to really do some lasting harm to the city, while this one was doomed to fail right from the start. Then again, maybe they didn't have much choice. They surely knew by now that Eldemar's investigators were onto them, so waiting for the summer festival was clearly stupid... but with Iasku Mansion shut down, perhaps retreating to Ulquaan Ibasa in a timely manner was impossible.

After a while, his scrying attempts noticed that fighting was especially fierce around the Hole. This was where most of the invading forces were concentrated, and Quatach-Ichl never seemed to move far from the place. Were the invaders gambling everything on the successful summoning of the primordial? It certainly seemed so. A part of him wondered if that meant Nochka had been kidnapped and was being ritually sacrificed as he watched, but he pushed that thought aside. He couldn't do anything about it, even if she was, and she would be alive when the next restart begins.

It was interesting, though. If the cultists successfully released the primordial from its extra-dimensional prison, he would finally be able to see for himself how dangerous and destructive it was. The restart wasn't even close to ending, after all, so the primordial would have plenty of time to show its might.

Hours ticked by and Zorian suddenly realized this was it. The fighting around the Hole had reached a fevered pitch, with Eldemar's soldiers frantically trying to surge forward and overrun the invaders while Quatach-Ichl rained a dizzying variety of suppressive fire on the forces arrayed against him. At some point one of Cyoria's mages actually managed to melt half of his skull off with some kind of golden fire, which was the first time Zorian had ever seen something do actual damage to the ancient lich, but that didn't seem to hold him back much. Above the Hole, and presumably on the inside of it, space shuddered and writhed, distorting everything like hot summer air. Slowly, jagged black threads started rising into the air from the depths, zig-zagging through the air and occasionally forking offshoots.

They were cracks, Zorian realized. Reality was breaking.

Suddenly, a huge volume of space in the center of the cracks simply... caved in, creating a pitch black hole that hung in the air. Something huge and dark brown, like a hand studded with mouths and eyes, shot out of the rip in space, but Zorian didn't have time to study it much. Without any prompting from him, the marker on his soul suddenly activated and everything went black.

He woke up in his bed in Cirin, with Kirielle wishing him a good morning.

- break -

With a sigh, Zorian helped Kirielle unload her luggage from the train, his mind still on the events of the previous restart. Why did the time loop restart when it did? Was it because Zach just happened to die at that point, or was it – like Zorian suspected – because the primordial was successfully released into the world?

What kind of relationship did the primordial have with the time loop? Was the whole point of the time loop to prevent its release? He wondered whether the time loop ended when it usually did because a month was how long a default restart lasted or because that's when the primordial was usually released and he never bothered to stop the ritual until now. Hm.

"Welcome to Cyoria, Kiri," he told her. "Pretty impressive, isn't it?"

He was cheating, of course. He *knew* that Kirielle found Cyoria's central train station impressive. This time, though, something else seemed to have attracted her attention.

"Umm," she said, pointing behind him. "I think that guy wants to talk to you."

Zorian turned around, only to see a pissed-off looking Zach stomping towards him. Zorian was so shocked at the sight that he didn't move at all until the boy was practically in his face.

He opened his mouth to give him an awkward hello, but before he could say anything, Zach's fist shot forward in a blur and punched him in the face.

53. Phantoms

Chapter 053 Phantoms

The moment Zorian realized that there was a fist flying towards him, he instinctively tried to take a step back to avoid it. Unfortunately, his and Kirielle's luggage was right behind him and he was never really a hand-to-hand fighter to begin with. Surprised and imbalanced as he was, Zach's punch not only connected with his face but also sent him sprawling to the ground, the back of his head slamming painfully against the unyielding concrete.

He didn't black out, but the force of the impact still left him in a confused daze for some time. It couldn't have been very long, just a couple of seconds, but when he regained the ability to process what his senses were telling him, he found that his surroundings had absolutely exploded in the brief period of time he was incapacitated. Kirielle was screaming for help at the top of her voice (and she could scream really, really loudly when she wanted to) while simultaneously kicking and clawing at Zach like a cornered lynx. Zach, for his part, looked very confused and panicked, awkwardly trying to fend off Kirielle's attacks without hurting her while trying to explain himself. Sadly for him, his words were largely unintelligible due to Kirielle's shrill and incessant shouting. The boy seemed to be at a total loss as to how he should deal with the situation he found himself in.

In other, less public circumstances, Zorian would have probably stayed on the ground for a little while longer, amused at Zach's predicament and feeling the boy deserved his fate. Served him right for punching him out of nowhere like that. As it was, he scrambled to his feet as quickly as possible while looking around. As he thought, they were attracting a lot of attention from people around them – everyone in the vicinity was watching the situation, talking and whispering amongst themselves and pointing fingers at them. It was likely that the only reason why nobody intervened into the situation yet was that Zach was visibly 'losing' against Kirielle, making the situation sufficiently comical to put them at ease. Still, that could change any moment now. He was pretty sure he saw a couple of policemen hurrying over in their direction, if nothing else. Best to stop this before it escalated.

He shouted for Kirielle to stop and calm down, and was a little surprised when she immediately stopped attacking and retreated behind him. Considering how fiercely she had defended him, he sort of expected her to be harder to restrain. But no, apparently now that he was back on his feet, it was his own responsibility to defend them both. Fair enough. Logically speaking, he was better qualified to stand up to Zach than a nine year old girl. Logic could be misleading, though – he doubted he could ever put Zach on the defensive as much as Kirielle had a few moments ago. It was a good thing that Zach didn't look like he wanted to continue attacking him any time soon.

Kirielle poked her head from behind Zorian to give Zach one final glare, causing him to flinch slightly, before turning to Zorian and giving him a questioning look. No doubt she wanted to know why this total stranger just punched him in the face out of nowhere. It was a good question. Why did Zach just do that? Hell if Zorian knew. He had considered the possibility that Zach might be hostile to him when they finally met, yes, but this wasn't really what he had in mind when he thought of a hostile Zach. Punching him in the face was hostile, yes, but physically attacking your target in a crowded train station was not a proper way to ambush a fellow time traveler. Even Zach should know this. So what was this about, really?

Sighing heavily, Zorian ran his hand through his hair in frustration and gave Zach a good hard look. Two things immediately jumped out to him. First of all, he couldn't sense anything from Zach – as far as his empathy and mind sense were concerned, the boy in front of him did not exist. He had no thoughts or emotions at all. That meant that the Zach in front of him was either a very good illusion or under the effect of the mind blank spell. Considering his punch felt quite real, he was going to assume it was the latter. Evidently Zach had come to this meeting a lot better prepared than he had been in the past. Secondly, he should probably get Kirielle's nails clipped after they got to Imaya's place, because they were evidently long enough to draw blood if she used them to scratch people. Zach had received a pretty nasty-looking wound on his forearm during his brief 'battle' with her.

As he noted before, Zach didn't seem interested in fighting with him anymore. The boy looked back at him with a strained smile and greeted him with a quick, awkward wave of his hand.

'Ugh,' Zorian thought to himself unhappily. 'This guy...'

"This," Zorian announced out loud, "is all one giant misunderstanding."

"Yes!" Zach immediately agreed, nodding frantically. "Totally a misunderstanding."

Of course, it couldn't really be that simple. Zach and Zorian spent the next fifteen minutes explaining to Kirielle that they were classmates who knew each other from before and that this was just Zach making good on his promise to punch Zorian in the face the next time he saw him for being a big jerk. Or so Zach claimed, anyway.

Zorian could hardly believe what he was hearing. That was serious? He had to admit he did vaguely remember Zach promising something along those lines in that awful soulkill restart when they had last seen each other, but he hadn't thought much of it. People make proclamations like that all the time. Zorian had totally forgotten about it until Zach reminded him about it.

In any case, after they were done explaining things to Kirielle, they had to explain things again to the policemen that had come to check up on the disturbance. Since Zorian had stood up in Zach's defense, they decided not to arrest him... so instead they issued a monetary fine to both of them for fighting in public. Zorian personally thought that was totally bullshit, but since Zach immediately promised he would pay both of their fines out of his own pocket, he decided not to protest too much.

Then it was time for a *third* round of explanation. Since Zach's attack on Zorian took place so soon after their arrival in Cyoria, Fortov was still around and decided to check up on this disturbance happening nearby. It was pretty bizarre seeing Fortov actually concerned for his and Kirielle's wellbeing for once in his life, but the concern did not last very long. Once Fortov realized they were both fine and that Zorian's attacker was his 'friend', he quickly left them alone to go back to his friends.

Not that Zorian was complaining, of course – the less time he had to spend around Fortov, the better. Still, this was the first time since forever that Fortov had sought him without intending to get a favor. He even managed to restrain himself from insulting Zorian in the course of talking to him. It was novel, and therefore interesting.

"Well then," Zorian clapped his hands. "Now that *that*'s done, we should get going. Our new landlord is waiting for us, and I want to get somewhere where people aren't staring at us and talking behind our backs."

"Is he going to come with us?" Kirielle asked, giving Zach a suspicious look.

"Yes," Zach confirmed. He had largely recovered from Kirielle's attack by now, regaining most of his usual confidence. "I need to talk to your brother about some things."

"What kind of things?" Kirielle demanded.

"Serious things," Zach said.

She looked to Zorian for confirmation and harrumphed dismissively when he nodded in agreement to this.

"You're both stupid," she pouted. "Acting like that in public... and I was actually scared we were under attack and everything..."

"Don't be like that," Zorian told her, using one of his arms to draw her into a one-armed hug. "I was really touched by your defense of me, you know? I'm pretty sure this was the first time someone stood up for me like that since... well, ever."

"She's too much," Zach said, studying the three bloody lines Kirielle had scratched into his forearm.

"So I'll tell you what – if you show some patience with Zach today, I'll answer any question you may have about the whole thing later in the evening before we go to sleep," Zorian told her, ignoring Zach's whining.

"Really?" Kirielle asked, peering at him suspiciously.

"Really," Zorian confirmed. While Zorian didn't usually tell Kirielle that he was a time traveler, he wasn't violently opposed to the idea. Since it seemed he was going to interact with Zach pretty heavily in this restart, he didn't see much harm in telling her what was really going on. He was pretty sure Red Robe would sooner track him down by monitoring Zach's movements than by following a chain of distorted rumors back to Kirielle.

"Really?" Zach asked, looking at him curiously.

"Yes, really!" Zorian huffed. What's with all this disbelief? It's almost as if they didn't expect him to tell the truth or something. "I already told her about the restarts before, and it wasn't a problem."

"You did?" Kirielle frowned. "But I don't remember you telling me anything about any 'restarts'."

"Completely understandable," Zorian said, patting her on the head. "Don't worry, all will become clear later."

He hoped. He glanced at Zach again, wondering why the boy tracked him down now, of all times, after spending so many restarts avoiding Cyoria.

He really did hope Zach's arrival would make things clearer instead of just complicating things further.

- break -

Zorian had originally intended for this restart to be much like the previous ones, but with the sudden inclusion of Zach into his schedule, he decided that plan was untenable and would have to change. Accordingly, he did not bother meeting Nochka this time around, instead taking Kirielle and Zach straight to Imaya's place. Kirielle had a tendency to blab just about anything to Nochka, who was not exactly very good at keeping secrets herself, and that didn't mesh too well with his intention to tell Kirielle about the time loop in this restart.

The first half of the journey was uncomfortably subdued. Well, Zorian himself didn't mind the peace and quiet all that much, but he knew that neither Kirielle nor Zach were predisposed to be that silent for long periods of time. The two did not know how they should act in the presence of the other and thus kept to themselves. That lasted up until it started raining. At that point Kirielle decided she wanted to play around with the rain barrier Zorian set up around them, just like she usually did at the start of the restart, Zach's presence be damned. That turned out to have been the ice breaker, and they both got more talkative all of a sudden. Both towards Zorian and to each other.

Of course, he and Zach could not really discuss the time loop out in the open with Kirielle around, so their conversation mostly took place in the form of discussing their magical skills and occasionally demonstrating a spell or two to Kirielle and each other. Aside from being a useful conversational tool, it also allowed the two of them to compare their abilities against one another to see where they stood in regards to magical

ability. Well, somewhat – obviously Zorian wasn't laying bare his entire skillset to Zach's scrutiny, and he doubted the other time traveler was being perfectly forthright either, but still. Just because the comparison wasn't complete did not mean it was worthless.

What Zorian discovered was humbling. While Zach was very combat magic focused, just like the boy had admitted to him in the past, he had made good use of the time loop to turn himself into a well-rounded mage. He was the sort of archmage that made other archmages envious – he had expertise in just about every type of magic, including the notoriously difficult and specialized medical spells. He actually healed the scratch marks Kirielle gave him as a proof of that claim. Even in regards to crafting-oriented magics like alchemy and spell formula, which Zach admitted were his least favorite fields and which Zorian specialized in, the last Noveda still possessed sufficient expertise to debate Zorian in a non-vacuous manner.

Finally, the little demonstrations they did for Kirielle clearly showed that Zach's shaping skills weren't any worse than Zorian's. Despite having huge mana reserves, Zach had *excellent* shaping skills.

Whatever Zorian could say about Zach's choices in the time loop, he clearly hadn't been standing idle this whole time – he had been steadily working on his skills for decades, and it showed. In retrospect, it was horribly arrogant of Zorian to even think he could have caught up to the guy in little more than 5 years.

"You know, I can't help but notice that your older brother left pretty quickly and didn't even try to talk to me," Zach said. "Not that I'm complaining, since it works out better for me that way, but you'd think he'd be more interested in someone attacking his little brother in public."

"He knows that neither of us can stand him, so he keeps away," Kirielle said casually, doing her best to snatch the little animated water drakes flying around her out of the air. Zorian and Zach had competed earlier to see who can create more realistic-looking drakes out of the surrounding rainwater, so the entire shield bubble was still full of them. Zorian was pretty sure he won, but Kirielle was the judge and she claimed she couldn't tell the difference. The little traitor.

"I don't think he's that considerate," Zorian scowled. "He just didn't feel like spending time on us. He had better things to do than waste time on his younger siblings."

"No, I'm pretty sure he knows you hate him," Kirielle said, shaking her head. "He even said so when we were alone once. It's why he tries to avoid you if he can help it. He thinks he's doing you a favor."

Zorian frowned. He supposed he hadn't been terribly subtle about his opinion about Fortov, so he wasn't really surprised that Fortov knew. He did find it hard to accept that Fortov's behavior was motivated by anything other than his selfishness, though. If he wanted to do Zorian a favor, why was it that he still came to Zorian from time to time to ask for favors? That was the worst reason possible for approaching him – the whole reason why he hated Fortov was because he always had to make up for Fortov's failures to do his job in addition to his own duties.

"So you think I'm being too harsh with him?" Zorian asked curiously. Before he had gotten stuck in the time loop, the mere insinuation that this was the case would have been the equivalent of throwing a lit match in a bowl of lamp fuel. Now he found himself honestly curious about what Kirielle thought about the topic.

"No. Yes. Maybe," Kirielle said. "I mean, he's still a jerk and I don't like him either. So I know how you feel. But maybe us being mean to him back isn't the correct thing to do. Maybe he'd be better if we were more patient with him. I'm not. I try being nice to him sometimes, but he makes it very hard."

"Yeah, I'll bet," Zorian snorted derisively.

"You know, I'm getting the idea that your family is a little messed up," Zach said.

"You have no idea," Zorian said. "And that's probably a good idea. Let's end the subject here, okay?"

"Fine, fine," Zach acquiesced. "So, is this the place?"

Zorian looked at the house Zach was pointing out and nodded.

"That's Imaya's house, yes. Let me just arrange for everything with the landlord and unpack a little and then we can talk. Do you have a place already lined up?"

"I... didn't think that far," Zach admitted.

Zorian sighed. Figures. "Then we'll go to the ruins of the aranean colony in the tunnels below us. There is already a pretty good warding scheme protecting the place."

"Oh, so you know where that is?" Zach said, perking up. "Did any of the spiders survive?"

"Spiders?" Kirielle mumbled, brows furrowed in thought. Zorian could tell she had been analyzing their every word during the entire walk, trying to figure out what they were hiding. It was both commendable and amusing.

"No, none," Zorian shook his head. Zach immediately deflated.

“So it’s just the two of us, or...?” he asked hopefully.

Though his empathy could pick nothing from him, Zach wasn’t a terribly hard person to read. Zorian realized that Zach really wanted to talk to fellow time travelers. The more of them there were, the better. He must have been very lonely and bored all these years he spent in the time loop.

“Just... let me drop off Kirielle at the house and then we’ll talk,” Zorian said.

“You better not forget your promise,” Kirielle warned, jabbing him in the ribs with her bony little index finger. Yeah, she was definitely getting her nails clipped when he got back.

“Fine,” said Zach. “I’ll wait for you to—“

“Oh no,” Zorian said, cutting him off. “Do you know what Imaya would do to me if she heard I left a person out here in the rain instead of inviting them inside? And she’d definitely hear, because Kirielle is too much of a tattletale to keep her mouth shut.”

“Hey!” said tattletale protested.

“She won’t care that you’re a mage and can easily protect yourself against the rain. I’d be hearing lectures and snide comments for days,” Zorian said. “You’re coming inside and introducing yourself to Imaya.”

And so, with Kirielle and Zach in tow, Zorian walked up to Imaya’s door and knocked...

- break -

After an hour or so, once everything had been arranged, Zorian led Zach into the depths of Cyoria’s underworld. Along the way, Zorian explained the truth behind what happened to Zach. There had been no large number of time travelers – just him and the araneas piggy-backing on him using memory packets. And in the aftermath of their confrontation with Red Robe, the aranea were all dead – soulkilled, according to Red Robe. While Zorian had some doubts about that, it was undeniable that the aranea started every loop dead from that point on.

Once they had reached the dead aranean settlements and Zach had had the chance to study the place for a while, they sat down and began to talk.

“I tried to find this place immediately after that restart,” Zach noted, staring at the nearby aranean corpse. He was surprisingly shaken by the dead settlement, considering aranea were rather inhuman and he had known them for a very short time anyway. “All I found were some isolated aranean corpses like this one.”

“Those were basically guard posts,” explained Zorian.

“Yeah, I guess. Maybe I’d have tracked it down eventually, but then this... ‘Red Robe’ tried to ambush me.”

Zorian perked up. This was the first clue he had about Red Robe’s activities in the wake of Zorian’s confrontation with him.

“He attacked you?” Zorian asked, leaning forward with interest.

“Attacked me and lost,” Zach grinned proudly. “He’s not that hard to beat without Quatach-Ichl to support him.”

So Zach was good enough to defeat Red Robe in a straight one-on-one fight. That was good to know.

“I guess he was counting on the advantage of surprise, but I saw his ambush from a mile away,” Zach continued. “I knew he was probably stalking me so I was already on guard. Still. He managed to escape in the end, and I didn’t really feel safe wandering around these tunnels with someone like that hunting me. I basically left Cyoria and hid for the rest of the restart.”

“Did he ever come after you again?” Zorian asked.

“Yes. Once,” Zach said. “In the very next restart, he tried to attack me at its very beginning. He teleported straight through the wards on my home and tried to kill me while I was still in the bedroom, getting dressed.”

“And he once again fled when you defeated him?” Zorian asked.

“Well, I’m actually the one that fled there,” Zach said, coughing uncomfortably. “I was still half-asleep and in my underwear, okay? I didn’t expect him to come after me so early. Anyway, from that point on I have been leaving Cyoria at the start of every restart to prevent further surprises like that. Even if Red Robe never came after me again after that one surprise attack.”

“Hmm,” Zorian hummed thoughtfully. He doubted that Red Robe spent all this time trying to track down Zach, so this still did not explain why he had been quiet all this time... but it was interesting information nonetheless. What did Red Robe want from Zach so badly?

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“So... why did you stop hiding now, of all times? And did you really have to punch me in the face like that?” Zorian asked sourly. “My teeth still hurt from that.”

“Do you even have to ask?” Zach scoffed. “You have been stuck in this time loop along with me for gods know how long, and you never came to me about it. No, worse than that – when I came to talk to you, you played dumb and did things on your own behind my back. You deserved a good punch in the face just for that.”

Zorian fiddled with his glasses awkwardly. Okay, it did sound kind of bad when he said it like that. But he had good reason for behaving like he did! He really did!

“But you know, I understand,” Zach continued. “I got played like a drum by that red robed fucker that’s looping along with us. He messed with my mind and was probably monitoring me somehow—”

“You’re sure he’s not doing it right now, right?” Zorian cut in with a question.

“I know how to shield myself from tracking magic, Zorian,” Zach said frostily. “Better than you, I imagine. It’s just that I usually didn’t bother with it, since I thought I was the only person aware of the time loop, so why bother? Ever since that night, though, I’ve been layering non-detection spells on myself constantly. The asshole hasn’t managed to track me down once in all this time. I doubt anyone can.”

“I can,” Zorian noted. “But then again, I seem to have an advantage that Red Robe does not seem to possess. I’ll trust that you know how to protect yourself.”

Zach gave him an unreadable look. Almost without thinking, he tried to focus his empathy on the boy to get a better feel for his emotions, only to suddenly remember that Zach was under the effect of mind blank when he felt nothing at all from the boy.

Yes, Zach could definitely protect himself if he wanted to.

“You’ll tell me about that later,” Zach said, shaking his head. “Anyway, sorry for snapping at you. I’m still kind of angry at myself for getting screwed over by Red Robe. I get a little testy about the subject. But anyway… I understand. It was dangerous to just talk to me directly with Red Robe lurking in the background. I still think you should have talked to me, but I can see why you’d think otherwise. I can even understand why you left that night without bothering to explain anything to me, considering what ended up happening.”

Zach gestured towards a nearby aranean corpse for emphasis.

“So I decided to leave you alone for a while. Even once it became obvious that Red Robe was no longer after me, and had essentially disappeared into thin air as far as I could tell, I stayed away so as to not attract attention to you. Just in case Red Robe was somehow watching, despite all my precautions. I figured you knew what you’re doing, and once you were ready, you’d come to me so we could tackle the time loop and this Red Robe guy together.”

How did he expect Zorian to track him down if he purposely made himself as untraceable as possible? Nevermind, he’d ask that question some other time. Best not to interrupt the boy now.

“And then you pull that crap in the last restart,” said Zach, anger leaking into his voice. “You’re finally making a move, and in a big way too, triggering the invasion several weeks early, but you made no attempt to involve me in any way. How can I not be angry? How can I not want to punch you in the face? Do you think so little of me? Just because you saw me brought down by two incredibly powerful opponents, one of which is a thousand-year-old lich, you think you can—“

“Zach, Zach, listen, that… that wasn’t intentional,”

Zorian said hurriedly, trying to stop Zach from getting too angry. He had a feeling he was going to get another punch in the face if he let the boy get going too much. “I never intended that restart to blow up like that. The whole thing was a mistake, it escalated way beyond what I was comfortable with, but I was curious and—”

“Did you even intend to contact me? Ever?” Zach asked him bluntly.

“Yes. Absolutely,” Zorian confirmed. “Probably after this very restart.”

Zach leaned back in surprise, giving him a surprised look.

“Oh,” he said, anger draining right out of him. “Well, if that’s so, then it’s probably good I came to you when I did, isn’t it?”

“I’m kind of in the middle of something important,” Zorian sighed. “I really should be focusing on that. Hell, I should have been focusing on it in the previous restart too, instead of messing around with Iasku Mansion and the invaders, but I can get really stupid sometimes. That’s why I only wanted to contact you after this restart.”

“If it’s so important, why not let me help?” Zach asked curiously.

“It’s not something you can help me with,” said Zorian. “Remember those memory packets the aranea used to retain awareness between restarts? Well here’s the thing…”

He then launched into an explanation about the matriarch’s memory packet and how he had been trying to hone his aranea memory interpreting skills to a high enough level to understand its contents. This also led to a discussion about Zorian’s mind magic abilities. Zach was clearly

uncomfortable with mind magic, which made sense considering how it was used against him. After some internal debate, Zorian offered to have a look inside Zach's mind to see what exactly Red Robe had done to him... but Zach predictably refused. He admitted that he didn't really trust Zorian that far yet, and maybe never would. Zorian was just glad the other boy didn't take offense at his offer.

"So if I understand you correctly, you're attacking isolated aranean patrols in order to practice memory reading skills on subdued aranea," Zach said.

"Yes," Zorian confirmed.

"And you think I can't help you there?" Zach asked incredulously. "Zorian, you're a total idiot."

"Err," Zorian fumbled, not sure how to respond to that.

"Zorian, with my help you would not need to waste time stalking isolated patrols. We could just walk up to the main aranean settlement and take them all head on," Zach told him. "I've done that before. I didn't just spend all these past months keeping out of Red Robe's sight – I've also been investigating things on my own, such as searching for other aranean webs around the continent to see if they can help me. Except that I'm not psychic like you and they can be incredibly dismissive and rude to 'flickerminds' like myself. I've been attacked plenty of times, and I know exactly how to fight them. They're no match for me at all. The power disparity is so big I can actually focus on incapacitating them instead of aiming to kill – even when they attack in groups. With my help, you could have had hundreds of aranean practice dummies every week, maybe every day. It largely depends on how fast we can find new webs to target."

Zorian stared at Zach for a few seconds before swallowing heavily. That... that was a good point. He hadn't even considered that.

"Well, what's done is done," Zach shrugged. "But I'm here now, so you have no excuse to keep being stupid. When do we start?"

- break -

In the end, Zorian decided there was no reason to delay things – they would be going after their first web the very next day. In the meantime, he went back to Imaya's place and talked to Kirielle. She claimed to believe him when he said he was a time traveler, but Zorian could sense she wasn't entirely convinced yet. Even after he recreated a stack of her drawings from his mental storage and showed them to her.

Though that part did seem to make his story a lot more plausible to her.

"I'm relieved," She told him before going to bed for the night. "You were so nice to me, it was really scary. I was afraid you were replaced by some kind of shape changer."

"Go to sleep, Kiri," Zorian sighed.

The next day Zorian located one of the smaller webs in the vicinity of Cyoria and took Zach there. He wasn't entirely convinced the operation would go as smoothly as Zach had promised, but Zach soon made all his fears groundless: the aranean web in front of them was subdued with terrifying ease.

There were no fancy tactics involved. Zach simply walked up to the settlement's main entrance tunnel and started raining down spells on the ill-prepared defenders. Waves of translucent blue force battered them against the walls, animated serpents made out of lightning electrocuted them and grasping ectoplasmic threads entangled them and stopped them from simply fleeing. When they realized that Zach was immune to mind magic, the aranea turned to traps, ambushes and mass attacks – but Zach simply punched through them, barely slowed at all. Magical traps were dispelled, non-magical traps disabled with alteration spells, the mass attacks and ambushes Zach simply tackled head on and won anyway.

In less than half an hour, every aranea that did not flee was incapacitated or dead. Aside from actually locating the web, Zorian hadn't done much and had just stood back and watched the carnage.

Zach was absolutely terrifying.

"Do you think this will be enough for you to work with?" Zach asked, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet and giving him an expectant look.

Zorian gave him an annoyed look. He could sense at least fifty aranean minds around them. The asshole knew well enough that this was more than Zorian could have subdued in an entire week of non-stop attacks on aranean patrols. This was just him taking a 'subtle' swipe at him.

Then again, considering the level of skill Zach had just displayed, maybe he deserved to be a little arrogant.

"Yeah," he said. "It's plenty."

- break -

After talking about things for a while and exchanging information, both Zach and Zorian agreed that neither of them knew all that much about the time loop. Like Zorian had long suspected, Zach spent most of his time trying to think up a way to counter the invasion and had not put much thought into what the time loop actually was. According to him, he always thought he had to find a way to counter the invasion in order to end the time loop. He could not explain why he thought so, since his memories were full of unexplained holes, but he felt very sure about that.

That could be a confirmation of Zorian's earlier theory that the release of the primordial was what triggered the restart, but it could also be a compulsion that Red Robe had put on Zach to screw him over. After all, the release of the primordial in the previous restart involved very visible cracks in space heralding its coming... something that Zorian had never witnessed before. And it wasn't like he had never observed the area around the Hole during the last moments of previous restarts. Why had the release of the primordial never caused such dramatic symptoms in the past?

Regardless, they both agreed that opening the matriarch's memory packet was their best bet for getting some solid answers. Accordingly, over the course of the next week, most of their time was spent on tracking down and attacking various aranean webs. They attacked a new one every single day, and the amount of experience in reading aranean minds that Zorian had accumulated was incredible. Zorian probably read more aranean minds in that one week alone than he had in the entire two previous restarts combined.

The especially important part was that Zorian was no longer just reading the minds of random guards and patrol aranea, but also the minds of their leaders and even matriarchs. Not only were these higher-ranking aranea especially hard to read (and thus gave the most useful experience), their thoughts were also an entire order of magnitude harder to interpret. There seemed to be a method among aranea to turn their mental powers inward onto their own minds, and most higher-ranking aranea had at least some expertise in it. Zorian wasn't exactly sure what those techniques were designed to accomplish, but they altered the thoughts and perceptions of the user immensely.

As a matriarch of a powerful web, Spear of Resolve was doubtlessly a user of these techniques as well. If Zorian had tried to interpret her memories without having taken this into account, he would have likely been in for a nasty surprise.

On Monday, when classes began, Zorian visited Xvim's office to try and bring him into awareness of the time loop again. In the previous restart, Xvim had been very suspicious of him and his overtures hadn't gone anywhere. It was difficult to know how much that had to do with his approach and how much of it was a product of all the arrests in Cyoria at the time, but Zorian was not taking any chances this time. He suspected he had tried to move a little too fast in the previous restarts, so this time he was more conservative.

He waited until Xvim was in his office before visiting him, tried to reduce his arguments to bare essentials and then finally handed him the code the man made him memorize. Xvim still told him to come back on Friday in the end, but Zorian had a feeling things would end up working better this way.

He was right. On Friday, Xvim tentatively accepted his story and once again decided to help Zorian grow by honing his dimensional magic and shaping skills. For now he just tested Zorian's abilities to see where he stood, but he promised to have something more substantial for him next week.

Considering how busy this restart promised to be, Zorian was perfectly fine with that kind of pace.

The first week also reminded him how much more Kirielle focused on him when there was no Nochka around to distract her. Without a friend of similar age to spend most of her time with, Kirielle focused most of her attention on trying to monopolize Zorian's time as much as possible. He had almost forgotten how clingy and annoying she could be, and now resorted to building all kinds of magical toys for her to amuse herself with and leave him alone for a few minutes. Thankfully, she liked puzzles, and there were a lot of magical puzzles described in old spell formula books – images loved inventing them for some reason.

Later in the week, when Kael and Kana moved into the house, some of that attention shifted onto Kana. In the restarts where Zorian introduced Kirielle to Nochka, Kana inevitably ended up as something of a third wheel to the two of them. They played with her, sure, but in any group of three people, someone was going to get pushed to the side... and Kana was much younger than Kirielle and Nochka, and silent to boot. He kind of suspected that Kana was happier with just Kirielle around.

Since Kael was always informed of the time loop the moment he arrived at Imaya's house, and since Zach often visited the place to speak with Zorian, the two of them finally had the opportunity to meet and talk with one another. Although they did discuss the time loop a little, Kael had yet to fully absorb the content of his notebooks (that was getting harder and harder as the number of past restarts and the number of notes in them increased), so that didn't really get anywhere. Instead, they mostly talked about alchemy. And the Weeping. Zorian would have thought they'd shy away from the topic, but apparently they were perfectly fine with bonding over their shared tragedies.

Currently, both Zach and Zorian were sitting beneath a tree in the middle of nowhere – a small copse of trees surrounded by farmland in the vicinity of Jatnik, not really a notable area in any way. Zach was currently trying to make an unbroken crown of daisies (and failing hilariously) while Zorian stared at the map of Eldemar that had every web they had located marked on it. Thanks to the memories of various matriarchs and aranean diplomats that Zorian had recently viewed, he now knew the locations of hundreds upon hundreds of new webs. Deciding where next to attack was actually quite a problem at this point.

"Hey, Zorian," Zach suddenly said, discarding the daisy crown he was building in a huff after accidentally tearing it apart again. "I know you're on a time limit, but do you think we could take a few days to find a specific aranean web?"

Zorian gave him a curious look. Truthfully, he found their current pace very demanding and stressful, and would have probably begged for a break soon enough anyway.

"I could, yes," he nodded, pointing at the map in front of him. "I won't say the map we have is really comprehensive or anything, but even if the web you're looking for isn't on it, it can probably point us in the right direction."

"Yeah, that's why I'm bringing it up," Zach said. "I originally wanted to wait until you opened the matriarch's package before mentioning this, but

the more I think about it, the more I think we should check this out now. Maybe it will be crucial in understanding what the matriarch was thinking.”

“What is it?” Zorian asked.

“Spear of Resolve told me back then that if anything should happen to her, I should go talk to the ‘Ghost Serpent Acolytes’ web,” said Zach. “She refused to say where they are or how to reach them, though. That’s why I have been visiting the aranea webs ever since then.”

Zorian frowned. Ghost Serpent Acolytes? The web that refused to speak to him because their spirit told them he was ‘bad news’? Could it be that they or their spirit knew something about the time loop?

Well, the time loop did sever the link between the material plane and the spiritual ones, and the Ghost Serpent Acolytes worshipped some kind of snake spirit. Even if it was a native spirit, and thus lived in the material world, maybe it still had some kind of connection to the spirit planes and knew something important.

“I know where they are,” Zorian said. “There is no need to search for them. I can just tell you where they are.”

“Oh,” Zach said. “Wow, and I spent so much time looking for them... I can’t believe I could have just popped over to you and asked you where they live. We really should have met sooner than this, it seems.”

“Yeah,” Zorian agreed. “Anyway, it’s probably best if I just point you in the right direction and don’t come with you. Every time I tried to talk to them in the past they said their spirit doesn’t like me and that I should go away. It says I’m bad news.”

“That’s weird,” Zach frowned. “What did you do to piss it off?”

“Nothing,” Zorian said, shaking his head. “I even tried visiting them soon after the restart began, before I ever interacted with any aranea. They react exactly the same way. I don’t know what’s up with that, but it’s best if you go there alone and don’t give them any indication we know each other.”

After listening to Zorian’s directions, Zach immediately teleported away to meet with the Ghost Serpent Acolytes and Zorian himself returned home to wait for him and get some much-needed rest. However, it was only several hours later that Zach returned to Cyoria as well and came over to Imaya’s place to talk to him. He walked up to the table Zorian was sitting at and sat down next to him, an unreadable expression on his face.

“They wouldn’t see me,” Zach said. “Their spirit says I’m bad news.”

“Really? So we’re both bad news,” Zorian hummed, tapping his fingers against the table. “Did they say why you’re bad news?”

“No,” Zach shook his head.

“Do you think we should just attack them and read their memories?” Zorian asked. He was all for being considerate, but it was obvious at this point that the Ghost Serpent Acolytes held some important piece of the puzzle in regards to the time loop.

“No,” Zach said quickly. “If they know we’re time travelers, perhaps they have some method of perceiving the restarts. Attacking them might forever sour their opinions of us. Maybe we try going there at the same time and refuse to leave until they agree to speak with us?”

Zorian arched an eyebrow at Zach.

“What?” Zach defended himself. “It’s worth a try! Don’t underestimate the effectiveness of being annoying for extended periods of time.”

In the end, Zorian agreed to go along with Zach’s plan of annoying the Ghost Serpent Acolytes into talking with them. He notified Kirielle and Imaya that he’d be gone from the house for a while and then left with Zach to visit the suspiciously judgmental web.

The moment they approached the aranean settlement, they were immediately ushered inside. Zach and Zorian gave each other an incredulous look and tried to ask their aranean guides why they were admitted so readily when Zach was turned down earlier in the day as bad news. They were simply told that the Ghost Serpent wanted to see them and that they neither knew what was happening nor cared. They just did as they were told.

Eventually they were led into a large circular cavern filled with water. There was a large rocky outcropping jutting from the center of this miniature underground lake, and a stone bridge connected the entrance to the cave to this rock. The ceiling of the cave was covered in small clumps of glowing white crystals, giving it an appearance reminiscent of the night sky full of stars, and the waters of the lake were dark and still.

All in all, the cave gave off a very eerie feel to Zorian.

Floating in the middle of this underground lake, just above the rocky outcropping, was a giant, milky-white, translucent snake. The only spot of color present on the ghostly serpent were its eyes, which had a soft pink glow. Spirit names were often very fanciful and poetic, but it seemed that the Ghost Serpent was exactly what it advertised itself as.

The moment he and Zach entered the cavern, the Ghost Serpent focused its large slitted eyes on them. A wave of pink light rippled across its ghostly scales, travelling out from its eyes and down to the very tip of its tail, and then it spoke.

“Leave us, leave us, leave us,” it said, its voice soft and melodious, not a trace of a hiss in the pronunciation. Why it felt the need to repeat the order three times was anyone’s guess, since the aranea immediately began leaving the chamber after it had instructed them to leave.

The Ghost Serpent waited for the aranea to leave and seal the entrance before it began to speak again.

“How?” It demanded. “How can there be two of you? I know the rules well enough – only one can enter and only one can leave.”

“We don’t know what you’re talking about,” Zach protested, folding his hands across his chest. “Why don’t you start from the beginning, okay?”

“You cannot order me, Branded One!” The Ghost Serpent snapped, coiling through the air angrily before fixing its glowing pink eyes at Zach again. “I hate you, hate you, *hate you!* Thief and murderer! Liar and egg smasher!”

“Hey, that’s slander!” Zach protested. “We don’t even know each other! This is the first time we’ve met!”

“Is it? Is it really, really, really?” the Ghost Serpent asked with narrowed eyes, once again employing the unnecessary repetition in its words. “I wouldn’t know, even if it is, would I? I know how this works. You both bear the Brand.” It glanced at Zorian for a second. “That is the only reason I’m talking to you. I know the Brand and I know what it means. Most have forgotten it, dormant as it has been in the past few Cycles, but I am older than the mountains and rivers, and I remember. I remember the crimes they did – the way they made me fall. And if they behaved as they did at the End, who dares even imagine what they did in the In-Between? But the Branded Ones are one and there are two of you. This makes no sense, sense, sense!”

“Ghost Serpent, you must believe us when we say that we understand very little about what is happening,” Zorian said. “I have gathered from your words that you know about the time loop, yes?”

“The time loop?” Ghost Serpent repeated slowly, as if tasting the words. “An interesting choice of words. But nobody remembers the In-Between. Only the Branded One. This is something that has happened again and again in the past. It is not difficult to understand.”

“Then please shower us with your wisdom and explain it to us dumb people,” Zach said, rolling his eyes.

“You’re saying there have been more time loops in the past?” Zorian asked hurriedly, before Zach had the chance to piss off the Ghost Serpent for good. Fortunately, it seemed that while the Ghost Serpent knew about the time loop, it did not actually retain the memories between restarts. It just knew that it was stuck in the time loop and could recognize them as time travelers due to their marker... which meant that this situation was possibly reproducible, and even if they bungled things up, it should still be possible to retry this conversation again.

“They were regular like the progression between night and day,” Ghost Serpent replied. “Every four hundred years, whenever the planets aligned. But the Gate has been lost for some time now, or perhaps the Key. Alas, it seems someone has finally enacted this wretched thing again. May he burn in the molten heart of the world forever, ever, ever!”

The Ghost Serpent writhed in the air for a moment, seemingly overcome with anger and outrage at the person responsible for the time loop. Then it focused on them both once again and spoke.

“I remember. Do you not?” It asked. “Do not answer, I can see it on your faces. I do not understand how the Brand can be shared, but clearly it has happened. I do not wish to talk to you anymore.”

“Please, oh great spirit of this cavern,” Zorian knelt, hoping that flattery and some humility may buy them some time. “I can see you have been wronged grievously by the Branded Ones in the past. We do not dispute your grudge. But we have been thrust into the time loop unknowingly and without any say on our behalf.”

“Flattery is good, but useless here,” the Ghost Serpent said. “I know how this works, works, works... you will come here again and again, sucking me dry of any knowledge and wisdom, learning of my fears and weaknesses, and you will take, take, take until there is nothing else. The only thing to do is not to engage you at all. What can you do to me, after all? Today I die, and tomorrow I live once more.”

“We just want to know how this time loop works,” Zorian said.

“Yes!” Zach agreed. “Just tell us what is happening here! If we are really the evil masterminds you imagine us being, then you’d be telling us something we already know anyway.”

Ghost Serpent hovered in the air silently for a while, considering the request.

“Very well,” it said eventually. “But after that, you must leave. And if you have any honor at all, you will never visit me again. Even after I have forgotten.”

“We promise,” Zach said easily. Zorian couldn’t help but wonder if the boy really meant it. After all, the Ghost Serpent could be such a useful source of information...

“Promises are but wind, but they are better than nothing at all,” Ghost Serpent said. “Watch closely.”

The spirit shifted its gaze to the still waters around them, and a large sphere of water floated up in the air from the surface. After a few moments, the sphere flew over to where Zach and Zorian were standing and started writhing like it was about to burst.

Instead it unfolded into a crude diagram – a single horizontal line with an upturned triangle balanced on top of it by the tip.

“The bottom link is the Beginning and the End,” the Ghost Serpent said. “It is the world you were born in, and the world you will die in. The triangle is the world of In-Between. It exists between the moments, constantly destroyed and recreated anew. A lifetime condensed in a moment. We are all trapped in this place, phantoms created for the Branded Ones like you to learn from and test themselves against. When the fires that fuel the world of In-Between run out, we will all fade away into the void... except for the Branded One, who will go to the End, to live through this month one last time, time, time...”

“Wait, are you saying this is all fake?” Zach asked incredulously. “That we’re all some kind of illusion!?”

“A reproduction, not an illusion,” Ghost Serpent replied. “If you could mimic a painting in every stroke and shade, would it not be as real as the original from which it sprang?”

“But that’s-“ Zach began to protest.

“Enough!” Ghost Serpent snapped. “I have given you what you asked for. Honor your end of the bargain and leave, leave, leave! Guards! Escort them out, out, out!”

And then, before either Zorian or Zach could protest further, the Ghost Serpent dived into the waters of the lake and disappeared from view. Despite its ghostly appearance, its dive caused a huge splash, forcing Zorian and Zach to quickly shield themselves or be thoroughly drenched.

Okay, that was just *rude*.

Regardless, the aranea soon came and politely, but firmly threw them out of the settlement. They both stood outside in silence for a while, lost in their own thoughts.

“So...” Zach said. “What do you think?”

“I think that I need to open that memory packet as soon as possible,” Zorian replied.

The Ghost Serpent’s story had given Zorian a horrible suspicion about what Red Robe had been doing all this time...

54. The Gate Is Barred

Chapter 054 The Gate Is Barred

In the wake of their talk with the Ghost Serpent and their subsequent ejection from the aranean settlement, Zach and Zorian teleported away to a sufficiently distant and remote location and sat down to discuss what to do next. And that's when the arguments began.

Zorian really wanted for them to separate for a few hours. He needed some alone time to think about what they'd heard. To make sure his logic was solid. He had his suspicions already – terrible, *terrible* suspicions – but they weren't the sort of thing he'd want to blurt out lightly. In fact, he wasn't sure he wanted to confide them at all... to anyone. Even Zach.

Another reason why he wanted a short break from his fellow time traveler.

Zach didn't want to play along, though.

"We should talk about this now," Zach argued. "While the memory is still fresh in both our minds."

"I have a really good memory," Zorian argued. Indeed, he had specifically memorized the entire meeting with the help of mind magic, and would never forget any of it. He could review the memory in vivid detail as many times as he wished. "It would be better if I had a chance to think about the spirit's words for a while."

"Well, that's fine," Zach said, giving him a dismissive shrug. "You can do that. Who's stopping you? But there's no reason why you can't do that here with me. I can be patient. I'll just... quietly sit here by the side and wait until you're ready to talk. It will be like I'm not even here."

Zorian gave him an annoyed look. He had serious doubts about Zach's ability to sit quietly like that for extended periods of time, and even if he could... it wasn't the same. There was no way Zach didn't know that.

"Look," Zach said, matching his annoyed look with his own. "I know how this goes. If I let you get away now, you'll use that time to think up some stupid story to throw me off with. You know something."

"I don't know anything for certain," Zorian protested, shaking his head. "And frankly, if I wanted to keep my suspicions to myself, I wouldn't have bothered to invent some kind of elaborate lie to deceive you. I would have simply refused to tell you anything."

Zach shifted uneasily for a moment.

"Okay," he said. "I guess I was being a little unfair there. Sorry. But still, you aren't seriously considering just leaving me in the dark, are you? After I informed you of that stupid snake and helped out with your mind magic training? Surely you realize how fast that would kill any sort of trust between us?"

Zorian looked away. Of course he realized that! But it wasn't that simple! If what he was suspecting was correct, then how could there ever really be trust between them?

"There can only ever be one winner in this game", Spear of Resolve had said in her fragmented message.

"Only one can enter, and only one can leave", said the Ghost Serpent.

If only one time traveler could keep the gains made in the time loop and the rest get dissolved into the void, like they had never existed at all, then how could they ever truly cooperate with one another? Any alliance would just be a temporary convenience, inevitably ending in betrayal.

And when all was said and done, Zorian was pretty sure that Zach was in a much better position to screw him over than Zorian was to do the same. The time loop seemed to recognize Zach as more legitimate, if nothing else.

Still, while a big part of him screamed at him to keep quiet about his theories at all costs, there was a small but equally insistent part of him that argued against keeping Zach in the dark. This situation seemed strangely familiar to him...

After a while, Zorian realized what was bothering him. The idea of him hiding this sort of knowledge 'until he could be sure' and Zach being bitter at him for doing so... it reminded him so very much of his arguments with Spear of Resolve before she was soulkilled. And for good reason – he was pretty sure his current suspicions were exactly what she had tried to keep secret from him. He was thinking of treating Zach the same way he had been treated in the past. And he knew how much he had hated the matriarch's secretiveness back then...

Did he really want to basically re-enact the matriarch's secretive scheme, despite the catastrophic way it ended up resolving? Wouldn't it be better to treat Zach the same way he wanted to be treated?

The trust had to start somewhere.

"Fine," Zorian sighed, turning back to face Zach again. "I'll tell you."

"Finally," Zach shouted in exasperation, raising his hands in the air. "I thought I'd have to hit you to make you come to your senses."

Note to self: talk to Zach about his unfortunate tendency to resort to physical violence to solve personal disputes. Right now they had more pressing topics to discuss.

"I should note that this has the potential to really destroy any chance of us trusting each other," Zorian sighed. "I mean, we *already* don't trust each other. You keep that mind blank spell up at all times when you're around me, for instance. That spell is harmful for your mind if you keep it up non-stop. I don't believe for a second that you don't know this. So you apply it specifically for our meetings because you're afraid I'll mess you up with my mind powers if I get the chance."

Zach flinched, his face morphing into a comical expression of surprise. It reminded Zorian of that time he had caught Kirielle raiding the kitchen pantry for sweets a few years ago.

"You don't have to feel guilty," Zorian interrupted his response, shaking his head sadly. "It's smart. I would have done the same in your place. But it helps illustrate my point – we already don't trust one another. How much more, then, would we be paranoid around each other if we knew only one of us could exit the time loop with their mind and magic intact?"

"What?" Zach asked incredulously. "How? Why?"

"The Ghost Serpent pretty much stated it outright – only one time traveler gets to leave the time loop," Zorian said. "The rest... disappear forever, I suppose. It makes sense, really – I don't think there was ever supposed to be more than one time traveler. Or 'Branded One', as the Ghost Serpent calls us. A reference to the marker, most likely. Anyway, if our situation is as unprecedented as the spirit suggested, and the time loop mechanism was only ever designed under the assumption..."

"Zorian," Zach interrupted him. "Don't take this the wrong way, but... your explanations suck. I have no idea what you're talking about. Well, okay, I kind of do, but still. Start from the beginning, please."

"Fine," Zorian sighed, trying to squash his annoyance. "The beginning. First of all, no time travel is technically happening here."

"No?" Zach asked, frowning. "How is that? The illusion world thing?"

"There is no illusion," Zorian said, shaking his head. "It's all real. *We're* real. Flesh and blood and soul and everything else. We're not living in a spell construct or some fancy dream."

"That's good," Zach said, breathing deeply. "It would just kill me inside if it turned out that everything I've learned in here is fake and that I'll be the same old Zach I once was once I wake up in the real world. So what *is* this, then – an actual copy of the real world?"

"Why not?" Zorian asked. "The gods have been known to copy people completely, duplicating them down to their souls and all. Plus, it seems that even mortal mages once knew how to conjure actual matter from nothing. Here, let me show you something..."

Zorian took out a piece of paper and some alteration tools out of his backpack and created a copy of one of Kirielle's drawings in front of Zach, explaining how the spell functioned to the other time traveler.

"That's a damn useful spell combination," Zach said. "I can't believe I never learned about it in all this time. This would have made so many things easier..."

"Yes, well... I can teach you how to cast the spells later," Zorian said. "Anyway, this is what I believe the time loop is essentially doing, albeit on a much greater scale. Whatever is behind this took a blueprint of the world, much in the same way I did with Kael's notebooks and my little sister's drawings. A mind-bogglingly detailed image of a single moment in time across the entire planet. Possibly beyond. And it is repeatedly producing a replica of the world based on that blueprint, allowing it to run for a month before destroying it and starting over."

Zach stared at the drawing Zorian recreated, lost in thought. This particular one depicted two sparrows in the middle of fighting one another. It was pretty impressive how perfectly Kirielle managed to capture this one moment of their battle in a static image. If only she was as dedicated in her magic studies as she was in her art...

"That's crazy," Zach eventually stated.

"And time travel isn't?" Zorian asked, raising his eyebrow.

"I don't know, it somehow sounds more plausible to me than this," Zach said, sighing. He handed the drawing back to Zorian. "I guess it does make a lot of Ghost Serpent's ramblings make sense, though. But here is what doesn't make sense - if our original world is real, and this copy we're living in is also real... where are we exactly? An entire world takes up a lot of space, after all."

"In a pocket dimension, I'm guessing," Zorian answered. "I have no proof, but hear me out. It is clear that, in order for this whole setup to work, we have to be under an insane amount of temporal acceleration right now. Otherwise, how could only a moment pass in the real world while we spend decades or even centuries in this... looping world?"

"Ah, I get it," Zach said. "It's not that the time doesn't pass in the real world while we're here – it's just that time flows so fast here that barely any time has passed in the real world."

"Exactly," Zorian said. "But this sort of temporal acceleration is on a whole other level than even the best temporal acceleration facilities currently

in existence.”

“Yes, so?” Zach shrugged. “Compared to copying the whole world, that seems pretty underwhelming.”

“I guess,” Zorian agreed. “But I suspect there is more to it than just the creator of this thing being ridiculously powerful. Time acceleration rooms have to be isolated from the outside world in order to work with any sort of efficiency. But this isolation is still done through magical wards and physical obstacles like walls, which means there is only so much you can separate them from the rest of existence. A pocket dimension, on the other hand, only touches our reality in one particular spot – its anchor point. You can’t get more isolated than that, and I bet the possible temporal acceleration is much bigger if you enclose the target area in its own pocket dimension.”

“So, you think the time loop is actually a physical copy of the world, enclosed in its very own, temporally accelerated pocket dimension,” summarized Zach. “The time loop has a ridiculously detailed image of the real world as it was at the start of this month, and it periodically recreates the whole world based on that.”

“Yes,” Zorian confirmed. “I’m only guessing all this, but it fits with what I found out so far.”

“And here I thought this thing couldn’t possibly be any crazier,” Zach complained, burying his face in his hands. After a second or two he straightened up again and looked at Zorian. “So how does this affect us? How is this different from this *actually* being a time loop?”

“For one thing, it means that ensuring a perfect month is impossible,” Zorian said. “You can’t live through one loop, decide you really like how it turned out and then end the time loop and continue on from there. If you want to do things ‘for real’, you have to leave the time loop. You will then be flung back at the beginning of the month to try everything one last time.”

“Okay, that is an important difference,” Zach admitted.

“Secondly, the Cyorian aranea will almost certainly be alive and well in the real world,” continued Zorian. “If everything here is a copy, and the pocket dimension is deliberately isolated from the real world as much as possible in order to facilitate temporal acceleration, then it’s unlikely that anything done to people in the looping world affects their real life counterparts.”

“He could always soulkill them again in the real world, though,” Zach pointed out, frowning.

“I doubt he can,” Zorian said. “I don’t think the spell actually kills souls. I think it simply marks them in some way, letting the time loop mechanism know it should not recreate them at the beginning of the new restart. If the time loop is, as the Ghost Serpent believes, some kind of training mechanism, then it makes sense to include a function like that into it. It allows the Branded One to get rid of impassable obstacles by removing them from the loop entirely.”

“What? That’s so unfair,” Zach complained. “Why does he get such an ability and I don’t?”

‘You might have had it at some point,’ Zorian thought to himself. ‘It’s quite possible Red Robe got it from you and then wiped your memory of the spell...’

“Do you think it might be possible to... unmark them somehow?” Zach asked. “It’s nice that the aranea aren’t permanently gone, but it would be nice to have their help within the time loop too.”

“I don’t know,” Zorian said. “It depends on what exactly has been done to them. There is still another issue.”

“Yes?” Zach asked curiously.

“Considering what the time loop really is, I don’t think we can just passively wait for the mechanism to run out of power,” Zorian said. “It seems likely to me that staying inside the looping world once it runs out of power equals permanent destruction. If we want to survive the collapse, we have to deliberately leave this place before it’s too late. Which is a problem, since neither of us knows where the exit is or how to access it.”

Zach stared at him in shock. It seemed he hadn’t really considered this possibility.

“And on top of that, the Ghost Serpent said only one person can exit this place,” Zorian sighed. “Meaning that the moment one of us leaves the looping world, all the other time travelers still inside are dead. Erased out of existence, really.”

“We don’t know this,” Zach protested. “How would the stupid snake know something like that anyway? You heard what it said – it has no memories of anything that happened during previous time loops. It could be making things up to divide us. It certainly hates the ‘Branded Ones’ enough to try something like that.”

“Still, what if the spirit is right?” Zorian asked. “What if only one of us can ‘win’ this?”

“Then neither of us leaves until we figure something out,” said Zach immediately, straightening his posture. He gave Zorian a direct and determined look. “We’ll figure out a way to get both of us out alive and well. There must be a way.”

Though the boy was immune to Zorian’s empathy due to his mind blank spell, Zorian could still feel the passion behind his words. Zorian had to give it to him – Zach could be very inspiring when he wanted to be. Unfortunately, there was a very important detail he had forgotten...

“The thing is,” Zorian noted quietly, “it’s not just the two of us who are here. Red Robe is in this world as well.”

Zach paused for a moment, not saying anything.

“...shit,” he finally concluded.

“Yes,” Zorian agreed. “I think I know why we haven’t seen any sign of him in all this time.”

“You think he’s trying to leave?” Zach asked, fear creeping into his voice.

“It’s what I’d do in his place,” Zorian said. “He thinks there is an unknown amount of other time travelers plotting against him, at least one of whom is a better mind mage than he is, and you have effectively slipped from his grasp. Why take the risk of confronting all that when he can just leave the looping world and erase all his enemies out of existence in the process? He’s been in this place long enough that he’s probably gotten most of what he wanted out of it, anyway.”

“Damnit,” Zach swore, kicking a nearby rock in frustration and beginning to pace around the place. “Damnit! Why!? Why is it always like this! I finally, *finally* get some answers about this shit and of course I’m three steps behind some asshole who is doing his best to screw me over! Zorian, please tell me you have some sort of idea where the exit is.”

“This is just a wild guess, but I suspect it might be in the time magic research facility beneath Cyoria,” Zorian said. “Spear of Resolve was very insistent on making sure I learned its exact location, putting multiple redundant copies of that section of the map. There must be something important there.”

“That’s great!” Zach said, brightening up. “When can we go there?”

Zorian snorted derisively. “Not for a long, long time. The place is insanely well secured. Even Quatach-Ichl refused to attack the place without army support.”

“Damnit,” Zach swore. “Of course it couldn’t be that simple.”

“I’m hoping that the matriarch’s memory packet contains some crucial information about the topic,” Zorian noted. “At the very least, it should tell me what about that place is so important. That way we can at least know whether or not to waste our time on the place.”

“Well that’s something at least,” Zach sighed. “Hopefully we don’t find the exit, only to see Red Robe just about to leave when we get there.”

“Don’t tempt fate,” Zorian told him. “Anyway, I just have to ask. Suppose we find the exit and Red Robe isn’t there...”

“I already told you. No one is getting left behind,” Zach said, correctly guessing Zorian’s question. “Once we confirm where the exit is, we’ll mess up Red Robe until he’s no longer a problem, and then we sit down and figure out a way to get both of us out. And if we can’t figure it out ourselves, we’ll find someone who can. It’s a big world out there, someone must know a way to help.”

Zorian stared at his fellow time traveler, a bit humbled by his optimism and sense of ethics. He kind of wished he could sense emotions off the boy, though, because he couldn’t help but wonder if Zach was feeding him a bunch of idealistic rubbish while quietly planning to leave the time loop at the first opportunity. How much could he afford to trust the boy?

And in the back of his head, a small, treacherous part of his mind whispered: how much could Zach afford to trust *him*?

- break -

After that talk, Zach and Zorian threw themselves into aranea hunting with newfound fervor. Day after day, week after week... in all honesty, the different webs were already starting to blur together a little in Zorian’s mind.

But it was effective – his ability to interpret aranean memories was growing by leaps and bounds, and he had even identified what the high-ranking aranea were doing with their own minds.

They were manipulating their own thoughts, doing things like filtering distractions out of their senses, blunting inconvenient emotional highs and placing compulsions on their own behavior. It seemed to be a way to increase productivity and ensure better decision making.

It was also incredibly dangerous. Improperly done, this sort of mind magic could render one dead, catatonic, irreparably insane or worse... and it was a branch of magic that was easy to do incorrectly. Nobody truly understood their own mind, after all.

Despite the danger, Zorian found the idea fascinating. It wasn’t literally an intelligence boost, but it almost functioned like one. He would probably try to dabble in it at some point... but not now. He had his hands full at the moment. He just hoped that Spear of Resolve’s mental manipulations weren’t as radical and convoluted as some of the other aranean elders he had seen recently.

Zorian’s lessons with Xvim proceeded without incident. He decided not to tell the man about his latest findings about the nature of the time loop, as he still didn’t know what to think about that himself, and was worried about how Xvim would react to finding out he was just a copy. He was a remarkably calm and collected man, but that would be quite a revelation. He did, however, ask Xvim about pocket dimensions.

Unfortunately, Xvim knew virtually nothing about them. The secrets of their creation were rare and closely guarded – only the greatest of mages could make even a tiny one, and they did not share that knowledge lightly. Xvim had claimed he had never seen one in his entire life, despite talking to a lot of capable mages, which made Zorian a bit amused. Technically, Xvim was looking at a pocket dimension right now, he just didn’t

recognize it as such.

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Between his interaction with Zach, aranea hunting and lessons with Xvim, Zorian was constantly busy. It was tiring, and he opted not to do many of his usual routines from previous restarts. He never went to hunt monsters with Taiven, for instance, and never told her about the time loop either.

Finally, as the end of the restart began to approach, Zorian decided he had prepared as much as he could. He informed Zach he would try opening the matriarch's memory packet soon and that he was taking a two day break from aranea hunting to get some rest before the attempt.

Kirielle, at least, was ecstatic about that. She could finally have him all to herself for two whole days... or at least that's how she seemed to interpret his decision, anyway.

It was currently the second day of his self-imposed rest, and he was lying on his bed, reading a rather silly piece of fiction dealing with time travel. It was a book about a man who went three years back into the past to prevent a devastating war and save his lost love. The story was more amusing than Zorian thought it would be when he started reading it, but that was probably just him – the story was supposed to be a romance, not a comedy, it's just that he personally couldn't take it very seriously.

The time travel spell was powered by love, of all things – what kind of magic was *that*?

Kirielle interrupted his fun by jumping on top of his bed (and him) and elbowing herself in by his side, where she pretended to read the book with him for a while.

“Can I ask you something?” she suddenly asked after a while.

“Go ahead,” Zorian said, turning the page. Kirielle quickly stopped him and turned the page back where it was. Huh, maybe she actually *was* reading along...

“Do you always bring me along when you go to Cyoria?” she asked.

Oh. That question again...

“No, not always,” Zorian admitted.

“Why?” she asked immediately, outrage creeping into her voice. He could tell she kind of expected that answer, but definitely didn’t like it.

“Because it’s dangerous,” Zorian admitted. “Zach isn’t the only time traveler beside me. There is a third person looping, and he is after us. Truthfully, the sensible thing would have been to *never* bring you along.”

“No!” Kirielle protested.

“-but I’m just too damn nice to do such a thing.” Zorian finished.

“Mom says that praising yourself is in poor taste,” Kirielle informed him.

Zorian gave her an annoyed look and promptly dropped the open book on her face. She sputtered indignantly for a moment before lifting the book and trying to use it as a bludgeon against him.

She gave up quickly when she realized it wasn’t very effective. And when she noticed Zorian was trying to distract her from her questions.

“Why don’t you call the mage guild on this guy if he’s so dangerous?” she asked.

“Because he’s a time traveler and they would be of no help,” Zorian said, rolling his eyes. “I doubt I could even get them to believe me. And even if I could, it would just be a huge clue for the jerk as to where he can find me.”

“That sucks,” Kirielle declared.

“Yup,” Zorian agreed.

She fidgeted nervously for a moment, setting the book down beside her on the bed.

“Am I of no help?” she asked.

“You help keep me sane,” Zorian told her.

“That’s it? I totally defended you from Zach back at the train station,” she pointed out huffily.

“Okay, you definitely have a point there,” Zorian admitted. Even if he hadn’t been in any real danger, Kirielle’s actions were still glorious. “But really, what are you getting upset about? Are you afraid if I don’t bring you along every single restart, I’ll get bored of you or something?”

"Yes," she admitted. "Daimen and Fortov both went to the academy, got themselves new friends and forgot all about us. Then you went there as well, but couldn't get any friends and I know it's kind of mean, but I was glad for that because that meant you didn't forget about me--"

"Kiri..." Zorian sighed.

She ignored him and continued with her explanation, quickly spilling out word after word and barely pausing for breath, as if it was all going to disappear if she stopped.

"-but you were still getting so distant and you were always, always annoyed at everything. And then you bring me along and you're suddenly nice, but now you suddenly have this Zach who is a time traveler like you and he will remember and I won't and--"

"Kiri, there is no way Zach can replace you," sighed Zorian, hugging her to stop her from getting herself even more upset, and rolling his eyes at her when she could no longer see him. She got worked up over the dumbest things sometimes. "The guy is almost as annoying as you are, and he doesn't even have an excuse of being nine years old."

She proceeded to hit him in the back for that comment. Well, at least she wasn't crying.

"I'll forgive you for not bringing me with you sometimes," Kirielle eventually decided. Very generous of her. "But you're not allowed to forget me!"

"Sure," he agreed easily. What kind of request was that anyway?

But the more he really thought about it, the more he realized he might not have a choice in the matter. If Red Robe decided to leave the time loop and collapse this entire world behind him, what would the future have in store for him and Kirielle? The real Zorian and Kirielle, that is, since the Kirielle he was looking at was just a copy, same as he was...

And that was another thing. He was just a copy of the real Zorian. If he found a way to return into the real world... what was going to happen to the original? Ugh... he was getting a headache just thinking about it. He'd kind of have preferred it if the time loop simply switched his soul with that of the original – that would mean he was killing the original Zorian by exiting the time loop, but this looping world had effectively killed hundreds of such Zorians already, so what difference would one more make?

Would the original Zorian agree with such assessment? Would he accept that it was okay for him to die so that a future version of him might live? In all honesty, probably not... but there was no way that would stop him from performing the switch if he had to.

Tomorrow he was going to finally open the matriarch's memory packet. He really hoped it had the final pieces he needed to figure out this puzzle once and for all.

- break -

"Alright," said Kael, handing him a vial full of glowing yellow liquid. Inspecting it closely, Zorian could see that the glow was not uniform, but instead came from tiny glowing motes swimming inside the liquid. "This is the potion I was talking about. The potion of self-awareness. It's meant to improve a person's ability to block out distractions and focus inwards. It's typically used to help train people's ability to sense their mana reserves and souls, but I suspect it will be helpful for this type of mind magic as well."

"How reliable is your information about this stuff?" asked Zorian suspiciously, swirling the liquid inside the container. "Did you test it somehow or...?"

"This is what my teacher used to help train my... abilities," Kael said. "It definitely works for its intended purpose. And while I'm not entirely sure it will help you in your task, it definitely won't hurt to take it. Zach volunteered to test the potion a few times, so I know for a fact it doesn't interfere with mind magic."

He pointed towards the boy in question and Zach promptly gave Zorian a thumbs up and a bright smile.

Ugh. The jerk refuses to drop his mind blank around him for any reason, but he blithely drinks a bunch of strange potions made by a junior necromancer he just met. Sometimes he just didn't get that guy.

"Fine. Here goes," said Zorian, quickly downing the liquid.

Almost instantly, Zorian's mind sharpened to an incredible degree while, paradoxically, the outside world began to feel distant and indistinct. It wasn't that his senses suddenly grew worse, because they were as sharp as they ever were, but what they were telling him suddenly became a lot harder to focus on.

He stopped struggling against the effect and let his mind turn inward. He could sense his heart beat, his muscles shifting as he fidgeted in place, the blood coursing through his veins... he could sense his mana reserves and the way they reacted when he tugged at them... his personal soul sense, normally so faint and sluggish to respond, suddenly seemed much easier to understand...

Damn. Why hadn't he asked Kael for something like this earlier? This would have been incredibly useful back when he was trying to develop a personal soul sense.

No, he couldn't get distracted – he discarded these visions and instead dived into his own mind where the matriarch's memory packet stood. He

did not feel the same sense of increased clarity this time – probably because his mind magic was already too good for the potion to improve – but that was okay. He mentally grasped the decaying memory packet and began to carefully take it apart.

Not carefully enough, it turned out. The packet, already on the verge of falling apart completely when he began, couldn't tolerate Zorian's still somewhat inexperienced touch. It violently burst apart, momentarily dazing Zorian with a burst of confusing images (some kind of defense mechanism, maybe?), and the memories contained within began to rapidly fade away from his mind.

Swearing internally at his failure, Zorian scrambled to access some of the memories before they all faded away.

Previously, Zorian had been hoping that Spear of Resolve hadn't delved as deeply into the mental self-manipulation as some of the other aranean elders had. Now he could safely say he was an optimistic fool. The memories currently floating in his mind spoke of an absolute master in the field that made all the other 'expert' araneas look like total underachievers in comparison. Spear of Resolve seemed to have found a way to turn part of her mind into a magical calculator, could somehow temporarily separate her mind into multiple parallel threads of thought and could integrate perceptions of multiple araneas into a unified, coherent whole. And that was just the stuff he could figure out in the short time he had been given. Even if Zorian had been given several extra years to get better at reading aranean memories, he doubted it would have helped him interpret the memories locked inside the memory packet.

And yet, despite all of this, there was one particular memory that Zorian could easily understand... because it had been made understandable specifically for him.

[If you are reviewing this memory,] the matriarch's memory echo said, [then in all likelihood, our plans were foiled and things went awry. It also means you have gotten good enough at mind magic to dive into the memory packet and read some of my memories. Well done. I hope you have had the courtesy of respecting my privacy and leaving the rest of my memories alone.]

Zorian could literally feel the smugness in her words. As in, she had made sure to attach that particular emotional impression to that particular section of the message. She knew damn well he had no hope of interpreting the rest of her memories.

Even in death, that spider was mocking him.

[I know you think I had it coming by rushing into this, but hear me out. I have sought out every clue about the time loop I could find. Most of what I'm about to tell you comes from the patron spirit of another aranean web – the Ghost Serpent Acolytes. Seek it out if you haven't already, though be warned that the spirit might not be too happy to see you.]

What an understatement. Did the matriarch not realize the depth of the Ghost Serpent's hatred of time travelers, or did she simply think her warning was sufficiently informative?

[Other sources include the researchers at the time magic research facility beneath Cyoria – you can find its location in the map I've attached inside this message – as well as some of the invaders that had the chance to interact with our mysterious time-traveling foe. It seems the invaders were quite curious about their new informant and have invested considerable time and effort into figuring him out.]

Damn. His investigation into invaders never seemed to produce any results as far as Red Robe was concerned. Then again, by the time Zorian was able to investigate them properly, Red Robe was no longer interacting with them at all.

[What I have gathered from all this is that this time loop is some kind of... fake, parallel world. We're real, but we're not. It's hard to understand. Or maybe accept. The problem that arises from this is very simple: the time loop is degrading. I can't tell how long it will be before it collapses entirely, but I do know that simply waiting for it to end would be disastrous. One has to deliberately *leave* this place. And everything I've gathered about our time-travelling foe from the invaders suggests he is completely unconcerned with finding the exit or leaving. I do not believe for a second that our foe is too stupid to see the importance of this or too complacent to make it his priority. The obvious conclusion is that he has already found the exit, and he can leave at any time. Thus, stopping him was of utmost importance. No matter what, he couldn't be allowed to leave the time loop.]

Oh this was bad...

[And also, if I am honest with myself...] The ghostly memory of the matriarch hesitated, as if wondering whether to say the next part at all. [If I am honest with myself, I had been hoping that I could find out how our mutual foe joined the time loop. So I could join it as well... and then, eventually, leave it before anyone else could.]

Wait, what?

[I'm not heartless, mind you. I would have done everything in my power to help the alternate version of you on the other side. Zach too, for that matter. But I had essentially been planning to betray you. The amount of good I could do – for my web, for my species and yes, maybe even for myself... it's so very irresistible. I hope if you ever get out of this place, you will not blame my other self for my own weaknesses, but I simply cannot see how I can make any other choice. It's nothing personal, but there can only ever be one winner in this game. I am truly sorry.]

That... Zorian almost tore the entire message apart in anger after listening to that. All this time he had been feeling guilty about her dying, hoping that Red Robe was lying and there was some way to bring them back... and it turns out Spear of Resolve was planning to screw him over?

But no. No, he wouldn't be destroying the message. It was important. Too important for him to throw it away.

He would listen to the message to the very end. He owed Spear of Resolve that much, at least. Even if she tried to betray him.

[I am unsure if this message is even necessary. But if the time loop can so casually create copies of us, it can surely destroy us just as easily. Our foe clearly has deep knowledge of how the time loop works. Thus, this message. I hope it won't be necessary, but just in case, I put in a map to point you towards the invaders' bases and – more importantly – the time magic research facility deep beneath Cyoria. I am rather sure the time loop exit is located there – it is an ancient artifact called 'the Sovereign Gate'. You can find its legend in various books easily enough, I'm sure. The security is high, but you will find a way to access the facility peacefully at the end of this message. The Gate did not react to me no matter what I did, but maybe it will to a proper time traveler like yourself. Otherwise, you may have to find 'The Key' to get it to open. This is bad, since – if I have interpreted the Ghost Serpent's ramblings correctly – the Key consists of the five imperial treasures of the first Ikosian emperor. The ring, the crown, the staff, the orb and the dagger. These items are all lost, likely scattered across Miasina. You'd have to conduct your search on a whole other continent. I didn't think it was possible, even with the help of something like working Bakora gates, so I didn't put too much effort into tracking down rumors surrounding them...]

After that was a map of Cyoria's underworld, largely identical to the one he already had but with the various holes in his version filled out with relevant information. Finally, the matriarch gave him information on the government inspector that had the authorization to access the time magic research facility, to check up on their work and make sure they weren't wasting government funding. According to the matriarch, the man was not even a mage, and was easy to impersonate... which was how she had gotten access to the place.

Aside from the pre-arranged message, he did not get anything else out of the memory packet. But truthfully, the message was already a little too much for him. The matriarch's plans to betray him, the fact that Red Robe might have figured out a way to leave a long time ago, the stuff about the Key in the end...

Eventually the effects of the potion wore off and he found himself drawn to the world around him again. Both Zach and Kael were eager to see what he learned from the packet and Zorian did his best to tell them about his findings. All except for the way Spear of Resolve planned to betray him. That felt a little too personal at the moment.

The unanimous conclusion was that they had to access this time magic research facility as soon as possible. Accordingly, Zorian would raid the government inspector's place the very next day to steal his identity badges and everything else they needed to gain access to the place.

- break -

Two days later, everything was ready. Since it would be a bit implausible for government inspectors to consist of two teenagers, Zach had bought them both a shapeshifting potion on the black market that turned them into nondescript, middle-aged men. Which was... weird. Regardless, with their appearances changed and with all the necessary documentation in their hands, they simply walked into the appropriate city office and demanded access to the facility.

Zorian had been worried that Spear of Resolve had been insanely lucky on her own try and that somebody was going to call their supposed superiors to confirm their orders and identity... but no such things happened. They weren't even suspicious about the fact that there were two of them when there should have been just one.

Zach, being an idiot, actually asked them about this. Zorian was about to wipe their memories and shout at him, but it turned out they saw nothing wrong with his question.

Awful security.

"You must be new," the guy talking to them said. "That place gets inspected constantly. The royals are afraid someone is going to steal their precious 'Sovereign Gate', so they check up on it constantly. That's why there's so much security around the place. Honestly, I don't understand why the researchers tolerate it. If I was in their shoes, I'd send the damn thing back to the royal treasury so I can work in peace. I bet it isn't even the real thing..."

After that, they were directed to a fancy magical elevator on the edge of the Hole, which took them down to the facility in question. Along the way, they passed next to the various other, less secretive research facilities – one of the armed guards that rode along with them was talkative and wouldn't shut up about them. Zach actually engaged the man in conversation, which was nice, because it allowed him to stay silent without looking too rude.

The other guard was as silent as Zorian. The two of them shared a friendly eye roll with each other in regards to the two gossips next to them and then ignored each other for the entire ride.

Finally they reached the place, passing through two more armed checkpoints that merely glanced at their papers before shooing them inside, and then they were finally inside.

They were greeted by a pair of researchers – one middle-aged, and one that couldn't be more than 18 years old in Zorian's estimation. They offered to give them both a tour of the place, and were quite surprised when they accepted the offer.

"We don't often get inspectors that are actually interested in our work," the middle aged man commented. He had introduced himself as Krantin Keklos earlier. "Most just want to see the Sovereign Gate to see it's still there and intact, and then leave as soon as possible."

"Oh, we definitely want to see the Sovereign Gate as well," Zach said, smiling. "We just thought it might be interesting to see what else you have

got down here."

"Of course," Krantin said. "Rest assured that we have been taking good care of it. We're grateful to the Crown for allowing us to study such an amazing artifact."

"You don't believe it's a fake like everyone else seems to," asked Zorian curiously.

"I'm not sure if it's the Sovereign Gate of historical legend," Krantin admitted. "But it is surely a genuine artifact from the Age of Gods."

Over the next hour, Krantin and Aread (his younger assistant who mostly let Krantin take the lead) led Zach and Zorian through the facility to demonstrate their work. Zorian could tell that Krantin was absolutely ecstatic to give someone he considered influential a tour of the place, despite his subdued attitude. He wanted more funds and support from the Crown, and thought that pandering to them might help him get it.

There were three main portions of the facility. The first was a series of three Black Rooms – the first and smallest was reserved for experiments on plants and animals, while the two bigger ones saw human use. The second portion dealt with combining alchemy and temporal acceleration in various ways. Finally, the third and last part was based around a large black cube about four meters long on each side. There was a door-like depression on the side of the cube, but Krantin explained that they had never managed to get it open.

Carved into this door was a very familiar geometric diagram – a horizontal line with an upturned triangle balanced on top of it.

"There it is," Krantin said, sweeping his hand towards the black cube. "The Sovereign Gate. Despite the legend surrounding it, we believe it is some kind of powerful time acceleration room rather than a literal gate to another world. Sadly, we have never really managed to activate it. I had high hopes that the upcoming planetary alignment and the resulting amplification of dimensional magic might be the key to getting it to work, but no such luck. Shame."

"Amazing," Zach said staring at the cube with an unreadable expression on his face.

"Yes," Krantin agreed. "It's hard to believe something like this had just been gathering dust in the Noveda family treasury for countless decades. If it weren't for Mister Zveri's generosity in donating some of Noveda's unneeded artifacts to the Crown, who knows how long it would have languished there undiscovered!"

"Yes," Zach said frostily, grinding his teeth. "What a generous guy, that Tesen."

"Well," Krantin coughed, realizing he had struck some kind of nerve, "Although I'm happy to answer any questions you may have, this is about it for what we do here. If you would—"

Zorian looked around to confirm they were alone in the area for the moment and then reached out to the two researchers' minds. Though both Krantin and Aread were highly-trained mages, they were specialists in time magic and had no real mental defenses. In just a few seconds, Zorian forced their minds into mindless stupor. They remained standing on their feet, and looked fine at first glance, but they were effectively unconscious.

Zach raised an eyebrow at their sudden silence.

"You got them?" he asked, turning to Zorian.

"Yes," Zorian confirmed. "So. Do you know how we can activate this thing? And is it even wise to do so? I mean—"

"We should try touching it," said Zach.

...yeah, okay. It wasn't like Zorian had any better idea.

"We should do it together, though," Zorian remarked.

"Oh, right – that way we will hopefully both activate it at the same time. We both have the same marker thing, so it should work, right?"

"Right," Zorian agreed uneasily. He wasn't so sure personally, but what else he could do? If the matriarch was right, Red Robe already knew about this place and could leave whenever he wished. The time loop still existed, though, so clearly he didn't. Why not? Zorian would have in his place.

He needed the answers the thing held.

"On three," said Zorian. "One, two... three!"

The both pressed their palm against the diagram on the door in perfect synchronization with each other.

Two seconds passed.

"Nothing is happening," Zach complained. "Damn..."

"No," Zorian frowned. He could feel something reaching out from the cube in front of them, trying to access his marker. Asking for... confirmation? "I could feel something. I don't know if you can feel your own marker yet—"

“Not really, no,” Zach said.

“Well, anyway, I think if I just-”

He flipped one of the switches on his marker. The mysterious force reaching out from the cube immediately rushed into him. Everything went black.

Zorian half expected to wake up in Cirin again, with Kirielle jumping on top of him and wishing him a good morning.

But he didn’t. He was instead floating in a black, featureless void. And Zach was right beside him.

“Woah. What happened,” Zach asked, looking around. “Where are we?”

“The cube wanted me to give it confirmation of some sort,” said Zorian. “So I said yes. And here we are.”

“If we’re permanently stuck in this void because of you, I’ll never forgive you,” Zach warned him.

“You would have done the exact same thing in my place and you know it,” Zorian said.

“Well yeah, but aren’t you supposed to be the paranoid, sensible one? Agreeing to unknown requests from a mysterious ancient artifact sounds pretty stupid to me.”

Before Zorian could say anything, another person popped into existence in front of them.

No... not a person. The entity in front of them was vaguely humanlike, but that was clearly just a crude façade. It wore no clothes, but that was okay because it had no genitals, body hair or anything else other than smooth skin. Its face was blank and apathetic, and its eyes were glowing white voids devoid of iris or anything else except soft light spilling out of them.

“Welcome, Controller,” the entity said, its voice soft and emotionless.

Zach reacted faster than him – he immediately reached for his spell rod, only to find it effectively glued to its holster. Checking himself, Zorian noticed his own spell rods suffered similar fates. In fact, his very clothes seemed to be glued onto his skin and though he could feel his mana reserves he didn’t seem able to manifest any of that mana at all.

“Who are you?” Zach demanded. “What is this place?”

“I am the Guardian of the Threshold,” the entity said, as apathetic as its face. “And this is the control room.”

“I don’t think this is a physical place,” Zorian noted. “Notice how your clothes seem to be a part of your body.”

“Hey, you’re right...” Zach said, frowning as he tried to roll up his sleeves and failed.

“We’re some kind of projections,” Zorian said. “As is the entity in front of us.”

They both stared at the entity in front of them. It seemed to interpret their attention as some kind of prompt.

“What is your request, Controller?” the Guardian asked.

“Can we leave this place?” Zorian asked.

“Of course,” the Guardian agreed easily. “Do you want to do that now?”

“By leave, we mean go back to the bodies we’re being projected from,” Zach clarified.

“The answer remains the same,” the Guardian easily responded.

“What about leaving the time loop?” Zorian asked.

“Time loop?” the guardian mouthed uncomprehendingly. Its eyes flashed for a moment before it refocused on them again. “I’m sorry, but the gate is barred.”

“What?” Zach protested. “What the hell do you mean ‘the gate is barred’?”

“The Controller has already left the time loop,” the Guardian explained. “It’s not possible for anyone else to leave.”

There was a brief silence as Zach and Zorian processed this claim.

“But I thought we were the Controller,” Zach protested.

“You are the Controller,” the Guardian agreed easily.

“But you just said the Controller has left the time loop,” Zorian frowned.

“He has,” the Guardian confirmed.

“Why is the time loop still in existence, then?” Zorian asked.

“The time loop cannot end while the Controller is still inside the time loop,” the Guardian said.

“So the Controller has left the time loop, but you can’t end the time loop because the Controller is still in the time loop?” Zach asked incredulously.
“Don’t you realize how stupid that sounds?”

“I don’t think we’re dealing with a sapient being,” Zorian said. “It’s some kind of animated spell performing its function and getting confused that there are multiple Controllers when there is only ever supposed to exist one. Guardian, how many people are you talking with right now?”

“Only the Controller can access this place,” the guardian placidly answered.

“So wait...” Zach said in a trembling voice. “You’re saying...”

“Red Robe has somehow tricked the control room into thinking he’s the Controller of the loop,” Zorian sighed. “He has already left. And so no one else can leave.”

“The gate is barred,” the Guardian confirmed.

Well, fuck.

End of Arc 2

55. Threshold

Chapter 055 Threshold

For nearly half a minute, the endless void they floated in was silent. Neither Zach nor Zorian knew what to say, and the Guardian of the Threshold seemed content to placidly wait for further questions. Zorian would have liked to say he was considering the implications of this new knowledge at the time, but the truth is that he spent most of it being surprised at how well Zach was taking all this. He kind of expected the other boy to freak out and start swearing and shouting by now. But no, Zach was surprisingly calm and quiet about the situation. The only evidence he was in any way upset was a slight frown on his face.

“So,” Zach eventually said, his voice cutting through the unnerving silence that sprung up around them. “What now?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Zorian admitted. “I really didn’t think Red Robe had already left the time loop. It makes so much sense, though, now that I look back on things...”

“Yeah, he really screwed us over, didn’t he?” Zach sighed.

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly put it like that,” Zorian smiled. “I’m pretty sure this is not what he had been planning. We were meant to disappear. The time loop was supposed to collapse when the controller of the time loop left this place, permanently removing us as a threat. But we’re still here, and if the time loop is this out of its normal parameters, it might actually be possible to get out of this place.”

“Heh,” Zach chuckled. “Now that you mention it, yeah. And also, this means I can stop holding back. You too, for that matter. We’ve both been doing our best to keep a low profile to stop Red Robe from noticing our activities. Now that we know he is no longer here...”

“Yes,” Zorian agreed. “The way I see it, we have three main priorities. Number one, we need to find out how long we have until the time loop collapses. Number two, we need to find a way to get out. And number three, we have to try and find out who the hell Red Robe really is so that we can take care of him quickly if... *when* we exit this place.”

Zorian turned to the side to look at the Guardian of the Threshold, who had been quietly floating in place not far from them while they talked. It didn’t appear bothered by them ignoring it.

“We should question the Guardian about everything we can think of,” Zorian noted. “Who knows what kind of critical secrets it knows, and it doesn’t appear as if it cares to share anything on its own initiative. Though that could take a while – we should probably return to our bodies for a while to make sure we aren’t interrupted.”

“Do we even have to worry about that?” Zach asked, pulling on his jacket in order to demonstrate the way their clothes seemed an integral part of their body. “The cube seems to have ripped our souls out of our bodies to bring us here. Does it even matter if our bodies get killed out there?”

“We could be just projected here,” Zorian shook his head. “It sounds like the simplest way to achieve this, to be honest. Then again, that would leave the loop controller awfully vulnerable while messing around with controls. Hmm... Guardian?”

“You are merely projected into this place, but your stay will not be cut short by events in the outside world,” the Guardian explained. It was apparently smart enough to interpret what his question was likely going to be based on his and Zach’s conversation. Interesting. “If your physical forms suffer critical damage, or if soul tampering is detected, I will draw in your souls inside the Gate for safekeeping. Your time here will remain uninhibited, though you will have to start a new iteration of the loop in order to leave the place, as I cannot re-anchor your souls back to your bodies if they are not sufficiently intact.”

“Well. Good to know, I guess,” Zorian mumbled. He looked at Zach, and found that the other boy was already staring at him. “Do you have anything you want to ask the Guardian or...?”

“You go first,” Zach told him, shaking his head.

“Alright. First of all, is there a time limit as to how long we can remain here?” Zorian asked.

“When this iteration of the loop ends, so will your current visit to this place,” the Guardian responded. “Other than that, no.”

So when the time loop restarts, they will be flung back to their bodies at the beginning of the month, but other than that, they could stay here as long as possible.

They had plenty of time, then.

“What are the criteria for each iteration’s end?” Zorian asked curiously. “Is mere passage of time sufficient, or is there more to it?”

“Passage of time is sufficient,” the Guardian confirmed. “No iteration is allowed to last for more than a month at the time. Beyond that, there is a multitude of contingencies that will cause the iteration to terminate prematurely.”

“Can you list those contingencies?” Zorian asked.

“No,” the Guardian stated emotionlessly. “You aren’t authorized for that information.”

Zorian blinked in surprise. Though he had suspected the Guardian wouldn’t be able to answer all of their questions, he thought it would have to do more with it being just a dumb animation spell in the end, not that it would literally refuse to help them like that.

“What? But I thought we’re the Controller,” Zach piped in suddenly. “How can we not be authorized to know?”

“The Controller doesn’t have unrestricted authorization,” the Guardian explained. “Only the Maker and his agents have access to information about the workings of the Gate.”

“Maker?” Zach repeated incredulously. “Maker of what?”

“Of the Gate, of course,” the Guardian said. Zorian could almost imagine the Guardian rolling his eyes at the question, even though its eyes didn’t work like that and its voice never changed in tone.

“So the Controller isn’t the ultimate authority when it comes to the Gate or the time loop?” Zorian asked. The Guardian immediately confirmed this. “What can you tell us about this Maker, then?”

“You aren’t authorized to know the identity of the Maker,” the Guardian informed him.

Of course it was going to be something like that...

“Ugh. This thing is so damn annoying!” Zach complained.

Ten more fruitless minutes were spent on trying to question the Guardian about the Maker, its agents, whether it was a god (like Zorian suspected) or not, how long it had been since the Maker had last interacted with the Gate, and so on. The Guardian’s response was the same for each of them: they weren’t allowed to know.

Zorian wished he could just invade the thing’s mind and be done with it, but their inability to perform magic in this place extended to his psychic abilities. They had no way to force the entity into cooperation, and eventually decided to move on to other topics.

“You said no iteration is allowed to last for more than a month,” Zorian reminded the Guardian. “Can you tell us why?”

“When an iteration is over, everything in it is destroyed,” the Guardian began. Well, good to have that confirmed... Zorian had assumed it was so for a while now, but having the Guardian verify it was nice. “Under certain philosophical outlooks, this could be viewed as mass murder...”

“But not under all of them, huh?” Zorian mumbled distastefully.

“Others do not view destruction of copies as a problem, so long as they do not diverge excessively from the original,” the Guardian continued, ignoring Zorian’s interjection. “The time loop is set up under such an assumption. Thus, it is imperative that entities copied by the time loop are not given enough time to meaningfully diverge from the originals, as their destruction would then become unethical. A month was determined to be a good cut-off point.”

“What if one of the copies managed to achieve awareness of the time loop and found a way to maintain continuity across different iterations?” Zorian asked. “Hypothetically speaking.”

“That would be very unfortunate for the copy,” the Guardian noted. “Only the Controller can actually leave the time loop, after all.”

“See, this is the part I don’t get,” Zach suddenly interjected. “Why was such a rule put into place? I mean, there is only one Controller to begin with, so why put that sort of limitation in place?”

“To stop the Controller from trying to smuggle some of the copies out of the time loop,” the Guardian said matter-of-factly, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

There was a short pause as both Zach and Zorian processed this.

“Why... why is that important?” Zorian asked shakily.

“Because only the Controller has their real soul pulled into the time loop,” the Guardian said. “Everyone else is a copy. For a Controller of the loop to leave, I only have to re-anchor their soul back to their original body. For one of the copies to enter the real world, I would have to switch their soul with the soul of the original. This would effectively kill the original.”

There was another, longer pause following this explanation.

Zorian wasn’t terribly surprised at the fact that him leaving the loop would require he switch his soul with his original. It was one of the first ideas he came up with himself, after all. What surprised him was that Zach was apparently *not* a copy. Being the Controller had more to it than just having a marker stamped on your soul, it seemed.

“So the Controller has their original soul drawn into the time loop when it is first made,” Zorian said. “They aren’t a copy, so there is no problem with them leaving. But everyone else would have to kill someone to get out, and that’s unacceptable. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” the Guardian agreed.

“But you could do that?” Zach suddenly spoke up. “If one of the copies wanted to leave this place, you *could* switch their soul with that of the original?”

“Theoretically,” the Guardian admitted, “but that goes against what I was made to do. I am the Guardian of the Threshold. One of the main tasks the Maker gave me was to ensure things inside the time loop could not menace the source of the template. If a diverged copy tried to kill the original by switching their souls with it, I would do my best to stop them.”

“What about a normal, un-diverged copy?” asked Zorian. “Surely there is no harm in replacing the original with a normal copy. They’re practically the same thing! It’s what makes it okay to destroy millions of souls every month or so, isn’t it?”

The Guardian hesitated. A short, tense silence descended on the scene as it considered the scenario.

“So long as the copies do not diverge too much from the original, such a switch would be theoretically acceptable,” the Guardian eventually admitted. “But it is my purpose to keep the time loop from spilling out in the real world as much as possible, so I would still refuse to perform such a switch. Only the controller, with the knowledge and secrets they gathered inside the time loop, is allowed to leave and make their mark on the world outside, since they are technically of that world to begin with.”

“Alright,” Zorian nodded, signaling Zach with his hand to drop the issue. Though still very placid, the Guardian seemed almost agitated by their current line of questioning. Zorian was afraid that if they pushed it too much it might realize one of them was a copy somehow and do something to ‘correct’ this. Best to leave the topic alone for now. “Let’s move on to something else. Guardian, you said the Gate is barred because the Controller has already left the time loop.”

“Yes,” the entity confirmed.

“Can you tell me how many iterations that was ago?” Zorian asked.

“The Controller is still inside the time loop, Controller,” the Guardian said unhelpfully.

Some more variations of that question confirmed that the Guardian had no idea when Red Robe left. The Controller left, but didn’t actually leave, and the Guardian was hopelessly confused about the whole thing.

Asking the Guardian for Red Robe’s description or other identifying information didn’t work either – the Guardian didn’t seem to perceive the world in the same way they did, despite its fairly human-like appearance and the lifelike avatars he and Zach were inhabiting. It seemed to ignore just about everything in terms of identifying characteristics when it came to the Controller. Other than the marker, of course.

“So the Controller that left has the marker, then?” Zorian asked.

“Of course,” the Guardian confirmed. “How could he have left, otherwise?”

“How does the Controller get the marker in the first place?” Zorian asked. “Is it hereditary, assigned by the Gate itself according to some criteria or what?”

“The Controller is marked by the Key, by the Maker, or by its agents,” the Guardian said. “I am not aware of what criteria were used in choosing any particular Controller. It is ultimately irrelevant to my purpose to know such things.”

“But the Key is lost,” Zach said, frowning. “Scattered across vast distances. And if the Maker is a god like you suspect he is, well... the gods have been silent for centuries. That only leaves his agents. Who would that be?”

“Impossible to say for now,” Zorian shrugged. “But apparently you were purposely chosen by someone to go in here.”

“Or maybe Red Robe was,” Zach said gloomily. “I know you think I’m the original looper, but the fact that Red Robe was capable of leaving just like that... it could be that he’s the one who’s the real deal. You saw how the Guardian reacted to the possibility of switching souls between the copy and the original. How did Red Robe leave if he’s just a copy?”

“I don’t know,” Zorian sighed. “It’s too bad the Guardian gets all stupid whenever anything involving Red Robe leaving is brought up.”

“If it didn’t get all stupid about it, we would have probably been erased out of existence when Red Robe left,” Zach told him. “So that’s probably a blessing in disguise. Anyway, Guardian? This marker I have on me is unique, yes? There is no way for there to be multiple Controller markers?”

“None,” the Guardian confirmed. “Before the time loop is activated, marking a new person will invalidate the old marker. Inside the time loop, the Controller marker cannot be invoked, and only lesser markers can be placed.”

“Lesser markers”? What the hell are those now?” Zach protested.

“The Controller can temporarily add people to the time loop by placing a lesser marker on them,” the Guardian explained.

“What?” Zach squawked. “There is a way to include someone in the time loop and you’re only mentioning this now!? And what do you mean temporary?”

"Though I'm happy to answer any question you may have to the best of my ability, I am ultimately not designed to teach the Controller how to operate the time loop," the Guardian said. "That is the job of whoever placed the marker on you. And by temporary, I mean that the target of the lesser marker will retain their memories and abilities for up to six iterations before the marker dissolves."

"Why would this lesser marker be temporary like that?" Zach asked, baffled. "Is there a way to make it permanent?"

"It is temporary to keep divergence from the original to a manageable level and discourage the Controller from getting excessively emotionally attached to copies marked in such a fashion," the Guardian explained. "There is no way to make it permanent, as that would be needlessly cruel. They cannot leave the time loop, after all."

"But if copies that retain awareness for more than a month count as people and killing them is wrong, doesn't that mean that using these lesser markers is effectively murder?"

"Yes," the Guardian readily agreed. "But it is not the Gate that does it, so it is acceptable. It is up to the Controller to decide when and if they feel comfortable using such an ability."

"So..." Zorian began after a short pause.

"I would never have used such a spell," Zach immediately said, correctly guessing what Zorian was about to ask. "Never. Why would I torture myself by bringing people into the loop, knowing that they would suddenly go back to their old, ignorant self in just six restarts?"

"Fair enough," Zorian said, guessing he had touched upon a sensitive topic. "Guardian, what about the ability to expel people from the time loop? Make them start each iteration soulless and dead? Does this ability exist?"

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"The Controller has such an ability as well," the Guardian confirmed.

By now, Zorian knew better than to ask whether such an ability had been used in the past. The Guardian had very limited awareness about what happened in the time loop itself, caring for little except the Controller itself.

"How about the ability to restore people 'erased' in such a manner back?" he asked instead. He was still angry at the matriarch for planning to betray him, but he wanted her back anyway.

"No," the Guardian said. "The ability instructs the Gate to make changes to the base template that is used to construct each iteration. There is no undoing them without direct intervention from the Maker. The Controller is advised to use this ability with wisdom and restraint."

For the next twenty minutes, Zach and Zorian tried to question the Guardian about the manner in which these abilities could be performed by the Controller or about any other abilities they may have at their disposal. Sadly, neither of those inquiries achieved results. The Guardian did not know how any of these abilities might be accomplished, and it refused to list all the abilities the Controller had, saying they were not authorized to know that information.

"This makes no sense," Zach complained. "It's happy to tell us about specific abilities if we ask, but a simple list of all options is forbidden?"

"Well, it sort of makes sense if the Maker didn't want every Controller to know about all the features at their disposal," mused Zorian. "If some or all of the Controllers are given limited information, you don't want to let the Guardian tell them all about it anyway..."

Another fruitless question and answer session occurred, where Zorian tried to ask the Guardian about the history of the time loop and its purpose. The Guardian claimed not to have any knowledge of previous time loops, though, beyond simply knowing they existed. Apparently it did not retain its memories between different time loops. As for the purpose of the time loop...

"The purpose of the time loop is between the Controller and the one who marked them," the Guardian concluded. "Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say it is whatever the Controller wants it to be. There is little to stop them from doing whatever they want while inside the time loop, after all."

"Alright, next question, then," Zorian sighed. "Can you tell me how long will it be before the time loop runs out of whatever is powering it and shuts down? That is to say, how long do we have to leave this place?"

"Yes, of course. The time loop has enough power for 52 more iterations before it must shut down," the Guardian said. "Assuming maximum utilization of each iteration, that is equivalent to little more than four years of operation."

Four years... maybe he was just greedy, but that seemed very short to him. He asked the Guardian about that just to see what it would say. He expected it to refuse to answer, bringing up their lack of sufficient authorization or whatever, but the Guardian actually had an answer for them this time.

"The time loop is normally supposed to be initiated at the peak of planetary alignment," the Guardian explained. "Unfortunately, something seems to have gone wrong and the time loop has been activated one month prior to it. This made everything more costly, causing the time loop to degrade far more rapidly than it is supposed to."

“Do you know how long the time loop had been in existence thus far?” Zorian asked.

“967 iterations,” the Guardian answered. “Approximately 30 years in linear time.”

Wait, those numbers were kind of strange... how could almost a thousand iterations equal 30 measly years?

“Wait,” frowned Zorian. “So the time loop spends power per iteration, not according to how much time passes?”

“Yes,” the Guardian confirmed.

“But I cut a lot of restarts short by dying to some stupid shit in the first few days,” Zach protested. “Are you telling me I’ve been burning through our allotted time every time I did that?”

“Yes,” the Guardian confirmed again blandly. “It is the Controller’s right to do such a thing, however. Presumably you felt the gains were worth the sacrifice of additional time.”

“Hell no, I didn’t!” Zach protested. “I just didn’t know any better! If I knew all this, I would have been a lot more cautious about this shit!”

“Unfortunate,” the Guardian said. It did not sound very sorry or compassionate, however, using the same pleasantly bland voice it always did. “It seems you were poorly prepared for this undertaking. You should complain to whoever gave you the marker once you get outside.”

“Yeah, I’ll get right on that. Just as soon as I manage to find the bastard,” Zach said gloomily, “So anyway, let’s just get this finally out of the way... Guardian, how can we unbar the gate?”

“You would have to present me with the Key by bringing it before the Gate,” the Guardian said simply. “If you present all five pieces, you will gain sufficient authorization to reopen the gate.”

“I don’t suppose you could tell us where to find those things, then?” Zach tried.

“No,” the Guardian immediately answered. Of course. “But finding them should not be too difficult for you. Your marker can sense their presence.”

Not for the first time, Zorian wished the damn marker stamped on his soul came with an instruction manual or something.

Though they continued to question the Guardian for two more hours, very little new information came out of it. When they finally decided to leave, the Guardian informed them that they would have to start a new iteration of the time loop because their bodies had been ‘excessively damaged’ while they talked to the Guardian and the dumb thing didn’t find it important to mention that until they were ready to leave.

After about five minutes, when Zorian realized Zach was not going to stop ranting at the Guardian any time soon, he just reached into his soul and flipped the marker restart switch.

Everything went mercifully dark and silent.

- break -

Like always, Zorian’s awakening was done via Kirielle jumping on top of him. The events immediately following the awakening were also fairly typical, with him having his talk with Ilsa and dodging Mother’s attempts at conversation while having breakfast. He even ended up inviting Kirielle to come with him to Cyoria, despite initially planning to leave her behind. Partially, this was because he realized his vague plans of rushing to gather the Key as soon as possible and find a way to fool the Guardian into letting him out were rather premature and he should really take some time to calm down and digest things a little. But an equally important reason for it was that he realized he needed a break. The previous restart had been very exhausting, what with all the non-stop aranea hunting and the various revelations at the end, and he didn’t feel like jumping into another long-term mission right away. Taking a restart or two to relax a little and think things through wasn’t going to kill them. The time limit they had was uncomfortably short for his tastes, but not *that* short.

He was just wondering how to explain all this to Zach when they next meet each other when he was interrupted by the knock on the door.

What? That... that doesn’t usually happen...

He went to open the door, reaching out with his mind sense towards the unknown visitor, only to find Zach on the doorstep. Apparently his fellow time traveler wasn’t content to wait for him on Cyoria’s train station.

Zorian was kind of shocked, and not just by the fact Zach decided to come to his home...

He could actually sense Zach’s mind now. It was still shielded, but the boy wasn’t under the effect of mind blank anymore. Zorian was kind of touched at the show of trust this represented.

“Hello, Zach,” Zorian said. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“Yeah, well, our last meeting’s ending was a little *abrupt*,” Zach told him with a little glare. “So I thought I should drop by and finish our conversation.”

“Sorry,” Zorian winced. “I know ending things so suddenly was a jerk move, but I was already kind of depressed from what the Guardian was saying and you getting into a one-sided shouting match with the thing was...”

“It’s fine,” Zach said, waving him away. “I lost my nerves too. It’s probably for the best you shut me down before I did something stupid. That thing seemed pretty uncaring, but if anyone can manage to piss off a non-sapient spell construct, it’s me.”

“Zorian, who is that?” Mother suddenly said, walking up to them. Turning around, Zorian could also see Kirielle peering from behind the kitchen door as well, watching the situation unfold.

“It’s just Zach,” Zorian said. “He’s one of my classmates from Cyoria.”

“Oh my, Zorian finally has friends visiting him at home,” Mother noted in exaggerated mirth. “I never thought I’d see the day. Could I get an introduction?”

“Sure,” Zorian agreed. It was only polite. “Mother, this is Zach Noveda, a friend and a classmate. Zach, this is Cikan Kazinski, my mother. The little girl peering from behind the door is my little sister, Kirielle.”

Mother gave Kirielle an annoyed glare and gestured her to come over and introduce herself properly. Huffing slightly at the order, Kirielle approached and shook hands with Zach as proper manners dictated.

“What, no Fortov?” Zach asked with a whisper.

Mother always had good hearing, though, so she ended up hearing anyway.

“He’s at his friend’s place right now. He’ll meet us at the train station, so you can see him there. I assume you intend to take a train to Cyoria along with Zorian, yes?”

“Yes. The train. Of course,” Zach fumbled, giving Zorian a questioning glance. He had probably expected them to just excuse themselves and teleport to Cyoria.

“I decided to take Kirielle with me to Cyoria this time,” Zorian said. “I hope you don’t mind her travelling with us.”

Kirielle gave Zach the hardest look she could muster, daring him to disagree with her coming along.

“Err, right. Of course I’m okay with that,” said Zach.

What followed was about twenty minutes of Mother trying to talk Zach into accepting something to drink and fishing for information about him. Zach decided not to mention he was the last living heir of a Noble House, possibly because he still remembered what Zorian had told him about his mother, and simply described himself as a wealthy orphan from Cyoria. Based on the looks Mother gave him, however, Zorian was pretty sure she suspected the truth. She was quite perceptive about these sorts of things.

Eventually, the four of them packed up and left towards Cirin’s train station.

“How come Zach doesn’t have any luggage to carry along?” Kirielle protested, glaring at the bag of her own things that Mother had forced her to carry herself.

“Well, I’m from Cyoria to begin with,” Zach said with a grin. “My luggage is already there.”

“Unfair...” she mumbled.

“Oh, you’ll see unfair when we get to Cyoria,” Zorian told her. “There’s an hour walk from the train station to where we’ll be staying, and I heard it’s going to rain too...”

When they finally reached the train station, they found Fortov already there, talking to his friends. Mother insisted on introducing Zach to him, which annoyed Zorian far more than it probably should have.

“No offense, Zorian, but your family seems pretty nice to me thus far,” Zach told him later, when he finally managed to excuse himself from Fortov’s group. “Maybe I’m a little biased, since my family all died and I wish I actually *had* a family... but I honestly can’t figure out your animosity for them”

“It’s personal,” Zorian told him in a clipped tone. “There’s a lot of history that you aren’t aware of. Just drop it.”

“Fine, whatever,” Zach sighed. “I don’t want to start a fight. I actually want to apologize.”

Zorian gave him a strange look.

“Apologize?” Zorian asked curiously. “What for?”

“Well, you mentioned last time how I keep up a mind blank around you at all times and how it means I don’t trust you...”

"You don't have to apologize for that," Zorian told him, shaking his head. "I also told you I would have done the same in your place, remember?"

"No offense, but I don't want to be like you, Zorian," Zach said, shaking his head. Well screw you too, Zach! The feeling was mutual! "The point is, you were right. We don't trust each other, and we're not going to get anywhere if we have that constantly hanging over our heads. We need to work together if we want to have any chance of getting out of here."

Well, that wasn't quite what he said, but since Zorian actually agreed with the sentiment, he didn't interrupt.

"So anyway, I think you already noticed I'm not under the effect of mind blank..." Zach said.

"Of course," Zorian nodded. "I do notice your mind is still shielded, though."

"Well yeah," Zach said, rolling his eyes. "Trust your neighbors but lock your door, you know?"

"I wasn't complaining," Zorian said. "I was just going to notice the shield doesn't feel like a spell. That's a non-structured mental defense, yes?"

"Of course you already tested it," Zach sighed. "Goddamn mind-readers. But yes, it's non-structured. I got it a long time ago, back in the first decade of my looping."

"It's... kind of rough for something you've been practicing for decades," Zorian admitted. "I mean, I know it's hard to practice non-structured mind magic when you aren't psychic like me, but I've seen other regular mages with similar defenses and theirs were a lot better than this."

"I never really refined it much since... well, I never needed it for anything more complex than resisting casual mind reading and the like," Zach said. "This isn't just me being lazy, mind you. This is pretty much conventional wisdom about non-structured mental defenses among mages. Or at least that's what the various magic instructors I learned from told me. Get just enough skill in the ability to foil casual attacks and deal with anything more severe with proper defensive wards and the like. If you don't have time to set up those, locate the source of the mental attack and go on the offensive. Or just outright flee from the scene. Most mages agree that fancy non-structured mental defenses are more trouble than they're worth."

"Well, I'm kind of biased, but I don't agree," Zorian said.

"Yes, I feel a bit stupid now for just accepting conventional wisdom when it comes to that," Zach admitted. "I've been stuck in a time loop for decades, it's not like I didn't have the time. I've honed far more useless skills to perfection just for bragging rights, so I really shouldn't have skimped out on something like this. But enough of that. I have a request for you."

"Go ahead," Zorian nodded, motioning him to continue.

"Don't mess with my mind without my express permission," Zach said. "Even if you catch me without any mental protection or something."

"Well, okay," Zorian agreed. "I can respect that. What if I suspect you to be under the influence of another mind mage already, though?"

"I... have to think about that," Zach fumbled. "For now, no. Don't mess with my mind even then. Just knock me out and wait for the effect to wear off."

Zorian wanted to point out that some mind effects didn't 'wear off', but he could see that Zach was still very uncomfortable around mind magic and decided to postpone this talk for some other time.

"Alright. I'll leave your mind alone. I will only use my mind sense and empathy on you, since they require no mental invasion to use and it's almost impossible for me to *not* use them on someone. Anything else?"

"Yeah," Zach said. "The fact you can sense and manipulate the marker placed on us and I can't really burns, you know? I can accept you're a better mind mage than I'll ever be since it's your special ability and all, but this personal soul sense of yours is something I could have easily acquired myself if I knew about it. Do you think you can teach me how to do that?"

"I think I'll have to set you up with one of my teachers to do that," Zorian frowned. "Alanic has access to potions I have never even encountered elsewhere and knowledge of how to help if something goes horribly wrong. I don't think it's going to be too much of a problem, though – he's a pretty helpful person, despite initial appearances."

Eventually the train arrived and they were forced to cut their conversation a little short. Since they were going to share a compartment with Kirielle for the rest of the ride, any sensitive conversations would have to wait for a while.

Even if they had wanted to talk about something arcane, though, Kirielle wouldn't have let them. Any apprehension she felt towards Zach melted away during the first twenty minutes of the train ride and the resulting boredom. She started asking Zach questions about Cyoria and the academy. Later on, Zach would remark how surprised he was at the way Kirielle treated him, as Kirielle had been rather more unfriendly towards him in the previous restart. But, as Zorian explained to him, that Kirielle was one who had a far worse impression of Zach... and that bad first impression of Zach had never really left her for the rest of the restart. The way Kirielle was treating him now was actually far closer to her true personality than what he experienced before.

"Kind of strange that you don't like most of your family, but you're so close to your little sister," Zach remarked. "Was it always like that, or...?"

"I always did like her best out of all of them," Zorian said. "But no, I did not have this good of a relationship with her before the time loop. There

was a reason why I had never brought her along before I started retaining my awareness across restarts.”

“Ah. I figured it was something like that,” Zach said. “So do we have a plan for this restart or what?”

“I was hoping we could take a break for a restart or two,” Zorian sighed. “I need to think about things and come to terms with all of this. It’s a lot to take in.”

“Hmm... fine,” Zach said eventually. “I guess we should spend some time getting to know each other anyway. You can still introduce me to that Alanic fellow that teaches personal soul sensing, right?”

“Absolutely,” Zorian confirmed. “You can work on your soul sense while we decide what to do. It’s not like I intend to literally do nothing myself, you know.”

“Oh? What do you have in mind for yourself?” Zach asked.

“I’ve been pursuing lessons from my mentor, Xvim, but I could never really properly focus on them thus far. Now that I don’t have the decaying memory packet in my head demanding most of my attention, I figure I should finally be able to give him all my attention and see what the results are. I’m still not sure how much to really tell him about the time loop and how it functions, though. I mean, I’m freaked out by how it works, and I’m actually aware of the restarts... I’m not sure it’s a good idea to explain to Xvim what’s really going on.”

“I can’t help you there,” Zach shook his head. “I never had much luck in convincing people about the time loop, and that was before I knew all this crazy stuff about it that I do now. I have no idea how you even convinced Xvim to take you seriously about time travel, considering he never believed me when I tried to do the same.”

“You went to Xvim to try and tell him about the time loop?” Zorian asked. “I guess you really meant it when you said you went to just about everyone with the story.”

“Yeah...” Zach agreed. “Do you think it might help you convince him you’re telling the truth if I came with you? I can do some pretty crazy magic on demand, by now...”

“I don’t know,” Zorian said. “I didn’t mention you when I talked to him previously, but that was mostly to minimize any links between the two of us in case Red Robe somehow caught wind of Xvim’s investigation in the time loop. Now that we know Red Robe is gone, it might be a good idea to include you into the story.”

Zorian considered things for a few seconds.

“I’ll go alone on Monday,” Zorian decided. “But I’ll tell him you’re also a time traveler and see if he wants to meet you.”

- break -

Of course Xvim wanted to meet him. Frankly, if Zorian was in Xvim’s place and a student came to him with a story about being a time traveler and then another student was *also* a time traveler, he’d react the same way too. Thus, the very next day after Zorian’s talk with Xvim, he returned to the man’s office with Zach in tow.

“So, Mister Noveda,” Xvim began. “Mister Kazinski here claims you and he are stuck in a... ‘time loop’, and have lived through this month many times before. You’ve lived longer than him, apparently. I’ve already heard Mister Kazinski’s story and saw the evidence he had for it, and now I’m curious to hear your side of it. But before we get to that, I admit I’m curious about your level of skill. Do you mind if we take an hour or two to test your magical abilities?”

“Sure,” Zach shrugged. “I guess we’re going to have to leave the office for that, though...”

“That won’t be necessary, mister Noveda,” Xvim told him. “The test will consist of simple shaping exercises.”

“Shaping exercises?” Zach asked, surprised. “Err, kind of *underwhelming*, but okay. Ready when you are.”

Oh dear. Should Zorian warn him?

No. No, it would be more amusing this way.

“Levitate this pen, please,” Xvim told Zach, handing him one of the many pens strewn along his desk. “And then make it spin in the air.”

Zach smiled, doing just that with total ease...

...at which point a marble nailed him straight in his forehead, causing him to lose concentration and stop levitating the pen, nevermind spinning it.

“...what?” Zach asked incredulously.

“You failed,” Xvim informed him, finger tapping against the table impatiently.

“But... you threw a marble at me!” Zach protested.

“And you immediately lost concentration,” Xvim said with a long sigh. “Shameful. And you’re supposed to be someone who trained magic for literally decades? What could you have possibly been doing all this time? Zorian here would have never let some little thing like that distract him, and he has only been stuck in the time loop for a few years.”

There was a long pause as Zach looked incredulously between Xvim and Zorian, as if unable to believe what he was hearing.

Zorian was struggling not to laugh. He could kind of understand why Xvim had done this – it was an asshole move, and completely inappropriate for a teacher, but damn if it wasn’t amusing.

“Well, I suppose it’s to be expected,” Xvim said. “Decades of shoddy instruction is nonetheless shoddy instruction. One more promising student failed by the poor state of our magical education. Let’s try that again, only properly this time. Start over...”

- break -

“I hate this guy,” Zach told him as they left Xvim’s office. “I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to strangle someone more in my entire life.”

“Yeah, Xvim has that kind of effect on people,” Zorian agreed.

“I mean, I knew he was an asshole, but I never quite realized he was that... *that* much of an asshole. You know?”

Yes, he knew. Oh, how Zorian knew...

“If he’s always like that, then why the hell did you keep coming back to him restart after restart?” Zach asked incredulously.

“I wanted to prove him wrong,” Zorian shrugged. “He was an ass, but he was demanding excellence in something I’d always felt I was good at, and so I just couldn’t let it go. Besides, he’s not utterly terrible, once you get to know him a little.”

“Not utterly terrible,” Zach repeated, rolling his eyes. “I really hope this is the end of it and I never have to talk to the guy again.”

“You know, Xvim is pretty good at non-structured mental defenses,” Zorian said innocently.

“No,” Zach said immediately.

“What?” Zorian grinned. “I was just going to suggest you ask him for help in mastering the ability. I’m sure he’d be happy to help you train.”

“No. Absolutely not,” Zach shook his head. “And don’t think I didn’t notice how much you were enjoying yourself while I suffered in there. I’ll find a way to pay you back somehow, you’ll see.”

Rather than be intimidated by the threat, Zorian finally laughed.

56. Obscure

Chapter 056 Obscure

Despite how much the experience had annoyed Zach, Zorian judged their meeting with Xvim to have been a full success. Sure, Xvim had been openly dismissive of Zach's skills, but that was just Xvim being Xvim. The man had been impressed in his own way, else he would not have kept pushing Zach towards ever more demanding shaping exercises as their meeting progressed. Not that this outcome was surprising – there was a lot to be impressed about when it came to Zach's shaping, especially if one knew how big his mana reserves were. His fellow time traveler had not honed his shaping skills to the same ridiculous standard that Zorian had achieved under Xvim's tutelage, but he was clearly far better than he had any right to be. Zorian was confident that the skills Zach displayed in that office would be taken as a point in their favor.

The next day, Zorian decided to introduce Zach to Alanic as well and see if the priest was open to the idea of teaching Zach some of his soul defenses. Accordingly, they went to the priest first thing in the morning, effectively skipping an entire day of classes. Not that skipping classes was much of a problem for either of them at this point.

The start of the meeting went about as Zorian expected it would. Zach talked, Alanic listened, and Zorian mostly stayed quiet. The priest already knew the nature of their request, since Zorian had already explained things to him while arranging the meeting, but he wanted to hear Zach's version of the story as well before he agreed to anything. Thankfully, Zach successfully kept to the script and didn't blurt out anything he wasn't supposed to.

Their story was, in essence, very simple: the two of them had ended up on the receiving end of a soul magic attack and now had some kind of marker stamped on their soul. Zach, being shaken by the experience, now wanted to learn how to defend himself from similar attacks.

"There is one thing that is bothering me about this," Alanic told them when Zach finished his tale, shifting his attention from Zach to Zorian. "If both of you suffered from this attack, how come only Zach is interested in learning how to defend his soul? Does the experience you went through not worry you as well?"

"Ah, well, I already know how to perceive and defend my soul," Zorian admitted.

"Really?" Alanic said curiously, raising his eyebrows in a silent question.

"Why would I lie?" asked Zorian with a shrug.

Alanic stared at him for a second before reaching across the table they were gathered around and grasping his shoulder tightly in his hand. Zorian was about to ask him what the hell he thought he was doing when suddenly all of his senses went haywire.

He swayed in his chair for a moment, the world around him spinning and melting like a bad illusion and his body feeling like it was being twisted into some unnatural form. Then he realized what was happening and used his magic to violently shove Alanic's attack away from his soul. It worked, and the world immediately returned to normal, but Zorian had an uncomfortable feeling that had more to do with Alanic backing off at the first sign of resistance than him being all that good.

He gave the man a nasty glare, and Alanic removed his hand from Zorian's shoulder.

"Shoddy defenses," Alanic said. "Serviceable, but shoddy. You should reconsider your decision, mister Kazinski. You could use my instruction as much as mister Noveda here."

"I know that!" Zorian snapped. "I just thought..."

...that Alanic would refuse to teach him, since he didn't want to do so in previous restarts. Well, not without receiving explanations that Zorian had been unwilling to give the man at that time.

Hmm

"You know what? Nevermind that," Zorian sighed. "Does that mean you're willing to teach us, then? Both of us?"

"I suppose I am," Alanic said, tapping his fingers against the table for a few seconds. "You are hiding things from me, but I don't think it's something sinister. Who taught you how to feel your soul, if I may ask?"

"A friendly shifter," said Zorian.

Partially true, even if Alanic had done the lion's share of the work.

"A shifter, huh?" Alanic said, giving him another long look. "Very well. Come with me so I can check up on this marker you two received from your attacker."

"Err, we don't want it removed," Zach hurriedly said.

"Yes, you already said that," Alanic said. "I just want to have a look. Don't worry, I'm not doing anything to you without your consent."

"You mean like launching a surprise soul attack to test our claims of already having a soul defense?" asked Zorian snidely.

"Don't be so whiny," Alanic told him unsympathetically. "That was just a light tap, spiritually speaking."

"That 'light tap' almost caused me to vomit all over your table," Zorian told him.

"Hmph," Alanic scoffed. "Your defenses are even shoddier than I thought, then."

Sighing, Zorian decided to drop the issue.

"What is it with you and annoying teachers?" Zach whispered to him as they followed Alanic deeper into the temple that served as his house. "Is this going to be a recurring thing with you? I don't think I can handle a repeat of the Xvim episode this soon."

Zorian was tempted to bring Zach to Silverlake after this, just to show him the *true* meaning of annoying. At least Alanic and Xvim were each helpful in their own way in addition to being hard to deal with. He wondered if Zach was good enough to deal with the grey hunter... he probably could kill the beast, but could he do it in a way that keeps the eggs intact?

Though now that he thought about it, Silverlake probably doesn't count as a teacher. She had taught him precisely nothing so far.

"Mister Zosk is way less annoying than Xvim," he whispered back to Zach, putting his musings aside for the moment. "He can be pretty harsh at times, but he's always fair. He doesn't insult people without good reason. The truth is my soul defenses really *are* shoddy at the moment. Give him a chance."

"I'm happy you have so much faith in me, mister Kazinski," Alanic said, butting into their conversation. Oops, guess they weren't quiet enough. Or maybe Alanic's hearing was just that good. "This Xvim fellow you keep talking about sounds fascinating. I hope you can introduce us sometime."

Zorian made a sour face. Bringing Xvim and Alanic together into the same room? Yeah, no way in hell was he letting that happen...

Alanic seemed to have noticed Zorian's distaste for the idea because he actually laughed at him.

"I was just joking, mister Kazinski," the priest said, his voice still tinged with amusement. "If I really wanted to meet this 'Xvim', I would have sought him out on my own. With a name like that, I doubt he'd be hard to find."

"I suppose you're right," Zorian admitted. 'Xvim' was a fairly exotic name, and he had a feeling that his mentor was rather famous within certain circles as well. Everyone who worked in a prestigious institution like Cyoria's Royal Magical Academy was at least somewhat famous. All in all, Xvim probably wasn't very hard to find for someone like Alanic, who clearly had connections to one or more spy organizations.

Not for the first time, Zorian found himself wondering what exactly would happen if he told Alanic about the time loop. Not in this restart, obviously, but as an idea for the future... well, he could use the battle-priest's help and advice.

Then again, he wasn't working alone anymore, was he? He would have to see what Zach would say about that.

Oh well. Hopefully Alanic would leave a better impression on Zach than Xvim had.

- break -

"Ugh," Zach said as they departed from Alanic's home. "That psychedelic potion is pure hell. And I'm apparently going to have to go through several restarts worth of that stuff?"

"You didn't have to take it," Zorian pointed out. "Its only purpose is to speed things up. You could have taken the slow, painless way and meditated your way to soul perception."

"No, I know my limits," Zach said, shaking his head. "Even you opted for the 'fast' route, and I'm even more impatient than you are. How you managed to pretend to be unaware of the time loop all this time I'll never fathom... What did he have you do while I was off hallucinating, anyway?"

"That 'light touch' stuff he tried on me earlier," grimaced Zorian. "He kept using weak soul attacks on me while having me fight him off. It's helpful, I guess. At the very least it gives me some experience in fending off soul manipulation. I usually rely on actual defensive wards to counter hostile soul magic, but this sort of stuff is useful if I'm ever caught off-guard with some casual soul spell. It's strange, though. Why is Alanic willing to help me refine my soul defenses now that I've brought you along? Why does your presence make him *less* suspicious of me?"

"I guess I just look like a more honest person than you do," Zach said with a grin. Zorian rolled his eyes at him. "Anyway, what now?"

"Now? Well, you either go home and do whatever you want, or you go with me to Knyazov Dveri while I visit the local dungeon," Zorian told him. "I was going to go there while you had your lessons with Alanic, but that idea obviously had to be scrapped, so I guess I'll do it now."

"You were going to go have fun in the dungeon while I suffered back there?" Zach frowned.

“Depends how you define fun,” Zorian said. “I’m just going to load up on crystalized mana before getting back to the surface.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Zach said. “Why would you need so much crystalized mana?”

“Money, of course,” Zorian said. “I use some of it for my magic items and golems, but most of it is sold for some quick cash. I memorized where the crystal clumps are over the restarts, so it doesn’t take long to pick up a lot of them. It’s almost like collecting money.”

Zach was quiet for a while.

“Well crap,” said Zach after a while. “That’s clever. Why didn’t I think of that? I could have used that trick a decade or so ago...”

“What, you had cash problems?” Zorian asked curiously. “Aren’t you obscenely rich?”

“I don’t have nearly as much money as people think,” Zach shook his head. Oh, right, his guardian kind of robbed him. “Hell, I don’t have nearly as much money as *I* thought I did, thanks to my slimy caretaker. But the real problem is that most of my money is unavailable to me. It’s all either banked into long-term accounts or stored away in ways that make it really hard for me to get to it on short notice. And even if I could get to it easily, I would still have to justify my expenses to my caretaker and get his permission in order to spend any significant sum. Which means that when I really wanted to spend a lot of money during the restarts, I basically had to get the money from scratch somehow...”

“Hmm. And how did you solve that?”

“Well, these days I just kill some rare magical creature and sell the corpse,” Zach shrugged. “You can earn huge amounts of cash if you know who to sell it to. I really like your solution, though. It’s a lot safer, and not even that much more time consuming. Doesn’t dumping a huge amount of crystalized mana on the market collapse the price, though?”

Zorian shook his head. “In the grand scheme of things, the amounts of crystalized mana I can gather in a few days are a drop in the bucket. Even if I focused on doing nothing else for the entire restart, I’d only produce a fraction of what dedicated mines produce on a daily basis. Though trying to sell too much to individual shops does tend to bring unwanted attention.”

“Alright,” Zach nodded. “So how are we doing this?”

- break -

Later that day, when they finally returned to Cyoria, Zorian was lugging no less than five luggage boxes full of crystalized mana – a lot more than his excursions into the dungeons beneath Knyazov Dveri usually got him. They probably went a little overboard with their crystal collection, but that was fine. One could never have too much money.

Zorian usually stuck to the safer areas of the dungeon he had mapped and explored a long time ago when embarking on his crystal gathering expeditions, but Zach had insisted they explore the dungeon a little deeper than usual this time. Since the other time traveler was so powerful, Zorian had agreed. He was actually somewhat curious if they could find something interesting. In the end, though, they didn’t discover anything too amazing – just several new crystal clumps and some strange cave plants that Zorian couldn’t identify and decided to bring along with him. He could then show them to Kael when the boy finally showed up again. They didn’t stumble upon anything particularly dangerous, which pleased Zorian (who didn’t want to end the restart short because they died to some stupid monster in the dungeon depths) and disappointed Zach (who had been hoping for a good fight to blow off some steam).

Just as they were about to separate and go each to their own homes, Zach suddenly spoke up.

“That was kind of fun,” he said. “We should go deeper next time.”

“That’s a bad idea,” Zorian said. “We already went past the depth where I met this floating mass of eyes that killed me just by looking at me. It’s only luck we didn’t meet anything like that today. Do you really want to cut one of our restarts short by dying to some stupid monster?”

“Ugh. You’re no fun,” Zach complained.

“We can always go hunting all the monsters that are terrorizing the city now that aranea are gone,” Zorian pointed out. “I already did that with Taiven in previous restarts, but... well, I can never really set myself loose when I’m around her. She knows me too well to accept my growth in skill at face value.”

“Taiven. I remember her,” Zach said. “She was your date for the evening that time when I invited all the students to my home for the summer festival. Are you close to her?”

“Not in the way you’re probably thinking of. We’re just friends,” Zorian said.

“Friends that go on dates together?” Zach said with a grin.

Ugh.

“I’m pretty sure I told you something like this back then, but Taiven isn’t interested in guys like me. I’m not her type,” Zorian responded, hoping this was the end of it.

Yeah, fat chance of that.

“Ah, so she shot you down then,” Zach nodded sagely. “Well, don’t let it get to you. You can’t get to them all, even with the time loop and its multiple retries. I never managed to talk either Raynie or Akoja to go out on a date with me, for example, no matter what I tried...”

Zorian was sorely tempted to ask Zach about his attempts to woo Akoja, since that was bound to have been amusing, in a train-wreck sort of way. In the end, however, he decided that he really didn’t want to know.

“I hope you realize that I’ve been in this time loop for only a handful of years and that most of that time has been spent while under threat and under pressure from various ‘emergencies’,” Zorian told him.

“Yes, so?” Zach asked, not understanding his point.

“Aside from picking a girl for the date at the end of the restart, I never went out on any dates,” Zorian told him. Did his meetings with Raynie count as dates? No, probably not. “I certainly didn’t go after every single girl in the class like you seem to have done.”

Zach stared at him in silence for a few seconds, apparently struck speechless at Zorian’s statement.

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“Seriously?!” he eventually asked, his voice incredulous.

“Seriously,” Zorian confirmed.

“You’re crazy,” Zach told him. “Mark my words, you’ll regret this once we’re out of this time loop. You’ll never get a chance like this in your life!”

“You sound like an old man,” Zorian said.

“Well, I *am* several decades older than you,” Zach pointed out. “Listen to your elders, young man, I know what I’m talking about...”

Ten minutes and a lot of pointless banter later, they finally called it a day and separated. Strangely enough, despite the fact he spent the entire day either having his soul slapped around, crawling through dark, monster-infested tunnels or being teased by his fellow time traveler, Zorian found himself happy with how it turned out.

Though he really could have gone without that last conversation – now he couldn’t stop thinking about the various girls in his life.

And he was certain that if Zach knew about it, he would be laughing at his predicament.

The jerk.

- break -

Two days after their meeting with Xvim, the man called Zorian in his office to tell him that he had tentatively accepted his story as plausible and to talk about what they should do next. That was... surprisingly fast. It was interesting to experience just how big of an effect Zach’s presence had on people he talked to. Both Xvim and Alanic seemed to be taking him more seriously this time around, just because there was a second person backing his story up. Was it just that multiple people were convincing in a way that a single person wasn’t, or was there more to it?

He was tempted to ask Xvim about the topic directly, but it was unlikely he could offer much insight into the thought processes of his previous incarnations and would force him to admit he was purposely restricting Xvim’s access to relevant information about the time loop.

Regardless, he currently found himself standing in front of Xvim on one of the Academy’s many training grounds, waiting for the lessons to start.

“So,” Xvim said. “I see you are here alone. I take it your fellow time traveler declined my offer, then?”

“I’m afraid you didn’t leave the best impression on him the last time you met, sir,” Zorian told him respectfully.

“A pity. He could have used my help. But enough about the easily discouraged – we’re here to help you. You say you’ve already worked with me to hone your dimensionalism? Show me, then.”

Zorian didn’t have to ask what Xvim was talking about. He took out a large, oval rock from his jacket pocket and outstretched his hand in front of him so Xvim could see the stone.

And then he generated a flawless dimensional boundary around the stone. Visually, nothing happened... but Zorian knew Xvim could tell the difference somehow. He supposed that his ability to sense magic was just that good.

“Passable,” Xvim said, passing his judgement. “Keep working on it in your free time, but I suppose I can work with this.”

Zorian nodded, and quietly pocketed the stone, his long experience with Xvim allowing him to shrug off his mentor’s ridiculous perfectionism without really getting upset. His dimensional boundary was more than just ‘passable’ and they both knew it. Zorian had already started to work on

forming a dimensional boundary over complex objects like small statues and planned to move on to live, moving insects soon.

"You seem to have rather good grasp on the basic teleport spell, and even know a great many variants," Xvim said. "So today I will show you how to defend against teleportation instead."

"I already know how to ward places against teleportation," pointed out Zorian.

"Truly?" Xvim said. "Let's test that."

He waved his hands, conjuring four glowing orbs of light that quickly assumed a square formation over a large section of the training ground.

"Ward that area against teleportation, and then I'll do my best to teleport in," Xvim told him.

Shrugging, Zorian went and did just that. He was quite good at warding, in his humble opinion, but he had no illusions that his wards would actually hold against Xvim's attempts to sidestep it. Who knows what kind of sophisticated teleportation spells his mentor had at his disposal?

There. Not his best work, perhaps, as he was slightly rushed for time and didn't have any fancy materials to work with, but that should at least force him to spend some time to-

Without saying a word, Xvim unceremoniously dispelled his teleportation ward with a wide-area dispel and teleported into the previously warded area.

Though he knew it wouldn't help, Zorian just couldn't help himself. He just had to say it.

"That's cheating," he said. "You told me you were going to try to teleport in, not that you'd just dispel the ward."

"And an actual attacker would play by the rules, hmm?" Xvim asked him. "You don't think they would just teleport to the edge of the ward and get rid of it?"

"If you gave me time to prepare, the ward would be anchored to something and be nigh impossible to dispel like that," Zorian said.

"And if you gave me time to prepare I'd bring a couple of mana siphons to starve the ward into collapse," Xvim said pitilessly.

"Ugh. Fine. Can I have another try?" Zorian asked.

"Of course," Xvim nodded. "You can have as many tries as you want."

Two hours later and 5 ward refinements later, Zorian had a warding scheme that Xvim couldn't just casually dispel whenever he wished. He had to extend the ward far outside the limits of the area indicated by Xvim's glowing orbs, but apparently that wasn't cheating either. The man even praised him for 'finally thinking outside the box'.

And then, when he finally couldn't dispel the ward, Xvim promptly teleported into the area as if the ward had never existed. Zorian wouldn't have been so upset about that, except that Xvim didn't appear to have used anything more complex than a basic teleport to do so.

"What happened?" he asked the man. "How did you teleport in with just the regular teleport? There are three stages of the basic teleport, and I made sure to suppress each and every one of them."

"I made a microscopic dimensional gate and used it to extend a ward-suppressing bubble in the middle of the area," Xvim said. "Then I simply teleported into a patch of effectively unprotected land. It is a standard way of getting into heavily-warded areas, though most people use magic items thrown into the area instead of creating a microscopic gate like I did."

"I presume this is because they can't create a gate like that, even a tiny one," Zorian said.

"Yes," Xvim confirmed. "But I'm hardly unique in this capacity, so it would be best to know how to deal with the tactic."

"Fine," Zorian said wearily. "I admit defeat, master. I don't know how to ward against teleportation effectively, so please teach me how. And if possible, I'd also like to know how to make the micro-gate thing, too."

"I suspect that level of skill is still beyond you, my student," Xvim told him with a small smile. "But we'll see. Now listen closely..."

- break -

Days passed. Aside from getting lessons from both Alanic and Xvim, Zorian spent his time playing games with Kirielle and creating experimental spell formula blueprints. He sought out Nora Boole's help for the latter task, discussing his designs with the enthusiastic woman that helped him start on his current path so long ago. She was surprisingly helpful, even after all this time... though it did bring him a bit more attention than he would have liked, since Nora couldn't shut up about this amazing spell formula talent she had found among the students. With Red Robe out of the picture, however, he didn't care as much about attracting attention.

He and Zach also went to hunt monsters that kept spilling into Cyoria a couple of times. Zorian already knew where a lot of them made their nests and which paths they took to the surface, and since he didn't have to feign ignorance around Zach, they thinned out monster populations

considerably during those couple of visits to Cyoria's underground. At Zorian's request, Zach mostly let Zorian tackle the monsters on his own, only getting himself involved when he had to. Which was embarrassingly often, to Zorian's annoyance – his combat skills were steadily growing, but he still wasn't a one man army like Zach was.

Eventually Kael arrived at Imaya's place, and Zorian brought both him and Taiven into the time loop. Kael was very easy to convince, like usual, but Taiven was still rather incredulous about the idea. Then again, she always was rather hard to convince that he was telling the truth...

Currently he and Zach were just lazing around in an empty meadow, far from any settlement. Well, any *inhabited* settlement. There was a small village nearby, but it had been completely depopulated during the Weeping, and now the locals considered the entire area cursed and refused to move back in. Zorian didn't expect that to last for long, but for now the village remained empty and the fields overgrown with grass.

Though the background of the place was rather morbid, it was a very beautiful location otherwise. Zach had really found some nice sites in his decades of wandering the continent.

"So what was Kael being so excited about the other day?" Zach asked him. "I don't remember him being so excited about the time loop in the previous restart."

"Well, since I no longer have to worry about keeping my head down to stay below Red Robe's radar, Kael decided he can conscript some of the local alchemists for that research he keeps transferring across restarts," Zorian said.

"That sounds very expensive," Zach said, frowning.

"It probably will be," Zorian said, nodding. "I'd be annoyed at him throwing my money around like that, but in truth I really don't have much use for most of it. Besides, I can always dip into other sources of cash if I ever run out."

"Other sources?" Zach asked.

"I know the locations of several secret stashes of the Ibasans and the cultists scattered around Cyoria," Zorian said. "And I can always rob their houses too, since I know where a lot of them live and all."

"But that's stealing," Zach protested.

"Yes?" Zorian confirmed, mystified at Zach's response. "Why wouldn't I steal from them? They're a bunch of murderous invaders."

"Well... I guess it makes sense," Zach admitted. "But it just feels wrong to me, you know?"

"But you didn't feel uncomfortable helping me violently break into aranean settlements so we could violate their minds for practice and skill theft?" Zorian asked curiously.

Zach winced. "I, uh... didn't think of it that way. Besides, they're giant spiders. It's easier to justify that sort of thing when I can't read their body cues and they don't bother to talk to me about it."

"That's because you had a mind blank on," Zorian noted. "They literally *couldn't* talk to you. They did talk to me, though. They asked, even begged us to stop plenty of times."

"Uh, wow," said Zach awkwardly. "That's... pretty messed up. I always did wonder why you were so reluctant to go attack more than one colony each day..."

Zorian nodded silently. He wasn't exactly dying of guilt over what they did, but that was one restart he never intended to reenact in the future. There was no way he could keep doing that without becoming a monster.

After a short silence, Zach spoke up again.

"You know, Zorian," he said. "After watching you fight against the aranea in that restart and against other monsters in this one, I couldn't help but notice your combat magic is a little... basic."

"I guess," Zorian said slowly, wondering what the other boy was getting at.

"It's not bad!" Zach hastened to add. "It's pretty good, all things considered. But, well... I don't think it's good enough for what we need to do."

"Fair enough," Zorian agreed. "I am working on it, though. I suppose you think I'm not doing enough?"

"Actually, I was going to offer to teach you some more spells," Zach grinned. "I'm not much of a teacher, but I don't have to be one in order to increase your arsenal of combat spells."

There was no reason to say no – Zorian was always happy to learn more spells, especially restricted ones like most combat spells. Of course, learning spells was not the same as being able to use them effectively in combat, which was why Zorian still relied primarily on classics like magic missile, shield, fireball and the like.

It quickly became obvious that many of Zach's favorite tricks wouldn't work well for Zorian. For instance, Zach loved the shield variations that

created multiple layers of force instead of a single shielding plane – while extremely effective, they had extreme mana costs associated with them as well. He also loved using spells in large swarms to overwhelm enemy defenses, which was likewise an impractical tactic for Zorian.

Still...

“Okay then, this is one of those fancy hexagon shields you sometimes see in illustrations,” said Zach, casting the spell deliberately slowly so Zorian could memorize the movements and chants. A ghostly sphere made of interlocking hexagons sprung out around Zach. “I personally find it too much of a chore, but it sounds like it can work well for someone like you. The main advantage is that if an attack punches through, it will only destroy one hexagon instead of collapsing the entire shield. Though this does make the shield as a whole somewhat weaker than the layered aegis I showed you earlier. Hence me not using it much.”

“That does sound more suited to me,” Zorian admitted.

“We should probably stop for today,” Zach said, dismissing the shield. It promptly dissolved into glittering motes of lights instead of simply winking out of existence like a regular shield did. Pretty.

“Yes,” Zorian agreed. “It’s best I spend some time experimenting with stuff you’ve already shown me before I bother learning more new stuff.”

“Don’t be afraid to ask for help,” Zach said. “Hell, maybe one day you’ll even teach *me* something.”

Zorian cocked his eyebrow at him.

“Who says I can’t teach you something now?” he asked the boy.

“Eh, I meant something related to combat magic,” Zach clarified, waving his hand through the air dismissively.

“So did I,” Zorian immediately countered.

“Zorian, please,” Zach snorted derisively. “Combat magic is my thing. I’ve been working on it for decades now. Even if you know some obscure spell I’ve never encountered, I probably already have something better in my arsenal. Any feat of combat magic you can do, I can either duplicate or exceed.”

“Hmm,” Zorian hummed thoughtfully. “That calls for a little test, I think. Do you think you’re up to it?”

“Sure,” Zach shrugged. “What do you have in mind?”

“See that rock over there?” Zorian said, pointing at a large stone some distance away from them. Zach motioned for Zorian to continue. “Keep an eye on it while I cast my spell.”

“Alright,” Zach said, retreating to a healthy distance and positioning himself so he could easily see both Zorian and the stone at the same time.

Slowly and carefully, Zorian went through the motions of the spell. Zach looked torn between confusion and amusement, since the spell was clearly just a magic missile, but said nothing and opted to just watch instead.

Zorian finished the spell. For a second, nothing seemed to happen.

Then the rock Zorian designated as his target exploded into a shower of stone fragments, causing Zach to flinch in surprise at the sudden, unexpected detonation.

“What?” he asked incomprehendingly. He gave Zorian a suspicious glance. “Did you put an explosive glyph on that stone beforehand or something?”

“Nope,” Zorian said, grinning widely. “I cast an invisible magic missile at it.”

“Invisible magic missile?” Zach asked slowly.

“Didn’t you know?” Zorian asked innocently. “A flawlessly cast force spell is perfectly transparent, making it effectively invisible. It took me quite a while to achieve this, but I’m sure a master combat mage like yourself has mastered this years ago.”

Zach stared at him for a second before shifting his gaze to the shattered rock the magic missile had demolished.

“So,” Zorian began, smiling brightly. “How long do you think it will take you to duplicate that?”

- break -

Three days later, Zorian was kind of regretting one-upping Zach like he did. Ever since then, his fellow time traveler seemed obsessed with duplicating Zorian’s feat, refusing to understand that this wasn’t something you could achieve by working on it really hard for a couple of days.

“I’m not even sure why you’re so upset about this,” Zorian finally told him. “It’s just a neat trick that people like you have no need for anyway.”

“It’s the principle of the thing,” Zach said, casting another magic missile at the tree in front of him. Zorian didn’t think the poor plant would last long

if this continued for long. ‘I’m the combat guy. It’s my thing, and I’ve been at this for decades longer than you! I can’t let you outdo me in this area.’

Zorian sighed at the explanation. He was getting uncomfortable flashbacks to Taiven’s little episode when she figured out how good of a combat mage he is. Was this a general combat mage thing?

Well, at least Zach was not crying over it like Taiven had... that would have been *really* awkward.

“At least let me show you how to do it properly,” Zorian said. “You’ll never succeed by going at it in your current fashion.”

Zach stopped for a second, considering it, before shaking his head.

“Maybe if I still can’t figure it out in a few days,” he said. “I like to figure out these sorts of things on my own.”

Oh well, he tried. With a helpless shrug, Zorian left Zach to his pointless attempts at brute-forcing a problem that required finesse to solve.

Eventually Zach either ran out of mana or got sick of casting magic missile – probably just got sick of it, considering his monstrous mana reserves – and decided to sit down next to Zorian for a while.

“Do you mind if I ask you a little about what you remember about the start of the time loop?” Zorian asked after a while.

“Feel free,” Zach shrugged. “But keep in mind that the beginning of the time loop is very fuzzy in my mind and I keep having trouble remembering specific things about it.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that,” Zorian nodded. “But I’ve been thinking about what you’ve said, both recently and back when you still thought I was unaware of the time loop...”

“That was an asshole thing for you to do,” said Zach, interrupting him. “I know I’ve said it before, but it bears repeating.”

“You’re never going to shut up about it, are you?” Zorian complained.

“Nope,” Zach confirmed.

“Anyway,” Zorian said, deciding there was no point in continuing that topic, “I remember you mentioning how you kept trying to convince everyone who would listen about the existence of the time loop. What was your logic behind that?”

“I found myself in some crazy time loop and there was an invasion of the city at the end of every month,” Zach said. “Of course I wanted some help.”

“So just to confirm...” Zorian tried. “Your earliest memories are of being confused by the situation you found yourself in, yes? The time loop was strange and novel to you, not something that felt natural?”

Zach frowned, lost in thought for a while.

“Yeah,” Zach nodded. “Sounds about right. It doesn’t feel like the time loop was something I was informed of in advance or specifically groomed for, if that’s what you’re asking. I guess that’s a point in favor of Red Robe being the true Controller, huh?”

“Him being the original Controller still makes no sense to me,” Zorian said. “Why would he tolerate you all this time if you weren’t somehow critical for the loop? Do you remember ever experiencing a time loop being cut short for no apparent reason?”

“No,” Zach said. “I would have remembered something that abnormal. I did experience a few unexpected restarts while sleeping, but I’m pretty sure those were due to assassinations.”

“Hmm. I doubt Red Robe never died prematurely, so that means the time loop *only* resets when you die. That’s a pretty obvious indicator it considers you more important than the two of us.”

They continued discussing the issue for another ten minutes of so, with no solid conclusions by the end. Eventually they shifted to the topic of how to convince people around them they really were in a time loop and Zach started sharing some of his more amusing failures in his initial quest for allies...

“You told Benisek that you’re a time traveler?” Zorian asked incredulously. “I can’t believe you thought that was a good idea.”

“Shut up,” Zach said. “Aren’t you friends with the guy?”

“Eh, sort of,” Zorian admitted. “But I’m afraid our friendship didn’t quite survive the time loop and its influence on me. I kind of feel bad, since it’s not his fault he can’t learn and grow like I do, but...”

“You don’t have to explain that to me,” Zach said. “I used to be casual friends with a lot of our classmates, but I feel completely alienated from most of them by now.”

“Right,” said Zorian. Best not to dwell on such a depressing topic. “So what exactly happened when you told Benisek about the time loop?”

“I thought he took it quite well at first,” Zach said. “Then I came to school the day after and found that he told half the school I’ve gone completely nuts. Though funny, everyone seemed to have a different idea of what kind of crazy thing I believed in...”

“Yeah, that sounds like Benisek,” Zorian nodded. “So when you said you tried to convince everyone, you really meant everyone, huh?”

“Well, obviously I couldn’t try to convince literally everyone in Cyoria,” Zach said. “But it was a lot of people. Students, teachers, city authorities, you name it.”

Zorian tapped his fingers against the ground around him, trying to think of some person from their class whose reaction to the time loop would have been amusing. Oh!

“How about Veyers?” he asked Zach. “Did you ever tell him about the time loop?”

“Who?” Zach asked, looking confused.

“Veyers Boranova,” Zorian said. “You know, the guy who punched you in the face during class in our second year? He got expelled from the academy before the time loop began, but he had technically been our classmate, so I thought...”

He stopped when he noticed Zach was giving him a strange look.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Zorian... who the hell are you talking about?” Zach asked him slowly.

Zorian stared at Zach for a while, before he began to explain things in more detail.

“I’m talking about Veyers Boranova,” he said. “Member of Noble House Boranova and our classmate during the first two years of our education. Tall, blond, and with vivid orange eyes that had a slitted iris and made him look sort of like a snake. You two hated each other... well, just about everyone hated the asshole, and he seemed to hate everyone around him, so I guess that doesn’t say much but... Anyway, the point is that there is no way you could have forgotten the guy!”

Zach shifted in place uncomfortably.

“I have no idea who you’re talking about,” he finally admitted.

Wow. Now that... that was very, *very* interesting.

57. Unwanted

Chapter 057 Unwanted

Zorian stared intently at the two sheets of paper in front of him, methodically going through every single line of text and marking down the matches and differences between the two documents. Zach sat beside him, watching him work with a thoughtful frown, not saying anything.

Despite the oppressive silence and serious mood, the two papers were simple lists of names. Classmates, teachers, public officials... each of them had listed anyone they considered even remotely important on their own sheet of paper, with no input from the other whatsoever. It was Zorian's hope that by comparing the two lists with each other, they could see if there were any other obvious holes in Zach's memory. Or Zorian's memory, for that matter – it was unlikely, but Zorian didn't entirely discount the idea that his own mind had been tampered with too.

"Is this really necessary?" Zach asked him. "Maybe I just forgot the guy?"

Zorian looked up from the two papers to give Zach an incredulous look.

"Hey, I'm just saying!" Zach protested. "I mean, it has been a pretty long time since I've been stuck in this time loop, and he was expelled before the time loop even began. I'd have to specifically seek him out, and what reason did I have to do *that*? We apparently didn't even like each other, if I understood you correctly."

"Please," Zorian scoffed. There was no doubt in Zorian's mind that Zach's curious inability to remember anything about Veyers Boranova was artificial in nature. "I can understand you putting the jerk completely out of your mind. Hell, I pretty much did that myself. But to completely forget that he existed at all and everything about him?"

Yet that was precisely what happened, if Zach was to be believed. Zorian could only conclude someone had scrubbed Zach's mind clean of everything related to the Boranova heir.

He wasn't sure why Zach was so unwilling to accept that conclusion, though he did have his suspicions...

Zorian returned to his task of matching names for a while, eventually stumbling onto a name on Zach's list that he was unfamiliar with. That was not very surprising, though – Zach's list was way longer than Zorian's, as the other boy was far more social than he was.

"Who is this Ilinim Kam guy?" he asked Zach.

"He was a student in one of the other groups during our first two years in the academy," Zach said. "We used to hang out together sometimes. You weren't very friendly back then, so that's probably why you don't remember him. I don't think you ever mingled with the other groups, did you?"

"No," Zorian admitted. "I was always very busy back then. I barely interacted with my own classmates, nevermind people I had no reason to talk to. Still, I did take a brief look at the other groups, back when I was investigating our classmates for potential Red Robe candidates. I don't remember ever seeing any Ilinim Kam."

"Well, I did say he *was* a student," Zach pointed out. "He failed the certification exam and dropped out of the academy."

Well, that would explain it. He had completely ignored people who failed to advance into the third year, thinking them irrelevant. That's how he'd missed Veyers too, actually.

"We're going to have to make a list of people like that and see if it holds any more surprises for us," Zorian noted. Scanning the names below Ilinim, he noticed quite a few names from other student groups. "That said, I can't help but notice that you know quite a few students outside our class..."

"I know what you're getting at," Zach interrupted him. "You're going to point out how I can list half of our year mates on demand but can't remember a guy that went to our class."

"And?" Zorian prodded. "Your response to that?"

"You're right. There is definitely something abnormal about me forgetting this Veyers guy like that. You happy now?" Zach said resignedly.

"Yes," Zorian nodded. "Now tell me who this Anixa Pravoski girl is..."

For the next hour and a half, they slowly went through the two lists of names, searching for any peculiarities. The good news was that Zach didn't have any other glaring holes in his memories, as far as Zorian could tell. Only Veyers seemed to be a total blank.

"So... do you think Veyers is Red Robe?" Zach asked cautiously.

"That's the question, isn't it?" Zorian said, taking off his glasses and inspecting them for dirt. It was mostly a way to waste some time while he thought about what he wanted to say.

“Yes it is,” said Zach slowly, as if talking to an idiot. “So why don’t you try answering it.”

Ugh. So impatient.

“It’s possible,” Zorian said. “But I don’t know. I’m kind of bothered by some things about this.”

“Like what?” Zach asked curiously.

“Like the fact Veyers apparently wiped only himself out of your memory,” Zorian said. “That is so... amateurish. I would expect more from Red Robe. I mean, if it was me doing something like this, I would have blanked out your recollection of another four or five random students to muddy the trail a bit.”

Zach gave him an unamused look.

“You know, Zorian, sometimes I can’t help but wonder if *you’re* actually Red Robe,” he said.

“You saw both of us in the same room, though,” Zorian pointed out, completely unconcerned by Zach’s words.

“I already know Red Robe can make simulacra, so that proves nothing,” Zach said, folding his hands over his chest.

Zorian made a mental note to ask Zach to teach him how to cast the simulacrum spell, since it was unlikely that Zach had never learned the spell in all the decades he had spent in the time loop and Zorian really wanted the spell. They had more pressing issues at the moment, however, so he reluctantly set the idea aside for the moment.

“The second thing that bothers me is that it’s hard to swallow that someone like Veyers could be the relatively discreet and patient Red Robe,” Zorian said, dragging the conversation back to the topic of Veyers. “I mean, he lost his temper at a disciplinary hearing, for gods’ sake! He is even more impulsive than you are!”

“Hey...” Zach protested.

“Then again, neither of us are very similar to the person we used to be before the time loop, are we?” admitted Zorian.

“There are plenty of similarities,” Zach said, shaking his head in disagreement. “But I do think that him having a short fuse before the time loop proves little. You were also rather unpleasant to interact with before the time loop, and look at you now...”

This was probably payback for Zorian’s earlier comment about Zach’s impulsiveness. He supposed he did kind of deserve that...

“I had reasons for behaving like I did,” Zorian noted.

“Who says Veyers didn’t?” Zach asked. “I’m sure he felt his behavior was totally justified, too.”

That was true, Zorian conceded. In fact, it could be that the nature of the time loop removed most of Veyers’ problems and allowed him to calm down. Much like it did for Zorian himself.

“I suppose you’re right,” said Zorian after a pause. He shook his head to clear his thoughts a little. “I think that, in the end, it doesn’t really matter whether Veyers is Red Robe or not. The fact you have no memory of him means he’s someone Red Robe didn’t want you to interact with, which makes him automatically important. We have to check him out.”

“Oh, no argument about *that*,” Zach nodded. “Though this makes me wonder... if Veyers really is Red Robe, what will we find when we track him down?”

“Depending on what method Red Robe used to leave the time loop, we would expect his counterpart in this world to be either a soulless corpse like the aranea or an unaware person no different from the rest of the people around us,” Zorian said.

“Why a soulless corpse?” Zach asked, baffled.

“Well, I’ve been thinking of the ways Red Robe could have tricked the Guardian into letting him out of the time loop reality, and I realized he might have just asked for his soul to be shoved into his real world body,” explained Zorian. “For a necromancer like him, it might be fairly trivial to just eject his old soul out of the body and continue as normal from there.”

“Would the Guardian agree to do that, though?” Zach asked. “*Can* it even do that? It did claim it would have to switch souls if the body in the real world already has one.”

“I can’t give you an answer to any of that, obviously,” Zorian huffed. “I don’t know enough about either necromancy or the Guardian’s capabilities to say if it’s possible. It’s just an idea I’ve been considering, that’s all.”

For a while, they kept throwing various possibilities at each other. It was all just wild speculation, however, so they gave up on that discussion as pointless soon enough. They would have to wait until they found Veyers before they could properly consider the issue.

A brief silence descended between them, each of them lost in their own thoughts.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to take a look at your mind?” asked Zorian after a while.

“What?” Zach asked with incomprehension, jolted out of his musings by Zorian’s question. A second later, when he finally processed the question, his face contorted into an annoyed glare. “No. Absolutely not. I’m sorry, but I already had my brain scrambled by one mind mage and I don’t want to be at the mercy of another. Besides, what would be the point? I may not be an expert on mind magic like you, but even I know there is no way to restore magically erased memories. I’d be letting you rummage through my mind for nothing.”

“Well, it’s true that a properly blanked out memory is irrecoverable,” Zorian admitted easily. “But why assume Red Robe executed the mind wipe flawlessly? I saw his mind magic in action at one point, when he tried to use it against me, and he wasn’t all that good with it. There is a good chance he missed something.”

“You have a very skewed image of what constitutes as ‘good’ when it comes to mind magic,” Zach told him. “It’s not Red Robe that’s bad, it’s you who is terrifyingly good at it. And the answer is still no.”

“What if I tell you that you could *still* be under the magic’s influence?” Zorian asked.

Zach gave him a surprised look.

“What the hell do you mean by that!” Zach asked him with a raised voice.

“It’s hard to believe you never encountered anyone mentioning Veyers in one of the previous restarts,” Zorian pointed out with a sigh. “He’s not often mentioned, but people do talk about him on occasion. At some point over the decades, you really should have noticed there was a guy everyone in our class knew of, yet you have no memories of.”

“Well… I was only rarely in class after some point…” Zach tried.

“Zach, you’ve been strangely evasive about Veyers this entire time,” Zorian told him bluntly. “Hell, not long ago you again floated the idea you may have just forgotten the guy. As if it hadn’t been abundantly obvious by then that the guy had been purposely deleted out of your memories. I would have expected you to be excited about discovering something so important, but instead you seemed really keen to dismiss the whole thing.”

“Zorian, you’re overcomplicating things again,” Zach complained. “Please speak plainly.”

“Fine. You’re probably under some kind of compulsion not to focus on the topic of Veyers,” Zorian said. “And possibly forget about it after a while, if it was ever forcibly pointed out to you. We’ll have to see if you still remember this conversation tomorrow.”

“Don’t even joke about that last part, Zorian,” Zach warned him.

“It’s what I’d have done in Red Robe’s place,” Zorian said, shrugging. “But I have a feeling you don’t have to worry about that. If Red Robe didn’t bother masking his memory wipe better, it’s likely that he didn’t bother with something so relatively sophisticated. The compulsion to dismiss the topic itself might have been enough, anyway. I mean, if it hadn’t been for me being so pushy and insistent about the hole in your memory when it comes to Veyers, you’d have likely dismissed it and eventually put it out of your mind.”

Zach hissed something under his breath that Zorian didn’t quite catch but which he was pretty sure were insults and swear words directed at Red Robe. Something about his canine ancestry and fondness for male genitals. Regardless, Zach spent the next several minutes pacing around the area and muttering to himself.

He looked dangerously unstable, if Zorian was to be perfectly honest. And it wasn’t the first time Zach had done something like that, either. It occurred to Zorian that all those decades Zach spent in the time loop, with only limited ability to interact with other people, must have been harder on his fellow time traveler than he had supposed.

How much worse, then, would he have ended up if the time loop worked as intended and he stayed inside for hundreds of years or however long it was supposed to last? Maybe the Ghost Serpent was onto something…

Finally, Zach stopped his pacing, ran his hand through his hair in a frustrated manner, and turned to Zorian.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” he said. “I really can’t, but I don’t seem to have a choice. Zorian?”

“Yes?” Zorian asked, curiously. Was Zach finally going to let him take a look at his mind? Probably, he couldn’t imagine what else-

“I want you to bring me to Xvim again,” Zach said, a sour expression on his face. “I’m going to need those mind magic lessons after all.”

“Oh,” Zorian said, blinking in surprise. He didn’t expect *that*. “Yeah. Sure.”

He wasn’t sure whether to be amused or annoyed by this outcome. It wasn’t what he had been trying to do by broaching the topic, but at least it was bound to bring plenty of amusement to him in the days to come.

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The next three days proved to be rather frustrating. On the bright side, Zach did not forget about Veyers after a while, so any compulsion he might be laboring under did not extend that far. Unfortunately, that's where the good news ended. Their search for Veyers had gone nowhere. They knew the boy's name, what he looked like and where his home was, but they still couldn't find him. In the end Zach and Zorian blanketed the entire city with divinations, and they still couldn't track him down. Either Veyers was under some heavy anti-divination wards, or he was not anywhere near the city of Cyoria.

To make matters worse, nobody seemed to know anything about the guy, not even the various authorities. Zorian knew from questioning academy officials (and reading their minds when they refused to give him an answer) that Veyers had never interacted with the academy again after his expulsion, even though he was supposed to come and sign some documents to finalize things. The academy sent a message to Veyers' House to complain about that, but received no response whatsoever. The police, for their part, received no report that the boy was dead or missing, despite the fact Veyers hadn't been seen in weeks.

They even tried contacting Noble House Boranova directly to see if they could arrange for a meeting. Sadly, their representatives told them to get lost. Not in those words, admittedly, they were actually rather polite, but they had still made it clear they didn't want to talk to them.

All in all, investigating Veyers was proving to be a lot harder than Zorian initially thought it would be. At this point in time, however, Zorian didn't find that either surprising or particularly disappointing. When was anything about this time loop simple?

Though it was a long-shot, Zorian decided to ask their classmates about Veyers to see if they knew something. At the very least, Benisek was bound to have heard some rumors about the disgraced Boranova heir, even if there was no telling how accurate any of them were.

"You're on time for once, I see," Akoja told him as he approached the classroom. She marked his arrival on the attendance sheet she was holding in her hands. "A positive sign. What's the occasion?"

Zorian thought about pointing out he was actually incredibly early, but decided not to. Let her have it her way this once.

"I actually wanted to talk to you," he said.

"Me!?" she asked incredulously, giving him a wide-eyed look. "Err, I mean, sure... what did you want to talk about?"

"Veyers Boranova," Zorian said.

"Him?" she asked in distaste. He felt a twinge of disappointment coming off her. "You really know how to pick a topic, Zorian."

"Sorry," he said, genuinely a little remorseful. He probably gave her a bit of false hope he would ask her out or something, if the feelings he got from her were of any indication. Not what he had intended. "I just thought you might know something about him, since you're the class representative and all."

"To be honest, I did my best to put him out of my mind," she said. "I can't tell you how glad I was when I heard he got expelled."

"Well, about that... do you know what exactly he did on that hearing to get expelled?" Zorian asked.

"No. Nobody does," Akoja said, shaking her head. "I heard people saying he attacked one of the judges, but that's probably rubbish. That's a little too much, even for Veyers."

As much as Zorian didn't like the guy, he had to admit there was truth to that. Veyers usually had some restraint around teachers and other people that had power over him, so he probably wouldn't have done something stupid like attacking a judge deciding his own fate.

But he wouldn't put it past him, either.

"So you've never seen him lately?" Zorian asked. "Never heard about anything about what he did afterwards?"

"No and no," she answered, giving him a suspicious look. "Why the sudden interest in Veyers?"

"Zach wants to talk to him about something, but can't find him," Zorian said. "I agreed to help so I'm asking people if they know something."

He sensed a twinge of annoyance from her when Zach's name came up. Him being suddenly friendly with Zach didn't sit well with her, he could tell, but to her credit she didn't say anything about it. One of these days he really had to ask her why she disliked the boy so much.

"Maybe his House placed him under private arrest when he got expelled?" Akoja offered. "It was quite a scandal for them, so they probably don't want him walking around in public for a while. At least until things died down a little. Knowing Veyers, he probably couldn't handle people talking behind his back and mocking him. He'd lose his temper and make things worse than they already were."

"Maybe," Zorian agreed. It was also possible that Veyers was currently a soulless corpse and his House didn't want that to get out for whatever reason. He and Zach were definitely breaking into the Boranova estate at some point if they failed to find any other clues to Veyers' location. "It would make sense, but his House didn't seem to care about his outbursts before, so..."

"Yes," Akoja agreed, nodding. "It's shameful how much they let him get away with. I can't even imagine what my parents would do to me if I tried to behave like that. Getting myself expelled? I would probably be sent away to one of our rural relatives as punishment. I bet Veyers would have learned how to rein in his temper real quick if he had to work at a farm every time he did something stupid."

Wow. Akoja's parents were pretty strict apparently. No wonder she turned out the way she did.

"How do you think your parents would react if you got expelled?" Akoja asked curiously.

"I... honestly don't know," Zorian admitted. "Truthfully, I think I'd be too afraid to find out. They already don't like me much, and academic success is the only thing I really have going for me in their eyes. If that happened, I'd just gather all my savings and portable belongings and leave the country or something. I wouldn't even bother coming back home."

Akoja stared at him in surprise for a moment, at loss how to respond.

"Ah..." she finally said, a little uncomfortably. "I see..."

"Don't worry about it," said Zorian. "It's all highly theoretical, since there is no way I'm getting expelled like Veyers. One last question. This may sound strange, but do you know what Veyers was capable of?"

Akoja still stared at him thoughtfully for a moment, probably still focused on his previous admission. He was tempted to take a quick peek at her thoughts to see what she was considering, but managed to restrain himself. If he started looking at people's surface thoughts for no reason, where would it all end? Besides, looking at the thoughts of a girl that had a crush on him was probably a bad idea to begin with.

"I assume you mean magically speaking," she said finally. Zorian nodded. "Well, his atrocious behavior aside, I do know he was actually doing well in terms of academics. I'm guessing his House hired some private instructor to teach him, or maybe even did the teaching themselves. I also know he could make fire without chants and gestures, and really easily too, but that is probably not unusual for a Boranova."

Zorian nodded. Noble House Boranova was famous for their mastery of fire magic. The orange, slitted eyes that all core members of the House shared hinted that this was a result of some bloodline or enhancement ritual, rather than secret training method, but there was no publically available information on the specifics of it. Houses were notoriously secretive about such things.

Thanking Akoja for her time and patience, Zorian continued on into the classroom. There were still a couple of people he wanted to try his luck with.

- break -

"Hello, Benisek," Zorian said, sitting down next to the boy. "Do you mind if I ask you about something?"

"Ah! So the great Zorian finally deigns to come back to his old friend!" Benisek said. "And here I thought you had replaced me with Zach!"

If Benisek hadn't been smiling widely when he said that, Zorian might have been actually worried that the boy felt slighted. As it was, he just thanked his luck that Benisek was a very laid back person who didn't take things personally.

It also helped that they weren't terribly close friends, in all honesty. Though that was Zorian's fault more than Benisek's.

"Don't be so melodramatic," Zorian told him. "You can have more than one friend, you know?"

"True, true," Benisek agreed readily. "And you look way happier this year than you usually are, too. Got a girlfriend too, perhaps?"

He wiggled his eyebrows at Zorian suggestively, causing Zorian to roll his eyes at him.

"Fine, don't tell me," Benisek scoffed. "You know I'll find out on my own soon enough, right?"

"Do you know anything about Veyers?" Zorian asked him, ignoring the question.

"Veyers?" Benisek asked. "Ah, I guess you only now found out why he's not with us this year. I keep forgetting you live in the middle of nowhere and don't really talk to people. Anyway, yeah, he lost his temper on his disciplinary hearing and got expelled. I guess even Noble Houses have only so much political capital to burn on people like him."

"Do you know what he actually did?" Zorian asked.

Benisek didn't. He knew all sorts of speculation about it, such as the one that he set fire to one of the written witness testimonies or the one where he slept with the daughter of some high-ranking academy official and bragged about it during the hearing. They were all 'heard it from a friend who heard it from a friend' sorts of story, though, and Zorian didn't put much stock in them.

Unsurprisingly, Benisek had no idea where Veyers could be at the moment. That's not to say he didn't have anything useful to offer in regards to the topic, though.

"You know, you're not the only person asking for him," Benisek said. "I've been hearing there are people discreetly asking people about his whereabouts for a while now. They're offering money to anyone who can prove they've seen him."

Huh.

"Do you know who they are?" Zorian asked.

"I'd already have mentioned it if I did," Benisek said, shrugging. "But looking at the most likely suspects... I think it's his House that hired them. If it's not them, it's unlikely they would let someone basically offer a bounty on one of their own."

"Maybe they don't know?" offered Zorian.

"If I know, there is no way they missed it," Benisek said, shaking his head. "I'm just a curious amateur. Noble Houses all have actual professionals on their payroll."

So Veyers' House was looking for him too? Curious. Strange that they could not find him – if Noble House Boranova had its own intelligence network like Benisek claimed, they really should have tracked him down by now. Especially since they were his kin, and thus presumably knew him far better than Zorian ever could.

He thanked Benisek for the information and moved on.

- break -

"No, I don't know what Veyers did to get expelled," Tinami said. "It didn't have to be anything particularly heinous, though. If the academy actually puts you through a disciplinary hearing, they are already thoroughly sick of you. He probably shouted at the judge or something similarly minor, and they decided it was as good an excuse as any. It's really a shame he couldn't control himself more, the last thing his House needs is something like this."

"Why?" Zorian asked curiously. "What's wrong with his House?"

"Noble House Boranova is a military house," Tinami said. "They suffered a lot in the Splinter Wars."

"Oh, is this something like what happened to House Noveda?" Zorian asked. "Were they too robbed of their assets?"

"Ah, you know about that..." she said. "No, it's not like that. They weathered the Weeping without losing too many people, unlike the Noveda. But they still suffered crippling losses in the dissolution of the Old Alliance, and they're a long way from recovering. Having the designated heir of the House behave like that... that's not going to help the other Houses take them seriously again."

Hmm... so House Boranova was weakened, but not so much that people could loot them the way they did the Novedas. It probably wasn't in their interest for Cyoria to be destroyed, so why would Veyers support the invasion?

"Perhaps he just doesn't care about his House?" Zorian mused out loud.

"I'd normally scoff at the idea of a Noble House heir that doesn't care about the House they had spent their entire life being groomed to take over at some point, but there is clearly something funny going on with Veyers," Tinami said. "So I don't know. It's possible."

While her explanations were interesting, Tinami ultimately couldn't tell Zorian where to find Veyers. And since Tinami was the last of his classmates he had planned to ask about the quarrelsome boy, this was the end of his current investigation. It had been... surprisingly helpful.

He left the class to go find Zach and report his findings. The other time traveler had decided to talk to Xvim about getting mind magic lessons instead of accompanying Zorian to class, but he should be long done by now.

- break -

Surprisingly, when Zorian actually reached Xvim's office he found that Zach was still inside. That could be either very good or very bad.

He didn't have to wait long, thankfully. About fifteen minutes after he arrived, the door opened and Zach stepped out of the office.

"So, how did it go?" Zorian asked.

"Surprisingly bearable," Zach said. "He was still kind of insulting, but he didn't outright provoke me this time."

"Yeah, that's pretty much his real personality as far as I can tell," Zorian said. "So did he agree to teach you?"

"Yes," Zach confirmed. "It was easy. We hashed out an agreement about that in the first fifteen minutes or so."

"So what have you been doing all this time?" Zorian asked curiously. "Did he decide to hold your first lesson right then and there?"

"No. Yes," Zach said. Zorian gave him an unamused look. "What I mean is, he did give me a brief lesson there at the end, but that's not why it took so long. We spent most of the time arguing about your theory that I have a compulsion placed on me. He thought it was stupid of me not to have someone check up on me right away to see if there is any truth in that."

"Well, he's right," Zorian bluntly told him. "Even if you don't trust me to do it, you should at least go pay one of the certified mind mages in the employ of the Mage Guild to examine you. They're quite reliable. I used their services myself at one point."

"I actually trust you more than I do 'experts' like those," Zach said. "It's just... I don't want anyone using mind magic on me. Having someone looking through my thoughts is a last resort as far as I'm concerned. This compulsion, if it even exists, clearly isn't a pressing issue. It's pretty much

rendered irrelevant at this point. I'd rather take the time to learn how to deal with this myself."

"If you say so," Zorian said. They had this argument before. There was no need for another rehash. "In other news, I've been asking around our class about Veyers..."

He told Zach about the scarce few things he found out from questioning their classmates. The most important fact, of course, was that Noble House Boranova appeared to be searching for Veyers as well.

"Damn," Zach said. "I guess there is no point in breaking into their estate, now, is there?"

"If we still can't track down Veyers by the end of the restart, we should still probably do it. Just to make sure, you know? But if they really are looking for him, then he obviously isn't there."

"I don't understand," Zach said. "A person like him is too distinctive to just disappear. His eyes alone ensure most people would note his passage wherever he goes. Yet it's like the earth swallowed him. Maybe he physically walked out of the loop?"

Zorian frowned. Theoretically? It could happen. The copies of people inside the time loop were every bit as real as their counterparts in the real world. Barring Guardian intervention, it should be possible for a copy to simply step out of the time loop reality and into the real world.

"I guess it's possible, but we shouldn't jump to conclusions," Zorian said. "Let's try to locate him first and see what happens."

"I don't see what we can try that we haven't done already," Zach shrugged. "Aside from breaking into the Boranova estate, that is, and we already know that's probably a dead end."

"The restart is still young," Zorian said, though he largely agreed with Zach. "We'll wait and see if he turns up somewhere. Perhaps his House, with their greater manpower and resources, can track him down for us."

It wasn't like they didn't have anything to do in the meantime.

- break -

Over the next week, both Zorian and Zach slowly advanced their lessons with Xvim and Alanic and kept an eye for Veyers. Sadly, the Boranova heir never turned up anywhere and their attempts to find him went nowhere. They even visited many of the nearby settlements near Cyoria in their search, only to come back empty handed.

Zach floated the idea that maybe Veyers purposely went somewhere far, far away instead of sticking to the city and its surroundings. In that case, they may have more luck in tracking him down at the beginning of the restart, before he had time to get too far from familiar ground. It was as good idea as any they had, but it was of no help to them at the moment. And it also didn't explain why Veyers would *want* to do something like that.

Despite their issues with finding Veyers, Zorian was happy. They finally had a real clue about Red Robe's identity, Alanic agreed to teach him more about soul magic and his personal projects were going along nicely. He had even managed to convince Taiven to accept him and Zach as time travelers, despite being very suspicious initially.

Initially, the point of making Taiven aware of the time loop was so that they could continue with their project of making a perfect training plan for Taiven. However, once Taiven was actually convinced he was telling the truth, she decided she could also help him by finding him someone of his own skill level to spar with – she claimed it was the best way to really practice combat magic, and that he was going to start stagnating if he only kept fighting training dummies and dungeon monsters. To that end, she first pitted him against her two teammates and then against some of her former student peers that she managed to convince to spar with him.

He won about half of the fights. He could have won them all, of course, but using his mental powers or various magic items was against the spirit of the spars.

"I'm tempted to ask you for a spar," Taiven told him one day. "But a real one, not these ones where you limit yourself to invocations. But I have a feeling I'd get my butt kicked and I don't think my pride can take that."

"Yeah, if I took you on with no holding back I'd just batter down your mental barriers and blast your mind into unconsciousness," Zorian said. "You don't have the power to take me down before I dismantle your mental defenses. You did once, but not anymore."

"Yeah, I figured it was like that," she nodded. "And don't even get me started on all those bombs you're carrying. I've seen the tests you and Kael did with all those experimental potion grenades. You could probably beat me just by saturating the entire area with those, considering how many of them you made. Are they as expensive as they look?"

"Worse," scowled Zorian. "The grenades themselves aren't that bad, but the experimentation needed to refine their recipe into something that effective is murder on my money stash. I'm actually running out of cash these days. Looks like I'll have to start robbing the invaders after all."

Taiven shook her head ruefully.

"You say that so casually," she said. "I think this time loop thing is having a bad influence on you."

"Funny, most people think the time loop *improved* my behavior," said Zorian with a smile. "But yes, I guess in some ways I really am getting

worse."

After a brief discussion about the morality of the time loop and permissible behavior for people aware of the restarts, the two of them said their goodbyes to each other and went to their respective homes.

The next morning Zorian and Zach entered Xvim's office, thinking they would be having yet another routine lesson from the man. But they were wrong, because once they arrived, they found the office already occupied by someone.

It was Alanic. He and Xvim were casually chatting with each other when Zach and Zorian arrived, sipping tea and generally behaving like long lost friends that were finally reunited.

"Ah, mister Kazinski and mister Noveda," Xvim said. "Just the people we were looking for. Go ahead and sit down. Mister Zosk and I were just exchanging some very interesting stories..."

58. Questions and Answers

Chapter 058 Questions and Answers

Xvim's office was fairly typical as far as teacher offices went – a small room dominated by a large table and several bookcases, with much of the free space taken up by mysterious stacks of paper that every teacher piled up in their offices for some reason. It was relatively cramped even in normal circumstances; with four people inside, it crossed solidly into uncomfortable territory. There weren't even enough chairs for everyone! Though that was admittedly something easily solved with basic conjuration spells.

Of course, much of Zorian's current discomfort stemmed from the nature of the meeting he and Zach had stumbled upon, rather than the lack of elbow room. Interaction between Xvim and Alanic could make the rest of this restart very uncomfortable, or even force a premature end to it. Still, the suddenness of this development, as well as the cramped nature of their current environment, greatly amplified the threatening undertones of the meeting and Zorian couldn't help but wonder how much of it was deliberate. Did Xvim and Alanic purposely arrange for this meeting to happen here and now in order to exert additional psychological pressure on them? Bit of a risky move, if they did. Some people reacted really badly to being cornered. Zorian would not have pulled such a stunt, were he in their place.

But no matter. It could be that he was reading too much into it and they just didn't consider things that way. Besides, it wasn't like they were really cornered. Zorian could start a new iteration at any time, after all.

After exchanging an uncertain look between themselves, Zach and Zorian greeted their two teachers back, moved into the room and made themselves as comfortable as possible under the circumstances.

As they settled into the room, Zorian found himself wondering what kind of information the two men had exchanged. Alanic had probably told Xvim everything he knew about them, but that honestly wasn't much and mostly just proved that Zach and Zorian were keeping some things secret from Xvim. Xvim, on the other hand, had a far more complete picture of what was going on than Alanic... but would he really tell the warrior priest about the time loop? And would the other man believe Xvim, even if he would?

Considering the way the two teachers were watching him, he reckoned he would find out the answers to those questions in very short order.

"Surprised to see me here?" Alanic asked them challengingly.

"Yes," Zorian freely admitted. "It's very... *interesting* to see you here. I didn't think you and Xvim knew each other."

"We don't," Alanic shrugged. "I grew concerned about some things about you two and knew you would never tell me the truth. So I tracked him down to see if he knew something that could help me."

"And you just happened to visit him at the time we have a session scheduled with him?" Zorian asked, raising his eyebrow at the man. "That's some curiously lucky timing."

"Luck has nothing to do with it. This is actually my third meeting with your mentor, mister Kazinski," Alanic admitted readily. "I came here today specifically to meet with you two."

"Ah," Zorian nodded.

"Alright, let's stop dancing around each other and get to the point," Zach said, apparently not in the mood for verbal sparring. He turned towards Xvim. "How much did you tell him?"

"Given the nature of the situation, we felt it would be foolish to try and trick one another," Xvim said. "I told mister Zosk everything I know about the time loop... a courtesy I wish the two of you had extended to me as well. It is quite obvious at this point that you know far more about it than you've chosen to tell me. A rather poor way of repaying my cooperation and generosity, if I may say."

Ouch. Zorian supposed he could add 'delivering guilt trips' to the list of Xvim's many talents.

"People react very badly if you try to tell them everything," Zach said, completely unapologetic. Unlike Zorian, his experience with Xvim and Alanic was both recent and relatively short. He didn't care much for Xvim's appeal to emotions. "I know because I tried it. Give too many details and people either freak out on you or dismiss you as a lunatic. And this was back when I didn't know half the stuff I do today. It's hard enough to convince people the time loop is real."

"I feel I have been fairly open-minded about this," Xvim noted.

"It took Zorian several years of mind-numbing shaping exercises for you to take him seriously," Zach said, rolling his eyes. "And even then, you tend to stall for weeks if he mucks up his timing or says the wrong thing. And that's Zorian – when I tried to convince you, you didn't entertain my story for a second."

Xvim frowned deeply, but said nothing.

"Okay, this is getting a little too heated," Zorian said, trying to stave off an argument. "First things first. Mister Chao, mister Zosk... I apologize for

keeping you in the dark. Keeping some of the story secret from you made perfect sense from our perspective, but I can understand why you would feel a little betrayed by our behavior.”

Alanic snorted derisively. Zorian suddenly remembered something.

“Actually, do you mind if I ask you something?” Zorian said, looking at Alanic. “What did Xvim say that convinced you the time loop is real?”

“So you know how to convince me yourselves in the future?” Alanic guessed. Zach and Zorian immediately confirmed his supposition. “To be honest, I’m still not convinced this is not nonsense.”

“Oh,” said Zorian, visibly deflating. Damn.

“So why the hell are you giving us grief over this if you don’t even believe what we’re saying?” Zach demanded, folding his arms over his chest defensively.

“Because I can tell you believe what you’re saying,” Alanic said. “So at worst you’re delusional, rather than just a bunch of liars. I am somewhat hurt that Xvim here got to hear this tale from you, but you apparently don’t think I’m worth convincing. It’s not like I would have cut all ties with you if I didn’t believe you, you know? I would have just thought you were a little crazy.”

Zorian gave Alanic an unamused look.

“You say that, but if I came to you with soul defenses that you yourself had taught me and used time travel as my explanation when you confronted me about it, it would matter a lot whether you believed my story or not,” Zorian told him.

“Ah, so they *are* my techniques,” Alanic said, nodding to himself. “I admit that had been bothering me for a while now. It’s one of the things that caused me to seek out Xvim. It was just so unlikely that a shifter knew how to teach you some of those things...”

“I did learn some of my soul awareness from a shifter,” Zorian said. “But the majority of it comes from you.”

“Right. I can see how that could be a bit of a problem,” Alanic mused. “While a time loop would explain things, there are simpler explanations than time travel for something like that. You could be a powerful mind mage, for example...”

“I am,” Zorian admitted.

Three surprised looks were immediately directed his way. Even Zach was caught off guard, probably because he expected him to keep this little factoid a secret at all costs.

“Hey, they wanted the whole truth. Let them have a taste of it,” Zorian shrugged. “Yes, I am a powerful mind mage. It’s one of the things I had focused on over the restarts.”

“An excellent choice for someone in your situation,” Xvim nodded approvingly. “Endlessly useful and it would be quite dangerous to train outside the time loop.”

Alanic gave Xvim a mildly scandalized look.

“So, anyway... I come to your place and demonstrate the soul defenses you taught me,” Zorian told Alanic, looking him straight in the eye. “You ask me how this is possible and I say time travel. You don’t believe me and check me for mind magic. As it turns out, I *am* a mind mage. What now?”

“Things get complicated,” Alanic admitted.

There was a short pause as everyone considered things in the privacy of their own minds.

“Well, this didn’t go as planned,” said Xvim, giving Alanic an annoyed glance. The scarred battle priest shrugged at him unrepentantly. “Let us put hypotheticals aside for the moment. I will concede that simply telling us everything may not be as simple as it first appears. Nonetheless. I will have to insist that you try just this once. If you don’t... then both of us will withhold our lessons from you for the duration of this restart.”

“Additionally,” Alanic quickly added. “If you honestly tell us everything, I will tell you what you need to do to stop me from getting suspicious at you in future restarts.”

Zorian hummed thoughtfully. The carrot and the stick. Truthfully, the threat didn’t worry Zorian much – losing their lessons for the two weeks or so left in the restart would be kind of annoying, nothing more.

He shared a look with Zach, who shrugged uncaringly.

“I’m fine with this,” Zach said. “We already planned on doing something like this in the future, didn’t we? Worst case, we get an example of what *not* to do when we try for real.”

Thinking about it some more, Zorian had to agree with this. This wasn’t nearly as planned and controlled as he wanted the eventual reveal to be, but what else was new? Few things went entirely according to plan, even in the time loop. He may as well tell them everything and see how they

react. He opened his mouth to speak, only to be interrupted by Xvim.

“We would prefer if Zach were to tell the story, if you will,” Xvim said.

“Me?” Zach asked in a surprised tone, pointing a finger at his own chest. “Why? Zorian would explain it way better than I could. Not only did he figure most of this stuff out before me, he knows you two far better than I do.”

“Perhaps,” Alanic conceded. “But it is far easier for me to gauge your honesty than it would be to judge Zorian’s.”

Zach shot him an uncertain look.

“They’re not using mind magic on you,” Zorian said, shaking his head. “I’d be able to tell. But between this and some of Alanic’s past comments, it seems likely that he has some supernatural way of checking people’s honesty.”

He then frowned. Something was bothering him. A memory that danced at the edge of his awareness, trying to make itself known. Suddenly, he realized what this reminded him of – Kylae, the priestess that predicted the future, had also claimed she had some way of telling if he was being honest with her.

“You know, you are not the first priest that claimed he could tell if people are lying to them,” Zorian told Alanic. “Is this some kind of ability priests possess that I’m not aware of?”

“It’s an ability connected to soul magic,” Alanic said. “But higher ranking priests are quite often trained in soul magic, so you’re not far from the truth. The outer portion of the soul – the aura – reacts to its host’s thoughts and emotions to some extent, and those with soul sight can learn how to read and interpret its movements. Since most people have no awareness of their own soul, and thus no control over it, a soul mage can often get far stronger and reliable tells about people than you would get by relying on body language and intonation alone.”

“But I *can* sense my own soul, so it’s not a reliable indicator where I’m concerned,” Zorian surmised.

Alanic nodded.

“But I can’t actually detect and manipulate my aura to such an extent,” Zorian noted. “All you’ve taught me is how to harden it to resist spiritual attacks.”

“And I only have your word for it,” Alanic shrugged.

“Alright, alright, I’ll do the explanation,” Zach said, interrupting their exchange. He waved his hands in front of him, conjuring an illusion of the planet above Xvim’s table.

“This is the world,” Zach said, pointing at the gently spinning green-and-blue sphere. He then shifted his hand to point at green blob that looked vaguely like Altazia. “And this place here is roughly where Cyoria is. Beneath the city there is a time magic research facility studying a powerful ancient artifact, likely of divine origin. The researchers think it’s an advanced time dilation chamber, and in a way they are right. When activated, it takes a detailed record of everything in existence... and copies it.”

Zach waved his hands again, and the ghostly planet forked into two identical spheres – one floating to the left of the original, and the other to the right. The difference was that the left copy was no longer spinning, standing still as if frozen in time, while the right one was rotating madly like a spinning top.

“The copy of the world exists in its own pocket dimension that is under tremendous time dilation. From the point of the copy-people living in this copy-world, the original world is frozen between moments. A hundred years passes in a fraction of a second. Not that they know this. The only tell that the world is a copy bound to its own pocket dimension is that the spiritual planes have been cut off from the material world.”

From the corner of his eye, Zorian saw Alanic suddenly stiffen.

“Time does not flow normally within the copy world,” Zach continued. He adjusted the illusion again, altering the right planet slightly. It still spun, but there was a subtle, stuttering quality to it now, since every couple of rotations it reverted to its initial position before fully completing the spin. “Instead of always going forward in time, the world is periodically reverted to its original state. Everything is utterly undone, the land and its people constantly recreated from that initial record of the real world that was used to make the copy-world in the first place. Time repeats itself over and over, month after month after month. From the perspective of someone living in such a world, it would be like they are trapped in a time loop.”

Zach leaned back in his conjured chair and gave Xvim and Alanic a dramatic stare. Zorian had a feeling Zach was kind of enjoying this, despite his earlier complaints.

“As a matter of fact, there is someone like that,” Zach announced. “Three of them, in fact.”

“Three?” Alanic asked, raising his eyebrow.

“Three,” Zach nodded. “There was supposed to be only one – a single person aware of the repetition, a mysterious marker stamped onto his soul to make sure he retains his memories through the restarts. Zorian thinks that is me. If so, I do not remember being this chosen one. A second person found a way to retain awareness across restarts and messed with my mind, deleting many of my memories. Much later on, I decided to

take on an ancient lich head on in battle and he tried to blend my soul with Zorian's as punishment."

That got him a curious look from both Xvim and Alanic, but Zach didn't try to elaborate on that, choosing to instead finish his story.

"We survived, but the experience granted Zorian a functional version of my marker, granting him awareness of the time loop," Zach said.

"Unfortunately, it also eventually motivated the second time traveler to leave the copy world. For reasons I won't go into right now, this means nobody else can leave without cheating the system somehow. And the fake world is running out of power and will collapse in little more than four years."

"And there you have it," Zach finally concluded, erasing the two illusionary planets with a wave of his hand and directing a bright smile at the two teachers. "We are all copies of the real thing, living in a looping, hyper-accelerated copy of the real world. A copy that will soon disappear, taking us all with it. Nothing you do really matters, and unless we can figure out a way to break the system, nothing we do will matter in the end, either. Zorian, did I miss anything?"

The narrative has been illicitly obtained; should you discover it on Amazon, report the violation.

Zorian suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. Just a million details, that's all. And did he really have to phrase things so provocatively? It would have already been hard to convince them, there was no need to make the job harder. But fine, he would play Zach's game.

"An Ibasan invasion force is going to invade Cyoria at the day of the summer festival. The Cult of the World Dragon intends to release a primordial in the center of the city while the defenders are distracted. The mayor of Knyazov Dveri is a necromancer and intends to harvest all of the souls killed in the conflict in some mad scheme to resurrect his dead wife as a lich and legalize necromancy," Zorian enumerated blandly.

"Eh, that isn't strictly time loop related, so I was going to bring it up afterwards," Zach said dismissively.

A long, uncomfortable silence descended upon the room. Both Xvim and Alanic seemed at loss for words, simply staring at the two of them in indecision and occasionally sharing strange looks between each other.

Zorian imagined that was how he and Zach had looked when they first stumbled into their meeting, so this was kind of poetic punishment in his eyes.

"So," Zach said, clapping his hands. "Any questions?"

- break -

Several hours and many, many questions later, Xvim and Alanic decided they had had enough and stopped the meeting. They didn't get everything in the end, not even close, but at the very least they knew the major details surrounding the time loop mechanism and invasion of Cyoria.

"Damn, that was exhausting," Zach told him afterwards as they wandered the city. "So much for your nice, relaxing restart to calm down and plan, huh? Between this and the Veyers thing, this is turning into a pretty exhausting month."

"I've had worse ones," Zorian said. "But yes, this was not quite what I had in mind when I told you I wanted a restart or two to unwind a bit."

"Do you think it will be worth it in the end, at least?" Zach asked. "They looked rather incredulous towards the end there."

"It's the invasion stuff," Zorian said. "If I hadn't lived through it, I'd have trouble believing it too. It sounds almost as far-fetched as the time loop itself. I'm not worried about that, to be honest. Unlike the time loop, the stuff about Ibasans, Cult of the World Dragon and Sudomir is pretty easy to confirm. I just hope they won't panic and do something stupid when they confirm that part of the story."

In the end, they had to meet with Xvim and Alanic two more times in the next four days, giving further explanations and details to their two increasingly nervous teachers. Like Zorian feared, they fixated more on the invasion of the City and Sudomir's plots than on the time loop. He understood, but was kind of annoyed anyway.

Another thing that was annoying was that Alanic, despite his earlier promise, didn't tell them how to stop his future iterations from getting suspicious at them. His explanation that he wanted to 'check things first' was kind of understandable at the beginning, but now Zorian was starting to feel a little cheated.

He was therefore pleasantly surprised when Alanic came to him on the fifth day of their first talk to give him the promised information.

"So we just have to claim we're junior members of this shady church organization of yours and that's it?" Zorian asked the man incredulously. "You would have just accepted a claim like that?"

"The Mesalian Order is not 'shady,'" Alanic told him with a small glare. Sure, Alanic, sure. "It's just not well known. And of course I would not just accept it. But neither would I drop everything to confirm your identity, especially if you forge a legitimate-looking letter of recommendation and give me something else to focus on. Like Sudomir, for example."

"If I tell you about the mansion, everything blows up soon afterwards," Zorian said, shaking his head. "I'm pretty sure I already told you that."

"So don't tell my future self about the mansion, then," Alanic shrugged. "Use some other piece of information. There is no shortage of crimes that

man is guilty of. I'm sure we can work something out in the coming days."

"Fair enough," Zorian nodded. He took a long look at Alanic, and noticed how tired and disheveled he looked. It didn't look like he was getting a lot of sleep these days. "So. Does this mean you believe us about the time loop?"

Alanic released a long-suffering sigh.

"I don't know what to believe anymore," he said. "But I figure there is no harm in helping you with this. If there is no time loop, the trick will be useless to you. If there *is* a time loop... well, you and Zach seem to be our only hope for a decent ending to all this."

At this point Imaya found them talking and gave Zorian an earful about being a poor host (he hadn't offered Alanic anything to eat or drink). Rather surprisingly, she then managed to talk Alanic into joining them for dinner. He didn't expect that. After prodding him a bit, Alanic admitted that he was so busy checking up on things he and Zach told him that he didn't have a proper meal since yesterday.

Imaya was terribly smug about the whole thing.

"What was that you said?" She asked with a smirk on her face. It was a rhetorical question, of course. They both knew what he had said. "Something about how he was 'obviously' not interested and how it was a 'pointless courtesy'? Seems that old people like me do know a thing or two about being a proper host, eh?"

Zorian let her have her little victory. She did turn out to be correct in this case, after all. In any case, Alanic was back the next day, though he didn't want to eat this time (Zorian had offered; Imaya couldn't say anything now) and instead wanted the two of them to visit Lukav about something.

"Are you sure we shouldn't have taken Zach with us as well?" Zorian asked as they put some distance from Imaya's house.

"I want to discuss shifters and the primordial," Alanic said. "From what I understood of your story, Zach has nothing to contribute there that he didn't hear from you first. I can't see a reason to bring him along. Unless you think he'll be insulted he's left out of the talks?"

Zorian considered it. If they were doing something exciting, like fighting monsters and the like, then maybe. As it was, Zach was already getting annoyed by their talks with Xvim and Alanic, complaining how much time they take and how boring they were. He probably won't care much that Zorian did this without him.

"No, probably not," he said, shaking his head. "I'll just fill him in later about what we talked about."

"Good. Let's hurry to the edge of the city so we can teleport to Lukav's place," Alanic said.

"There is no need," Zorian said with a self-satisfied smile. "Let's just find a deserted alley and I'll teleport us out straight out of the city. The teleport beacon hasn't been able to stop me for quite some time now."

If Alanic was surprised by his claim, he did not show it. Zorian supposed it was a minor thing after the revelations in the past few days. They found a sufficiently isolated place and soon arrived not far from Lukav's house, just outside the village he lived in.

He spoke with Alanic while they walked, the warrior priest telling him about some of the theories he had thought up over the past few days. Most of them centered on the release of the primordial from its prison dimension.

"So you think this whole time loop was created to stop the release of this thing?" Zorian said. "I can see where you're coming from. On one hand, both the time loop and the primordial release ceremony are clearly reliant on the planetary alignment to work. It's not a coincidence that those two are happening at roughly the same time. On the other hand, the time loop did start a month earlier than it was supposed to, for some reason. Each restart just happens to end at the time of the primordial's release. And on top of it all, the one time the primordial was released prematurely, the time loop immediately reset itself on its own."

"Seems like an open and shut case to me," Alanic pointed out.

"Nothing is open and shut about this time loop business," Zorian sighed.

"If you say so," Alanic said. "We're almost there. Let me do the talking in the beginning."

As it turned out, this was not the first time Alanic talked to Lukav about the topic. He had already told his friend about some of the things he found out from Zorian – specifically, the part where a group was trying to sacrifice shifter children in order to set a primordial loose into the world – and asked for his advice on tracking down the sacrifices before the ritual takes place. Lukav asked a lot of questions, and eventually Alanic grew annoyed and decided to just bring Zorian along on his next visit to clarify things.

Not that Zorian could truly help Lukav understand the issue, since he didn't truly understand it himself. Primordial essence was almost as big of a mystery to him as it was to Lukav.

"I don't understand why they're killing all these children," Lukav complained. "If the primordial essence is just a key to access the prison dimension, you'd think they needed only a drop of essence to work the magic. They could just... I don't know, bleed them a little?"

"A bridge, not a key," Zorian said. Not that he truly understood what the difference was, but Sudomir had phrased it like that so it was probably

important. "Apparently that means they need as much primordial essence as possible for the ritual to work, so they're draining the victims of everything they have. Partial extraction of life force just doesn't cut it."

"Even if it wasn't necessary, they would have likely killed them in the end," Alanic said. "You don't set up a ritual like that and then leave witnesses afterwards."

In the end, Alanic didn't get what he wanted out of the meeting. He was trying to find a way to track down the sacrifices before the ritual began, as well as a way to locate the exact position of the anchor point of the primordial prison (something more accurate than Zorian's 'inside the Hole, somewhere'). Unfortunately, the only advice Lukav could give him in the end was to try and contact the local shifter tribes for help.

Alanic then left his friend's house, but Zorian stayed behind. He wanted to talk to Lukav about his idea to accelerate his training with the help of transformation potions. The idea was to transform into magical beings with useful special abilities and then use the experiences gained in that form to upgrade his own abilities. He was especially interested in creatures that possessed a form of advanced magic perception, since he was unhappy with his rate of growth there. Xvim claimed he was advancing along 'adequately' there, but Zorian didn't really have time to be merely adequate.

Lukav gave him both the good news and bad news. The good news was that his idea was solid. It was a known training aid, just one that was sparingly used due to extreme expense of such transformation potions. Not an issue for him and Zach. The bad news was that transformation potions like the ones he wanted couldn't be found on the open market. This was the sort of thing you needed good connections and various licenses to obtain. Especially in the sort of quantity he would need.

Fortunately, Lukav was perfectly capable of making potions like that and willing to help Zorian out. All Zorian had to do was bring Lukav an appropriate magical creature in good enough condition and pay a 'moderate fee', and the man was willing to make a transformation potion or two out of it. Any leftovers not used to make Zorian's potions would belong to Lukav.

Zorian had a feeling he was being thoroughly cheated there, but at the end of the day it was just money and he should probably be glad that Lukav was willing to essentially break the law for his sake. He still had an urge to learn how to make transformation potions on his own so he wouldn't have to rely on the man.

Something to think about, at least. He made a note in the list of ideas he was making in his free time and moved on.

- break -

The next couple of days were surprisingly peaceful. Alanic and Xvim agreed to continue teaching them, cutting down on their usual questioning of them whenever they saw them. They were still clearly keeping in contact with each other, discussing the time loop and the invaders, but for now they kept their conclusions to themselves and plotted something in the background. Zorian was a bit concerned about that, but not enough to lose sleep over it. Their minds were sufficiently open for his empathy to work on them, and they didn't feel like they had any malicious intentions towards him and Zach.

Zorian wasn't doing anything substantive during this time, his motivation suffering due to his recent dealings with Xvim and Alanic. He tried his hand at drawing again to pass the time, messed around with theoretical spell formula and learned some new spells from Zach.

He also let Taiven talk him into several rounds of physical combat. Normally he would never agree to something like that, no matter how bored, but recently his golem-making skills had progressed enough that his lack of fighting skills was becoming an issue. He couldn't make golems fight any better so long as he only knew the crudest basics of normal fighting. After talking to Edwin, his fellow golem enthusiast in the class, he had found out that Edwin was (rather reluctantly) taking martial arts lessons to pre-empt this very problem. That was how he met Naim, actually. And no, there was no solution except to learn how to fight the hard way.

Taiven absolutely demolished him, of course. She was superior to him in strength, technique and practical experience. It was not nearly as bad as he feared, though – she actually toned down the violence to something manageable and gave him some solid advice about what he was doing wrong.

She still kind of sucked as a teacher. Zorian was pretty sure the student wasn't supposed to end the lessons covered in bruises. He should look into hiring a proper fighting instructor someday. Maybe Naim knew a good one.

Another thing to add to his list.

- break -

It was another quiet day. Most of Imaya's household, plus Zach and Taiven, were gathered around the kitchen table, playing a game of cards. Since there were only so many players that could join a game at once, and since they were horrible players on their own, Kana and Kirielle were each attached to another person. Kirielle was attached to Zorian, of course, since he was her brother. She gave terrible advice and complained loudly when he didn't listen to her, giving clues to other players as to what his hand looked like. Kana, on the other hand, was sitting in Imaya's lap – Kael was away currently, negotiating some kind of deal with one of the alchemists in the city, so Imaya decided to take her under her wing while she played. The little girl mostly just watched the game, but occasionally Imaya prompted her for advice and she dutifully suggested a card by silently pointing at it with her finger.

Imaya always played the suggested card, no matter how terrible the suggestion. And she was *still* doing better than Zorian and Kirielle.

He wondered if it would be okay if he started glancing at people's thoughts from time to time. It was cheating, but he had Kirielle dragging him

down and they didn't, so it kind of evened out, didn't it?

He studied his opponents a little. Right now, Zach was solidly winning the game. He was kind of suspicious about that, but if his fellow time traveler was cheating somehow, Zorian couldn't figure it out. Imaya was second, despite the occasional 'help' she solicited from Kana. Taiven was in third place, but she had a solid three point lead on him. Considering his current cards and the confidence all three of them radiated, he doubted that was going to change in this game.

"Play this!" Kirielle demanded, pointing at a card. Another poor choice on her part.

He played it anyway. Let her see the consequences of her folly, for once.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Seeing how this was shaping up to be another loss for him, he immediately handed the cards to Kirielle and volunteered to check up on it.

As it turned out, the visitor was Xvim. Apparently his mini-vacation was over.

"Greetings, mister Kazinski," Xvim said. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"No, not really," Zorian said. "Well, sort of. But it's nothing really important so don't worry about it. Please come in."

Surprisingly, Xvim didn't want to jump straight to business like Zorian thought he would. Instead, he accepted Imaya's offer of something to drink (tea) and took the time to talk to everyone in the house (except for Kana, who didn't talk). He got especially interested in Taiven, since he realized halfway through their talk that Zorian had told her about the time loop.

Zorian almost had a panic attack when he realized this – he was virtually certain that he was on the verge of another crisis, and would spend the next few days running damage control. He never actually told Taiven and Kael the whole truth about the time loop, after all. Thankfully, Xvim seemed more interested in the training regimen he was devising for Taiven and his help with Kael's alchemy research, rather than her opinion on time loop mechanics.

Eventually he managed to get Xvim alone for a while and explained to him that she and Kael only know a part of the truth, and that he would appreciate if things stayed that way. Xvim didn't seem to approve, but promised to respect his wishes.

Xvim also used this opportunity to ask why he was never informed about Kael and Taiven during their talks, and Zorian admitted he totally forgot to tell Xvim and Alanic about those two. It wasn't really relevant to 'the whole truth' in his mind. Xvim accepted this explanation without complaint, but still wanted to talk to them about their perspective on things.

In the end he, Zach and Xvim barricaded themselves in Kael's alchemy lab to have a proper talk in peace.

"So. More questions, huh?" Zach said with distaste.

"Yes. But not the kind you are thinking of," Xvim told them. "I actually came here to talk to you about your plans for the future."

"Well, they are still in the process of being made," Zorian admitted. "You have to understand, it has only been a single restart since we found out we're trapped in this world. The lead-up to that was very stressful, and this restart was *supposed* to be something of a short vacation. I have been slowly assembling some kind of plan in my head, but it's still very rough."

Currently, Zorian's plan for moving forward was very simple. Use time loop cheats to amass a lot of funds. Recruit various experts across the city (and perhaps the country and beyond) as their researchers, investigators and teachers. Take over the aranean criminal contacts and see if they could be harnessed for something useful. Trade with aranean settlements for their mind magic secrets. Raid mage guild records and various magical libraries (including the academy library) for information and forbidden magic.

"I think you should use your mind magic more," Xvim told him.

"What?" Zorian frowned. That wasn't advice he heard very often. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you should attack mages and steal their secrets with your mind magic," Xvim told him bluntly. "Not only spells and training methods, but also things you could use to convince them to cooperate with you."

"Are... are you sure you should be giving out that kind of advice?" Zach asked him incredulously.

"You have very little time to catch up to Red Robe and find a way to reach the real world," Xvim said. "Even for me, the enormity of the task in front of you would be rather daunting. You should use the tools you are given."

Wordlessly, Xvim reached into his jacket and handed Zorian a thick notebook. Opening it, Zorian found it full of names, addresses and accompanying short notes.

"There are people that should be able to help you, whether to increase your skills or track down some crucial piece of information or material component. Not all of them will be willing to help you out, however, and sometimes the things you need most out of them, they will not be willing to part with. In such cases... I suggest you employ more aggressive, even illegal persuasion methods."

By the end of Xvim's explanation, the notebook felt incredibly heavy in Zorian's hands. It was just a trick of the mind, he knew, but it didn't help him feel better about it.

"You have no idea what you are asking of me," Zorian told him bitterly, fighting the urge to throw the notebook at Xvim.

"Probably not, no," Xvim agreed. "I was never in your kind of situation in my entire life, and I have serious doubts I would have risen to the challenge if I was. Especially at your age."

"You're asking me to attack people who have done nothing wrong, just because they have something I want," Zorian said. "That kind of stuff changes you. I couldn't even do that to giant spiders without feeling terrible afterwards. And really, I don't want to be the sort of person who became used to stuff like that."

"Then feel free to ignore my advice," Xvim said. "I'm only giving you advice; I have no power over you. If you feel you can do without reaching for methods like these, or that going along with it would cost you something you cannot afford to lose... then don't do it. It's as simple as that."

There was a short silence where Xvim and Zorian stared at each other, Zorian clutching the notebook so tightly in his hand his fingers went white. Zach seemed to be at loss what to do, watching them both uneasily as if waiting for a fight to break out.

Eventually, Xvim broke the standstill by reaching out and pushing Zorian's hand, still clutching the notebook, towards Zorian's chest.

"Keep the notebook, whatever your decision," Xvim said. "It will be useful regardless."

Following that, Xvim politely excused himself and left. After he was gone, Zorian looked at the notebook one last time before slamming it loudly on top of Kael's alchemy table in frustration.

"Worst vacation ever," he announced bitterly.

Zach said nothing.

59. One Step Forward

Chapter 059 One Step Forward

Not too long after Xvim had left the house, Zorian did as well. He had no particular destination in mind, he just wanted to get out of the house for a while. As far as he could tell, it was the only way for him to get some time alone. The rest of the house's inhabitants could tell something had happened between him and Xvim that had greatly upset him and kept prodding him for answers. He knew they meant well, but gods were they annoying.

Their questions were especially inconvenient because he couldn't actually answer any of them. Not without explaining the true nature of the time loop and multiple other things he had been keeping secret from them.

Maybe he had no right to be annoyed. Considering the magnitude of the secrets he was keeping from them, their nosiness was well justified. But he was not in a good mood at the moment and it was hard to be understanding and rational. Best to get away from everyone until he had a chance to cool off.

Zach didn't try to follow after him, thankfully. Zorian made a mental note to thank him for his consideration later.

For a while he simply walked aimlessly through Cyoria's streets, checking out storefronts and watching the people around him. Eventually, though, he grew bored with that and decided to visit some of the more significant places from his past. He checked out his old, academy-provided apartment that he had lived in during the initial restarts (it was now occupied by someone else, as it turned out) and spent some time on the roof of the building, just watching the city and feeling the wind blow over him. He then descended into the dungeon beneath Cyoria and walked through the lifeless corridors of the aranean settlement hidden within it. Finally, he walked over to Hole and spent some time peering into its fathomless depths, idly wondering whether the primordial's prison was placed here because of the Hole or if the Hole was the product of the prison being placed here.

As he departed from the immediate vicinity of the massive mana well, he encountered a small group of cephalic rats hiding in the shadows of a nearby building. With him no longer trying to mess up the invasion and with so many things happening in a short period of time, he almost forgot about them. He was pretty sure his mind magic had long since surpassed the swarm's ability to hurt him, so they didn't frighten him the way they once had. Hmm...

On a whim, he extended a telepathic probe into one of the rats, trying to start a conversation with the collective mind of the swarm. Maybe he could bribe or blackmail it into switching sides? Or at least get it to gather information for him as well as for the invaders – it would hardly be the first time a spy worked for multiple sides...

Connecting to the collective was easy. Trivial, even. Due to the way the swarm mind worked, it couldn't really use mental shields the way he was using them. Instead, it relied on redundancy of individual rat minds and the sheer psychic might of its combined self when faced with hostile mind images.

Talking to the collective, on the other hand, was proving to be as difficult as he had feared it would be. The swarm treated his every contact as an attack, striking back at him whenever he established a telepathic link and cutting off individual rats from the greater whole when they realized their 'counterattack' was getting them nowhere.

In the end, when Zorian refused to stop his contact attempts and gradually ramped up the aggressiveness of his telepathic probes, the swarm mind just plain wrote off the entire group he had cornered and disconnected them all from the collective rather than continue dealing with him.

Only mildly disappointed by the outcome, Zorian continued on, not even bothering to kill the frightened, suddenly isolated cephalic rats. What would be the point, really? The idea of making the cephalic rats work for him stuck with him, though. What should he do to get the swarm to hear him out, though? Just keep pestering it like he just did until the swarm grew sufficiently annoyed with him to actually start talking back? If Zorian was in their shoes, he'd break the silence after a while to tell the jerk to knock it off. Just in case it actually worked.

Still, maybe he was assigning excessively human thinking to what was a composite mind made out of rats. If he wanted to talk to the swarm mind, he might have to actually capture one of the rats and bind it harder to the collective. Make it impossible for them to cut the connection and abandon it.

Sitting on a nearby bench and taking out a notebook, Zorian started to sketch a spell formula setup that would 'lock' a cephalic rat to its collective. A metal cage with three overlapping wards that should... no, wait, that wouldn't work. Maybe he should just make his own connection instead of trying to strengthen the existing one... if he placed a small marker on five to six rats, it should create a resonance that...

A while later he had to reluctantly put his plotting aside, because it was getting dark and it was time to start going back home. It would take a couple of days to finalize the design anyway. And he was feeling a lot better now too, so there was no need to stay away from Imaya's house any longer.

He found it curious that making designs for contacting cephalic rats had been satisfying. What did he like so much about that? After thinking about it for a while, he figured it was because that was a problem he actually knew how to solve. He wasn't sure which one of his ideas was the best solution, but it wasn't like his time loop problems, which seemed completely intractable. He had no idea how to track down the five Keys, and

even if he did they wouldn't automatically tell him how to enter the real world along with Zach. He had no idea how to track down a kid that couldn't be found by his own Noble House. Not only did he not have the skills necessary to accomplish these feats, he didn't even know which skills he needed for that.

With that in mind, was the sort of thing Xvim advocated even necessary? He had flipped through the notebook Xvim had given him as he wandered around. Some of the people Xvim had recommended were experts at divination and mind magic, which might potentially help him gather information. But most of them were more oriented towards magic in general.

What he had was largely an information problem. Would being a better mage help with that?

It might. What were the chances that the Keys, once found, could be acquired without using a lot of magical skill and effort? Minuscule, knowing his luck. And the way out of the fake world, whatever it ended up being, would surely demand far greater skills than he could currently marshal.

And that's without considering the issue of Red Robe and the fact they would have to deal with him somehow when (if) they got out of the time loop.

It was dark when he finally returned, and when he entered the house, he found Imaya still awake and waiting for him.

Honestly, he just didn't understand that woman.

"You know you didn't have to wait for me, don't you?" Zorian asked her, exasperated. "I do have a key of my own."

Even if he had forgotten it, it would have been childishly easy to unlock the door with magic. He could have even relocked it the same way after he went inside.

"I know," she nodded, unbothered by his tone. "But I wanted to wait for you anyway. Do you feel better now?"

"I do," Zorian admitted. He didn't really accomplish anything, but he felt calmer anyway.

"Where did you go? Just wandering around?" Imaya asked knowingly.

"Pretty much," Zorian said with a shrug. "I bought Kirielle a hairclip, climbed to the top of a building, visited a graveyard, stared into a hole and tried to talk to rats."

"You bought your sister a gift?" she asked, curious. "What's the occasion?"

Zorian gave her a strange look. Out of all the things he said, that was what she chose to focus on?

"It was cheap and I felt like it," he said. He sat down opposite to his landlord, not really in the mood for going to sleep yet. He wasn't tired. "Why did you wait for me? Aren't I just a tenant to you?"

"I'm not sure. I have heard about these 'tenants'. They are supposed to be these terrible creatures that come home drunk and late, destroy your walls and furniture and never pay rent on time," said Imaya, voice tinged with amusement.

"Slander," Zorian said blandly.

"In all seriousness, I guess you're right that I care too much," she said, sighing lightly. "It's Kana's and Kirielle's fault, I think. They make me think of children I always wish I had."

Zorian gave her a mildly surprised look. Not because her wanting to have children was so unbelievable, but because in all the restarts he had known her, she rarely talked about herself like that. He almost asked her why she was still single if she wanted kids, before he remembered Ilsa's warning not to discuss marriage or husbands with her.

"Don't look at me like that," she said. "It's natural to want kids, you know? I know young people like you don't want to think about it, but that will change as you age."

"I didn't say anything," Zorian said, shaking his head. "Though... I apologize in advance for being so brazen, but if you want children so much, why don't you just *have* them. Sure, some people would judge you for being a single mother, but..."

He was interrupted by Imaya bursting into laughter.

"Oh, that is kind of funny," she said. "I guess Ilsa told you not to mention my husband and you jumped to conclusions, hmm? But no, being single isn't the problem. It's the fact I'm infertile."

Oh.

"My husband left me when we found that out," Imaya said. "He wanted kids too, and I couldn't give him any. So there – now you know about that too. It's not that big of a secret, and I'm mostly over it, so don't worry about avoiding any mention of it. I'm not as delicate as Ilsa thinks I am."

She seemed to consider things for a moment.

"Though don't mention it on a whim, either," she added. "It's a depressing topic."

"I understand," Zorian nodded. Why would he keep bringing it up for no reason, anyway? "Just one question. You being infertile... is this a problem of not being able to afford the cure, or it being literally incurable?"

"The second, I think. The healers at regular hospitals certainly don't know of any cure that would help. If it exists, it's something that would take a budget of a small state to track down and buy," Imaya said.

Zorian filed that away in the back of his head and moved on to other topics. Imaya's problem, while tragic, was not very high on his list of concerns. Still, it wouldn't hurt to look for any miracle cures when he conducted his investigation of the Keys and the like. He was pretty sure Kael would appreciate something like that too, and powerful medicines might not be useless to him and Zach either.

He spent the next half an hour talking to Imaya, mostly about Kirielle and what she had been doing all these days while Zorian was away. He was relieved to hear she was surprisingly well-behaved – he had been absent more often in this restart in comparison to others, and he was afraid she would act out because of it. The only issue was that she had apparently broken a couple of plates a few days ago and never bothered to tell him about it. It was annoying - if she had told him immediately, he could have probably fixed them up with magic. As it was, the pieces were dumped into the trash and were long gone now, so he would have to pay Imaya back for the plates with money.

Not that he couldn't afford it, but still. He was so giving the little brat an earful tomorrow.

- break -

The next day found Zorian sitting in his room, surrounded by a veritable mountain of books. Some of the books were mundane, borrowed from the library or bought from the stores. Others were brought over from the book cache held in the aranean treasury, or stolen from the private collections of the cultists working with the invaders.

He was looking for something, anything, that might allow him to grow fast enough without resorting to Xvim's idea of advancement.

Unfortunately, he had found little so far. As expected, really – if there was an obvious way to gather magical skills and power faster than normal, it would already be in widespread use.

He was actually rather glad when the door opened and Zach walked inside, since it gave him the excuse to take a break from his self-appointed task. He was kind of amused to see Zach flipping through a book of his own, though. It wasn't often that Zach decided to read a book, especially one as thick as what he was currently holding.

"Something interesting?" Zorian asked him curiously.

"Not really, no," Zach replied. "It's a medical textbook. Kael gave it to me. He has been bothering me for a couple of days now, saying that the time loop is absolutely perfect for medical research and begging me to invest more of my time in practicing my medical magic. Apparently *someone* told him that I am good at medical magic."

He gave Zorian a small glare while saying the last part. It had no effect on Zorian. He had no reason to keep that a secret from Kael, and he was pretty sure Zach could have made Kael back off easily enough if he really tried.

Instead he decided to change the subject and get to the probable point of this visit.

"What do you think about Xvim's idea?" Zorian asked.

Zach visibly scowled, throwing his book on top of a nearby book stack before replying.

"It makes me uncomfortable," he said. "Extremely uncomfortable. That's the kind of stuff Red Robe did to me, didn't he? But that doesn't mean you shouldn't do it. I'm pretty biased here, but I can see Xvim's reasoning. If you feel you have to do this, I won't try and stop you."

"Did you ever do something like that when you were first gathering strength?" Zorian asked.

"Not like this," Zach said, shaking his head. "I didn't like mind magic much, even back then. But I did attack people and looked through their private libraries and spell collections. I usually had a good reason to attack these people, though. Maybe you can do the same? Limit yourself to people you can justify attacking?"

"That's kind of what I'm already doing," Zorian said. "Maybe not as aggressively as I could be, but only because I lack the time to truly dedicate myself to it. Xvim's whole point is that this wasn't going to be enough. That I need to take what I need, regardless of how justified the target is."

Zach hummed thoughtfully, thinking about that for a couple of seconds. Zorian waited patiently, curious about what his response would be.

"You know, most of my magic doesn't come from raiding other people's secrets," Zach finally said. "The majority of it I accumulated by simply paying, begging and annoying various experts into teaching me. Granted, some of it is only possible because I'm the last of the Novedas. Before its fall, my House had a habit of financing talented mages from poorer backgrounds while they were still beginning their careers, and quite a few such people still live and feel they owe Noveda a debt because of it. Me being the last of them also tugs at people's heartstrings in some cases, as does

the fact my guardian practically dismantled the House and robbed me of their legacy. Plus, some of them wish for fame that comes from teaching the last Noveda, or hope to profit from ingratiating themselves to me, gambling on me restoring the House to glory and paying them back afterwards. Between my money, family legacy and fame, it usually isn't too difficult to talk people into teaching me. Maybe we can leverage that to get some of these people to cooperate willingly?"

"That is an interesting idea," Zorian said after a short pause. "I'm not sure how effective it would really be, but it's worth a try. In fact, it kind of reminds me of the fact I do have some small amount of reflected fame myself, courtesy of my older brother. It might be a good idea to see if I can get something with that. That didn't work too well for me in the past, but back then I clearly wasn't a magical prodigy like Daimen. Now, I can effectively pass myself off as a second coming of Daimen by demonstrating some of the magical proficiency I picked up in the time loop."

Zach gave him a surprised look.

"Yeah, I know," Zorian said unhappily. "It kind of rankles to rely on Daimen like that, but desperate times call for desperate measures."

Zach just shook his head in amusement, not saying anything.

"What about black rooms?" Zach asked after a while. "Couldn't we get extra time using them?"

"Actually, yes," Zorian agreed. "I've been checking them out and I think we can definitely trick the operators beneath Cyoria into letting us use the room once per restart."

"Just once?" Zach frowned.

"Black rooms are *really* mana intensive," Zorian said. "The facility beneath Cyoria can activate their black rooms twice a month, but the first activation is really inconveniently timed for our purposes. It happens right at the beginning of the restart. There is no way we can make use of it then, unless we stage an all-out assault on the facility as the very first thing in the restart. And even if that succeeds, that would surely cause the facility to shut down and postpone the second planned activation, so it wouldn't actually gain us anything."

"Ugh," Zach mumbled unhappily. "But that still means we can essentially double our time, doesn't it? A single activation gives us an entire month for the cost of a day."

"In a way, that's true," said Zorian. "But it's a month during which we cannot access any experts or books we didn't think to bring with us in advance. It's useful to be sure, and we should abuse it for all it's worth, but it's not nearly as useful as another actual restart would be."

"Maybe we can find some more black rooms elsewhere and commandeer them too?" Zach offered.

"It doesn't hurt to look for them," Zorian agreed. "In any case, we won't be able to use the chamber beneath Cyoria in this restart. We already missed the activation day, unfortunately. But starting in the next restart, we should plan to take advantage of it every single time to maximize training time."

"Yeah," Zach agreed. "Though I can't help but think those will be some very boring months spent in there..."

"Probably," Zorian agreed. Especially for Zach, since he didn't look like the sort of person who handled being cooped in a small room for weeks very well. "We'll see how it goes in the next restart and adjust the plan from there. If it doesn't work, we'll scrap the idea."

If you spot this tale on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

"I know what you're thinking. I'm not that impatient," Zach huffed. "I'm not going to throw away a golden opportunity like that just because I'm a little bored."

After a quick discussion about what to bring to the black rooms to pass the time (Zach insisted the best answer to that is 'girlfriends', but reluctantly gave up on the idea when Zorian started enumerating problems with that idea), they lapsed into a short silence. Zach looked around the room, taking in the books Zorian surrounded himself with and even casually flipping through some of them.

"So is there anything else?" Zach asked. "Did you find something worthwhile in this little book fort you made?"

"Not really," Zorian admitted. "Enhancement rituals seem interesting, if we can find the right one. Unfortunately, mages are very secretive about those. A lot of enhancement rituals require a lot of dead test subjects before one can fine-tune them to usability, so mages are leery of admitting they use them or know how to perform them. I think someone high up in the Cult of the World Dragon is very good at those, though, so we might have something there if we can track that person down."

"Don't enhancement rituals require you permanently tie up some of your mana reserves into maintaining them?" Zach asked. "Sounds like a bad deal for you. No offense, but you don't really have that much mana reserve to burn."

"That's why I specified we need to find the right one," said Zorian. "And besides, nobody said it has to be me who makes use of them. You're good now, but it never hurts to get better and your reserves are more than big enough for an enhancement or two."

Zach considered it for a while, before shaking his head.

"I'm leery of messing with my magic like that," he said. "I'm not vetoing the idea, but it would have to be some pretty amazing enhancement to get me interested."

"Fair enough," Zorian shrugged. Indeed, enhancement rituals could be quite dangerous and some may even have effects that linger across restarts, so Zach's hesitation was quite reasonable. "Oh! I been meaning to ask you this, but I keep forgetting. Could you teach me how to cast the simulacrum spell?"

"Uh, no," Zach said. "I did find the spell once, but I couldn't cast it. The scroll said the spell requires the caster to have 'awareness of their own soul', which I couldn't figure out at the time. I suppose this is what Alanic is teaching me how to do right now, but at the time I couldn't figure it out and eventually gave up on learning it."

"Hmm," Zorian hummed thoughtfully. "Well, I can sense my own soul, so I should be able to do it. I don't suppose this scroll is somewhere easy to get to, at least?"

"I don't even remember where I found it," Zach said. He seemed lost in thought for a moment, before shaking his head sadly. "Sorry, but it was a long time ago. I think it was in the sanctum of that lich in Taraman, but it could have easily been in the treasury of that demon-worshipping cult in Tetra or in that secret vault I found under Marbolkano or in a hundred other places."

"Damn," said Zorian. "Well, try to remember. I can't find a detailed description of the spell, but depending on how it works it could greatly improve our efforts."

"Will do," Zach nodded. Before he could say anything else, though, Kirielle barged into the room. Posing dramatically for no real reason, she announced that he had another visitor.

Yesterday it was Xvim, and it was Alanic's turn to come and talk to him.

- break -

After a short round of greetings, Zorian ushered Alanic into his room, where Zach had been waiting for them, and retook his position on the bed, surrounded by his books. Alanic flipped through some of them, frowning at the dodgier works he stole from the cultists but saying nothing.

"Xvim visited me yesterday," Zorian said when Alanic didn't seem like he would start talking any time soon.

"I know," Alanic said. There was no emotion in his voice, and Zorian couldn't feel anything from his mind.

"I hope this isn't an attempt to pressure me to take his advice," he warned.

"Heavens forbid," Alanic told him seriously, giving him a grave look. "I didn't agree with his decision to begin with, so why would I pressure you to go along with him?"

"You don't approve?" Zach asked, surprised.

"I'm a priest," Alanic said. "Why would I approve of attacking innocent people for magical power?"

"Forgive me for saying this, but you haven't exactly been a shining beacon of morality in the previous restarts I've known you," Zorian said, frowning.

"Towards my enemies, perhaps," Alanic shrugged. "But these are not the kind of tactics one should use on allies and those who haven't done anything wrong."

For a few seconds, there was a silence in the room as everyone digested this statement. After those couple of moments passed, however, Alanic seemed to deflate and closed his eyes in defeat.

"That said," he began. "I have to say what you've told me is both terrifying and depressing. Without your intervention, both Lukav and me end up dead at the start of the month. Even if the invasion of Cyoria fails, it will still take thousands of lives, most of which will have their souls captured and fed to Sudomir's necromantic device. The aftermath could easily spawn another round of splinter wars, and I don't even want to think what this Red Robe of yours would do if allowed to run unchecked."

"What's your point?" Zach frowned. "We know damn well the stakes are high."

"I'm getting to it," Alanic said, giving Zach an unamused look. Zach just rolled his eyes at him. Rather than argue further with Zach, Alanic turned back towards Zorian. "From what I understand, a crucial part of you getting out of this fake world we're trapped in is finding these five Keys, yes? And the marker on your soul is supposed to be able to sense them, but you don't know how."

"Correct," Zorian confirmed.

"In that case, it is imperative that you learn how to sense your soul better. If we're lucky, this will allow you to understand your marker better and unlock this critical ability," Alanic said.

"But I'm already doing that," Zorian pointed out. "You're already teaching me how to sense my soul better, are you not?"

"I'm teaching you using the safest method I know of," Alanic said. "The kind I would naturally use when a teenager comes to me for help in learning how to defend himself against soul magic. It is not the fastest one, however. Not by a long shot. The method I have in mind is absolutely lethal if done even slightly wrong and leaves a permanent mark on the user's body, and I would have never suggested it to anyone under normal circumstances. But these are not normal circumstances, and if you're telling the truth about the time loop then the downsides are minimal. The only danger for you is that you might cut your restart short if you get it wrong."

Not exactly a small downside in Zorian's opinion. Still, he was willing to risk it at least once to gauge how viable it was.

"How much faster is this new method?" Zorian asked.

"A lot faster," Alanic said, insisting on being frustratingly vague. "Additionally, there is a level of personal soul awareness you would have never been able to reach using the safe method I'm currently teaching you. Only by utilizing some of the more extreme methods, like the one I'm suggesting, could you truly master your skill at sensing your own soul."

"Well," Zorian said after a short pause. "I'm definitely interested, then."

"Yeah, not really much of a choice, isn't it?" Zach said. "If it's like that, of course we're going to go for it."

Alanic gave Zach a strange look.

"I'm afraid this offer is only for Zorian for now," Alanic said, shaking his head. "As you are now, you would have never survived the ritual. You need a certain amount of existing soul awareness to undergo this training successfully."

"What?" Zach protested. "No accelerated learning for me? That's not fair! I'm perfectly fine with risking my life, you know!"

"No, Zorian is the one risking his life," Alanic said. "You would just be throwing it away for no gain. You can't afford to be so wasteful with your life. None of us can."

One giant argument (and some shouting) later, Zach grudgingly accepted that Alanic wasn't going to let him go through the life-threatening training along with Zorian. Zach would still accompany them to the training site, but he would simply continue on with his current lessons rather than what Zorian was getting.

Strangely, Zorian found himself actually enthusiastic at the prospect of this life-threatening training. In all honesty, soul awareness training was some of the most boring magic training he had the displeasure to experience and he would gladly take the chance Alanic was offering. He could understand Zach's frustration perfectly.

He just hoped Alanic's faith in his ability wasn't misplaced. At the very least, he was sure Zach would never let him forget it if he actually ended up dying because of a measly training exercise.

- break -

Two days later, Alanic led two of them to a completely new place, even to Zorian. It wasn't inside the temple Alanic lived in, or any other place he had brought Zorian over to in the previous restarts. It was a literal hole in the ground in the middle of nowhere (well, in the middle of the poorly-visited forest in any case), which opened to a dark, dusty staircase. Light-suppressing wards were etched into the walls of the staircase, making both magical and mundane illumination impossible. They had to use their mana to sense their environment, slowly descending down the rough, uneven stairs while cursing whomever built the place. Probably Alanic, if the surety with which he moved inside was of any indication. If he didn't build the place, he was certainly very familiar with it.

In any case, once they finally reached the bottom, they arrived inside a spacious, perfectly square room. This one wasn't magically darkened, but Alanic forbade them from casting any lighting spells, insisting they use torches instead, so it ended up being pretty damn dark anyway.

"It's a ritual room," Alanic said. "And the ritual I'm about to do is disastrous if done wrong. Any magic not related to the ritual could warp it in undesirable ways. Magical lighting should be safe, but it's best not to risk it."

"This whole setup is sinister as hell," Zach complained. "If Zorian didn't vouch for you, I'd probably be attacking you by now."

Alanic said nothing, instead focusing on lighting all the torches around the room with smooth, practiced motions. As the dim light of the scattered torches filled the room, it became obvious that there was a complex spell formula etched into the floor, arranged into several concentric circles.

"So can you explain now what this ritual is all about?" Zorian asked, staring at the spell formula in an attempt to understand what it did. The outermost circle was simply a classical mana barrier that sought to isolate the inside of the circle from ambient mana – a common addition to ritual setups in order to minimize the interference of outside forces upon the magic being done. The innermost circle, on the other hand, seemed to be some kind of anchor, preventing the contents from going... uh, what?

"The point of the exercise is for you to die for a time," Alanic said, turning towards him. All the torches had been lit by this point.

Zorian looked at the inner circle again. That was supposed to anchor his soul, wasn't it? Prevent it from simply moving on...

"More specifically," Alanic continued, "I will eject your soul from your body while allowing you to retain awareness of yourself. By becoming a

pure soul with no body to distract you, you gain unparalleled awareness of your soul and how it works. Partially because there is no body to distract you from concentrating on your soul, and partially because pulling a soul out of the body makes its structure and quirks less muddled and easier to study.”

“See, what did I tell you?” Zach whispered to him. “He *is* trying to kill you. Pay up.”

“We never put any stakes on the bet,” Zorian whispered back. “And you’re right only on a technicality – the point of the exercise is for me to return back to life in the end. I think.”

“If you won’t take this with utmost seriousness, I’m stopping this right now!” Alanic said angrily.

Zach quickly mimicked shutting up and Zorian schooled his features into a properly severe expression.

Alanic stared at them for a few seconds to make sure they were properly contrite and then continued on.

“The longer you remain outside the body, the more time you have to hone your skills and the clearer your soul will become to you,” Alanic said. “But the longer you stay outside the body, the more tenuous the link that tethers your soul to your body will become. It is a fine balancing act, and the price of being incautious and guessing it wrong is death.”

Alanic paused for a second.

“There is still time for you to back out,” he finally said.

What, seriously? Like he would back out *now*.

“I’m willing to risk it,” Zorian said, shaking his head. “What do I need to do?”

“Go sit in the center of the ritual diagram,” Alanic instructed. “Before we do this, we must make preparations. Several spells have to be cast on you. One is a spell that will tether your soul to your body, but not pull you back in unless you will it. Another is a spell that will make a sort of magical brain for your soul to think with, allowing you to retain awareness as a soul without a body. If any of them is done wrong, you will just die...”

For the next fifteen minutes, Alanic kept explaining the mechanics of the ritual to Zorian, and even quizzed him several times to make sure he was paying attention. It was a bit tiresome, but he supposed that for something this dangerous it paid to be overcautious. Alanic felt that he should be able to handle the ritual, but stressed that there were no certainties when it came to things like this. A procedure like this was never really safe.

One thing was interesting, though. Zorian couldn’t help but notice how much of the setup clearly relied upon the leader of the ritual having soul sight and being able to cast soul magic on the trainee. This was not something an expert in soul defense could set up – it was full-blown necromancy. Another clue that Alanic might have a bit of a dark past...

“Oh, and one last thing before we start,” Alanic said. “As you may be aware, bodies of living beings are not designed to work without a soul. Having your soul absent from your body does terrible things to it. The damage done by a person’s life force running wild throughout one’s body is insidious and hard to recover from. Many people have permanently ruined their health through abusing this method of honing their soul awareness. Due to the way the time loop resets your body, you should be immune to this long-term damage. However, this will do nothing to shield you from the immediate aftermath of separating your soul from your body for a while. Even if everything goes flawlessly, you will wake up feeling incredibly sick and in terrible pain.”

“I see,” said Zorian.

“I’m telling you this so you don’t freak out and hurt yourself,” Alanic continued. “It would be best if you don’t try to talk or move after waking up. Just endure the pain and the sickness for a while and wait for your body to re-establish equilibrium.”

Zorian nodded, already dreading the experience.

“Ready?”

No.

“Yes,” he said, sounding more certain than he actually felt.

There was no warning. With a sudden movement, Alanic clasped his hand around the top of Zorian’s head and *pulled*.

Only once had Zorian felt such pain, and that was when Quatach-Ichl had tried to fuse his soul to Zach’s. He tried to scream and found that he had no control over his body anymore.

His vision grew dark around the edges, his body felt numb and unfeeling, and all the sound in the room gradually disappeared. His awareness quickly shrank into a single point, until there was nothing left.

And then there was something. His soul blazed into his awareness, bright and clear in a way it never had been before. He panicked at first, struggling to understand what had happened to him and instinctively flailing around for some leverage with nonexistent limbs and finding nothing. After a moment, though, he remembered what was happening and what Alanic's instruction said – the very first thing he had to do was find the link that tethered his soul to his body. He must never let it out of his sight, lest he stay this way for too long without realizing.

He was alone – alone in a way that was difficult to put into words. He could sense his soul, but everything outside the outer boundary of his soul was an empty, silent, featureless void. It was absolutely terrifying, and he felt a powerful urge to return to his body immediately.

But he didn't. Gradually he calmed down and got to work.

He didn't know how long he stayed as an aware soul, tracing the structure of his soul and the way it interacted with the marker woven into it. It was hard to tell the passage of time in his current form. It didn't really matter if it was just moments, though, because this one visit told him so many things... everything was so much clearer and more obvious in this form, and he could already see-

The tether! It was weakening!

After fumbling in panic for a moment, Zorian activated the tether and his tether and soul rushed down to reunite with his body.

- break -

After going through Alanic's new soul awareness training a couple of times, Zorian could finally say with certainty that coming back to life was worse than dying. Having Alanic rip his soul out of his body hurt like hell, but only for a moment. The pain and the sick feeling from returning to life lasted for hours, only slowly fading away.

He had to give Alanic some credit, though – it was effective. Very effective. After the fourth session, Zorian finally managed to locate the part of the marker that was in charge of detecting the Keys. It turns out the reason it was so hard to puzzle out was that it didn't work over unlimited distances – it could only detect a marker when it was relatively close. That meant that, unfortunately, they couldn't just follow the path laid out by their marker in tracking them down. But at least they would know now if they got close to one of them.

None of the Keys were around Cyoria. He had checked just to be sure, since he would have felt like an idiot if it turned out there was a Key just under his nose and he had never bothered to check.

Aside from that, he also identified a marker function that would tell him exactly how many restarts they had left until the collapse. They already knew that by now, courtesy of the Guardian, but it was nice to have a way to check that information at a whim.

In other news, Zach was kind of jealous about Zorian's increased soul awareness and corresponding marker control. He was working extra hard on his basic training and was not at all discouraged from following in Zorian's footsteps once Alanic pronounced him as ready, despite Zorian describing to him in loving detail how horrible the procedure felt.

Zorian refrained from noting that Zach had only just started his basic training in soul awareness, and that it would take multiple restarts before he reached the level Alanic wanted him to be at.

In any case, the restart was nearing its end, so preparations had to be made. Kael once again brought him his research notebooks to be carried over into the next restart, and Zorian also updated his own notes, as well as the outcome of Kirielle's and Taiven's training regimen for the restart.

And this time, there were new additions to his collection – both Xvim and Alanic brought him their own notebooks to transfer into the next restart. Well, Xvim actually brought more than one...

"I must admit you've outmatched me with your ingenuity in this regard," Xvim told him. "I would have never thought to just bring over entire notebooks by storing them in my mind. I trust there is no issue with giving me the same deal that you gave your friend, yes?"

"It's fine," Zorian said. Since he no longer carried the matriarch's memory packet, he had plenty of free space for more notebooks. He looked at Alanic standing beside his mentor. "What about you? Are you sure you only want to transfer this one little notebook?"

"It's all I need," Alanic said, shaking his head. "Unlike Xvim and Kael, I don't intend to use the time loop to conduct some kind of research. I just need facts and names, so that I waste less of your time the next time you tell me about the time loop."

"I guess we shouldn't give this to you if we don't plan to tell you about the time loop in that restart, then," Zorian mused.

"Obviously," Alanic agreed. "But if you want to undergo the same training you just did, you're going to have to tell me about it or else I'd never agree to it."

"I already guessed that," Zorian said. "Well, if that's all, then this is it. This is probably the last time we will speak to each other before time resets itself."

Xvim and Alanic shared an uneasy look between each other.

"Actually, there is something else," Alanic said. "Me and Xvim plan to lead a combat group into the Hole during the invasion in order to disrupt the so-called 'summoning'."

"Well, I'm not going to stop you," Zorian said, confused at where this was going.

"I know," Alanic said, giving him a look implying that he was being stupid. "I want you to come with us. If we can fight our way through to the ritual site, we can identify the mages in charge of the summoning and you can then interrogate them in future restarts. There is also a high chance that leaders of the local Cult of the World Dragon will be there too. All in all, this is definitely information you should be interested in."

"I am," Zorian confirmed. "And yes, what you say makes sense. I guess I just wasn't thinking of the implications of what you were planning. I guess I'm just so used to failing against the invaders when trying to fight them directly that I just unconsciously discounted the chance you might succeed. You know you're going to have to fight Quatach-Ichl if you want to reach the ritual site, right?"

"We know," Xvim said. "He might be old and mighty, but he's still just one mage."

"Well, one mage commanding a whole army of monsters and underlings," Zorian noted. "But fine, we'll give it a shot."

"Good," Alanic said. "Do you think Zach will also come?"

"Are you kidding me? He'd never forgive us if we excluded him out of a good fight like that," Zorian said. "Just tell me where the meeting point is and we'll be there."

- break -

When Alanic told him he and Xvim would come at the head of a combat group, Zorian had assumed they meant twenty or so mages as the main combat force and maybe twice that many riflemen to serve as support. Instead, when he and Zach came to the meeting point they found almost a hundred men, all of them mages. Some of them were indeed carrying rifles, but Alanic explained that they were mages carrying firearms rather than regular soldiers.

Xvim and Alanic clearly took their warnings about the invaders and Quatach-Ichl very seriously, which was a good sign.

In any case, Alanic (who was the overall commander of the group, with Xvim being content to follow the man's lead) decided not to waste their strength by fighting through the city to reach the Hole. Instead, the entire group hid themselves near their destination and waited for the invasion to begin.

"The point of this operation is to catch the leaders of the attack red-handed," Alanic explained when one of the mages asked why they weren't attacking the summoners immediately. "We must wait for the attack to begin and gather steam, or else they might decide not to stick around the ritual site."

Xvim and Alanic had clearly been talking to the defenders of the city, making preparations, because when the fighting started, it immediately turned fierce around the Hole. Defenders focused much of their efforts into fighting the invaders there, and the invaders reacted to this by concentrating their forces around the Hole even more.

"We'll wait for the city defenders to soften the invaders up a little before making our move," Alanic announced, dispassionately watching the carnage.

Zorian was watching it too, scanning the crowd from any sign of Quatach-Ichl. The ancient lich was prone to teleporting often when he fought for real, which made it a chore to keep tabs on him, even from this distance.

"Every time I lose sight of him I keep expecting him to suddenly appear behind me and blast me in the back," Zorian admitted to Zach quietly.

"Yeah, I know how you feel," Zach replied back equally quietly. "I've fought against other liches and won, but I could never really beat that son of a bitch. And he does have a tendency to pull crap like that on you when you least expect it."

Idly, Zorian began to do the same thing he often did these days to calm his nerves – he checked up on the Key detection mechanism in his marker. He never got a valid response from it, of course, but it reminded him that he had actually succeeded in something recently, and that usually helped his mood.

Except he actually did feel something now. Excited, he focused on what the marker was telling him and-

"Fuck," Zorian hissed, suddenly stiffening.

"What?" Zach asked worriedly.

"I found Quatach-Ichl," Zorian said bitterly, pointing at a spot to the left of them. The lich was just standing next to a building, placidly watching the battle unfold without bothering to intervene.

"Oh," Zach said, quickly noticing the lich now that he knew where to look. "What the hell is he doing just standing by the sidelines like that?"

"I don't know," Zorian said. "I don't really care at the moment to be honest. I found one of the Keys."

"Oh?" Zach said, his mood rising.

“You know that crown Quatach-Ichl is always wearing?” Zorian asked.

Zach looked at him blankly for a moment before his face twisted in a grimace.

“Oh you’ve got to be kidding me,” Zach complained.

But unfortunately, Zorian wasn’t kidding. According to his marker, Quatach-Ichl was wearing the crown of the Ilkosian emperors, one of the five Keys they needed to assemble to leave the time loop.

“This restart just keeps getting better and better,” Zorian sighed.

60. Into the Abyss

Chapter 060 Into the Abyss

Zorian didn't have time to ponder Quatach-Ichl and his crown for long. Right after his brief conversation with Zach, a trio of artillery spells impacted the enemy lines in front of them, kicking up plumes of dust into the air and throwing the battlefield into chaos. Evidently that was meant to provide a smokescreen for their group, because Alanic announced they would begin their advance towards the Hole immediately after.

The entire battlegroup surged forward like a coiled spring, eager to take advantage of the distraction. Zorian found himself struggling to keep up – most of the mages in the battlegroup were physically fit adults, and Zorian was physically unimpressive even by the standard of his own peers. It took everything out of him to match their speed and not fall behind. Even then, he would have never lasted more than a handful of seconds if he hadn't drunk a stamina potion before the battle.

Zorian had always known that being physically fit was an important requirement for a battlemage, if only because that's what the academy named as the reason behind forcing first-year and second-year students to take physical education classes. Before the time loop, however, he had never really understood *why* it was important. It wasn't about the ability to take hits or having backup when someone managed to force you into close-quarter combat, though these concerns weren't wholly irrelevant either – it was about mobility. A physically fit person could move faster around the battlefield while carrying more and tiring less.

It was only in moments such as these that Zorian realized how important that was and how much his weak, scrawny body limited him. He really had to figure out some kind of workaround for that, but a simple stamina potion would do for now. At least he wasn't the only one who had neglected his body – Xvim also had to take the aforementioned potion to keep up with the group, which made Zorian feel a little better about himself.

As they ran, Zorian noticed that Quatach-Ichl was gone from his spot. A quick consultation with his marker determined that the ancient lich had teleported himself a fair distance from the battle site, roughly in the direction from which the artillery spells came.

Well. That was... really unfortunate for those artillery mages. Looks like they would get no more support from them. However, since every second of Quatach-Ichl's absence was good for Zorian and his group, it was probably better this way. Was he callous for thinking that way? Probably. However, maybe it was because the end of the restart was so close or because it was hard to feel sorry for people he never met, but he couldn't help but take a strictly pragmatic stance about this. He directed a silent thanks to the mages for their sacrifice and then put them out of his mind.

Their approach was noticed very quickly, despite the distraction, and a portion of the enemy force broke off to confront them. The enemy organization was still in disarray from the artillery magic attack, so the response force was less numerous than it could have been. Even so, they were pitted against about one hundred or so mages, twenty war trolls, a regiment of skeleton soldiers and a small iron beak flock.

Easily manageable, in Zorian's estimation. Though Alanic's entire battlegroup had a little less than one hundred people, they were better equipped and probably more skilled than the average invader mage. Plus, they had Zach and Zorian on their side. The question was less whether or not they could sweep the enemy forces aside, but whether they could do so before Quatach-Ichl came back.

Soon, spells started flying on both sides. The enemy mages struck first, hurling wave after wave of magical projectiles at the approaching battlegroup. Fire bolts, beams of electricity and javelins of force were concentrated upon specific parts of the battlegroup and timed together so they would arrive at their targets simultaneously in an attempt to overwhelm individual defenses with impossible force. In response, the battlegroup stopped advancing at maximum speed and shifted into a staggered advance, the front half of the group halting in place to better shield the whole and counterattack while the back half surged forward. Once the back half of the group overtook the defending half, they switched roles, the previously defending half suddenly advancing towards the enemy while the other half covered them and responded to attacks.

Though such tactics greatly slowed down their advance, they were very effective. Despite repeated attacks, the battlegroup didn't lose a single person as it edged closer and closer to the assembled enemy forces. The incoming projectiles were dispelled, shielded against and intercepted by floating chunks of stone ripped from surrounding roadway. All the while, the battlegroup kept sending out their own waves of attack spells at the invaders, scattering the attacks across the entire enemy group at first and then focusing the majority of their efforts on the weak links among the enemy mages that they identified with this probing barrage. With every exchange, several invaders ended up dead or dying with very little to show for it.

At this point, the enemy mages panicked. They ordered their war trolls, iron beaks and skeleton warriors to charge the battlegroup and stopped pacing themselves, burning through their mana reserves like crazy to throw out as much firepower as they could in the shortest possible time. Caught off-guard by the desperate gambit, three of the mages that made up the battlegroup ended up dead in the initial rush. Afterwards, however, the battlegroup quickly reorganized itself to counter the attack, stopping their advance in favor of a purely defensive posture.

Alanic, Xvim and Zach became more active at this point. Alanic took a few seconds to conjure a huge, animated bird made out of brilliant orange flame and sent the resulting firebird at the approaching flock of iron beaks. It proceeded to easily annihilate the flock, simply by flying through them, and then swooped down towards a cluster of enemy mages to continue its rampage. One of the mages managed to hit it with a dispelling wave before it could connect with the group, but rather than collapse upon itself like most magical constructs did when dispelled, the firebird detonated into a massive firestorm that swallowed both the group targeted by the firebird and the groups adjacent to it.

At that point, however, Alanic was no longer paying attention to the firebird. The moment he had finished casting it and sent it on its way, he had

shifted his attention to the charging war trolls and skeleton warriors. He pointed his staff at the war trolls and fired five tiny orange bullets at them in quick succession. The small orange bullets shone very brightly, like miniature stars, and were incredibly fast. In the blink of an eye, they reached the war trolls and detonated into massive conflagrations, far bigger and hotter than any mundane fireball could manage.

Most of the war trolls were incinerated on the spot, but five of them were that strange sort of hyper-resilient trolls that Zorian sometimes encountered among invading forces – the sort that were extremely well warded against fire and other forms of damage. These war trolls survived Alanic's spell bombardment, but were still singed and dazed by it, so Alanic shifted his attention to the rapidly approaching horde of skeleton warriors instead.

The undead horde had been thinned somewhat by a continuous barrage of attacks coming from the rest of the battlegroup, but there were several hundred skeleton warriors and these ones proved to be resilient against most forms of magic. Powerful wards seemed to have been etched into their bones, protecting them against common attack spells. It seemed inevitable that at least a quarter of the skeleton warriors would survive to close into melee with the battlegroup, which would be disastrous. The moment the horde got close, however, Alanic made a sharp, grasping motion towards it with his free hand.

There was no visible spell emanating from Alanic, but the pinpricks of sinister light burning inside the empty eye sockets of every skeleton warrior were instantly snuffed out. The entire horde of skeletons silently collapsed to the ground, like puppets with their strings cut.

Meanwhile, Xvim mostly concentrated his energies on countering the enemy mages. Whenever the invaders attempted to concentrate their fire somewhere, he conjured translucent purple clouds in front of the area, and at least half of the spells that had entered the cloud would end up being dispelled by the time they passed through it. Sometimes, when the enemy mages tried to employ some especially powerful spell, he would fire fast moving, milky white globes of ectoplasm that unerringly homed in and collided with the enemy projectiles, activating them prematurely. Very rarely, when there was nothing major to be countered, Xvim fired bright blue bullets at enemy shields – whenever one of those bullets connected with a barrier, it instantly collapsed and went away, regardless of how strong it seemed.

Strangely enough, Zach didn't join in the rest of the battlegroup in peppering the enemy with spells. Instead, he spent most of his time ripping large chunks of the pavement out of the ground and hurling them at the enemy like a living catapult. It was crude, but surprisingly effective – stone and gravel could not be dispelled, and stopping all that mass was anything but easy. For the most part, the only defense against Zach's catapult impersonation was to move out of the way – which was not always an option, and, more often than not, exposed the target to equally lethal threats. The five war trolls that survived Alanic's fire stars, for instance, were too dazed to move out of the way in time, and were promptly crushed to death by several tons of falling rocks.

For a moment Zorian wondered why more people don't try and do what Zach was doing, but then realized that most people weren't nearly accurate enough to pull that off. Unlike normal offensive spells, Zach's rocks did not home in on the target. It probably took literal decades of practice for Zach to be so unerringly accurate with his improvised projectiles.

As for Zorian himself, he didn't bother joining in on the spell exchange. He knew that spending his limited mana reserves on these spell exchanges wasn't the wisest course of action for him. Instead, he roamed through the enemy ranks with his telepathy, hunting for easy targets. Many of the enemy mages had at least some form of mental defense, but the quality varied greatly. Some of them were only weakly defended, and quite a few had no mental defenses at all. Zorian viciously punished such carelessness whenever he found it, driving telepathic knives into their thoughts and puppeteering their bodies into attacking their comrades. He was fairly sure he was doing way more damage by doing that than he ever could by casting mundane combat spells.

He also used his mind sense and his marker to keep an eye for ambushes and Quatach-Ichl's return. Because of that, he managed to catch a trio of enemy mages trying to circle the battlegroup and attack them from behind. Although their invisibility spell was good, they were slow to react when Zorian suddenly attacked them with a severing beam, and all three ended up being cut in half by it.

Suddenly, Zorian's mind sense detected a mind below their feet, rapidly ascending to the surface. It wasn't the first time he experienced something like this, so he knew what he was dealing with.

"Rock worm!" he shouted, shining a harmless beam of light at the spot the creature was about to emerge from.

Without a word, the mages scattered from the emergence point and set up a kill zone around it. The rock worm attempted to compensate, somehow detecting the shifting positions of its targets through the ground, but Zorian immediately adjusted the beam of light to warn others of its movements. Too stubborn to break off the attack, the rock worm emerged to the surface anyway, erupting out of the ground in a spray of gravel. It lasted less than five seconds before it was sliced apart into several pieces by surrounding mages that were waiting for it.

And then it happened. The moment Zorian had been dreading and was diligently on the lookout for – Quatach-Ichl was back. His return came in the form of teleporting right behind the battlegroup, and then trying to catch them off-guard with a surprise attack from behind. It would have worked like a charm, too, except that Zorian by now somewhat understood how the ancient lich thought and had deliberately chosen to linger in the back of the battlegroup in anticipation of this.

With blinding speed, the ancient lich pointed its bony finger at the thickest concentration of mages in his sight. Zorian didn't bother shouting a warning – it would never reach Quatach-Ichl's targets in time – he just reached into his pocket and flung a pitch black metal cube at the lich.

A jagged red beam of disintegration magic erupted from the lich's finger, seeking to slice apart its unfortunate victims. The cube Zorian threw at the lich was much slower, and would never reach the lich before the disintegration beam did its grisly work. However, it did not need to – instead of traveling in the direction the lich was pointing, the red beam curved through the air towards the black cube, hitting it instead. The cube seemed to

drink in the light, absorbing it utterly instead of disintegrating. It then continued forward unimpeded, but it never actually reached the ancient lich – a quick gesture from Quatach-Ichl send it careening to the side, where is impacted uselessly against the pavement.

While this was happening, Zorian raised his hand into the air and created a loud boom to draw people's attention to what was happening in the back of the battlegroup.

"The lich is here!" he shouted.

However, rather than continue attacking the back lines, Quatach-Ichl teleported again. The distance was very short, however, simply getting him to the right of the battlegroup. There he fired the disintegration beam again, and this time Zorian was in no position to counter him with another cube. Zach was there, but he was caught off guard and all he could do was raise a quick shield in front of himself. Other people managed to shield themselves too, but not everyone reacted in time. The jagged red beam cut a swath of destruction straight into the heart of the battlegroup, killing and wounding at least 15 mages.

Rather than wait for a response, Quatach-Ichl teleported again, this time to the left of the battlegroup. However, this was where Xvim was stationed and he was quicker to react than Zach. Another jagged red beam shot out of Quatach-Ichl's hand, impacting the dark green shield Xvim erected between himself and the ancient lich. Quatach-Ichl swept his hand sideways, trying to repeat his recent move and simply maneuver the beam through the whole group until he encountered a weak link or two, but found that the beam refused to obey his commands. It remained stubbornly 'stuck' to Xvim's shield, twisting and warping in order to stay connected to it.

Quatach-Ichl dropped the disintegration beam then, but before he could do anything else, Xvim thrusted his hand forward and the dark green shield surged forward like a battering ram, crashing into the ancient lich. Quatach-Ichl was forced to take a step back, but was otherwise unharmed. On the other hand, this momentary distraction allowed an entire barrage of offensive spells from the rest of the battlegroup to reach him.

Quatach-Ichl suddenly sped up, his movement becoming a blur, and cast shield after shield. Every spell was blocked, sidestepped or even reflected back to the caster. He then stomped his foot against the ground, causing a massive sheet of rock and gravel to rise from the pavement and fly towards the battlegroup. A combined wave of force from numerous mages managed to blow most of the sheet away before it could flatten everybody, but by then Quatach-Ichl had teleported away again.

At least four people ended up dead in the exchange, partially as a result of reflected spells and partially because one large chunk of gravel managed to get through the force wave.

As if completing the circuit, Quatach-Ichl teleported next to the front of the battlegroup. Not only was this where Alanic had been waiting for him, however – this time both Xvim and Zach had followed him by teleporting to the front as well. Zorian remained at the back of the group, knowing he was too weak in direct combat to do more than get in the way against Quatach-Ichl. That didn't mean he couldn't help in his own way, though...

Alanic fired some kind of golden orb at Quatach-Ichl the moment he had appeared, which produced an almost panicked reaction from the ancient lich. He immediately erected a fancy-looking triple-layered shield in front of himself, which was probably a good idea since the golden orb passed through the first two layers as if they weren't there and was only stopped by the third one. Quatach-Ichl was then immediately attacked by Zach and Xvim, who struck against him simultaneously from opposite sides. Zach launched six black, flying blades at the lich while Xvim fired some kind of layered white orb at him.

The lich suddenly sped up again. Zorian was entirely sure at this point that these bursts of speed represented the lich hastening itself with some pretty powerful temporal acceleration. Regardless of the truth of the matter, the extra speed allowed the lich to dodge the black blades and dispel the layered orb.

Well, try to dispel the layered orb. When the dispelling wave hit it, it only shaved off the surface layer of the orb, but most of the projectile continued on unimpeded.

At this point, the lich tried to teleport again. However, it was too late. Zorian had finished hastily carving the spell formula into the ground beneath him and proceeded to pour most of his mana reserves into the ward he was casting, anchoring it to the spell formula beneath his feet. A powerful anti-teleportation field immediately snapped into place around the entire area and the lich's teleportation spell fizzled out.

The layered orb impacted straight into Quatach-Ichl's chest. With a high-pitched grinding sound, it drilled straight through the lich's armor and detonated inside his rib cage. The ancient lich's entire skeleton was suddenly illuminated in arcing white light that seemed to lock down Quatach-Ichl's movements. At the same time, Zach's flying blades that Quatach-Ichl had previously managed to dodge suddenly reversed direction and slashed at the lich again. Their pitch black surface sank deep into the ancient lich's bones, effortlessly slicing through the nigh-indestructible material. In less than a second, both of the lich's arms were severed at the shoulder and the blades pressed on. Alanic started to make his move again...

Suddenly, a massive wave of dark red force erupted from Quatach-Ichl's form in all directions, flinging Zach, Alanic and Xvim away from the ancient lich. The wave then continued on, slamming into the rest of the battlegroup and flinging them about. The physical part of the wave had been blocked before it reached Zorian, but there seemed to be a soul magic aspect to the wave that went through normal magical barriers as if they weren't there. Zorian's soul, strongly shielded as it was by now, weathered the assault without issue, but many of the mages around him staggered or even fainted under the spiritual pressure of the wave crashing into them.

Less than a second after the wave passed, Alanic was back on his feet again, having apparently weathered the sudden attack with little

consequences. Xvim and Zach, however, were a lot less fortunate. They remained on the ground, still alive and moving but in no position to counter Quatach-Ichl at the moment. Zach looked particularly affected, rolling around on the ground as if in great pain.

“Crap,” Zorian hissed. He poked the mage near him that seemed least affected by the wave and pointed to the spell formula at his feet. “Guard this so the lich can’t teleport away, okay?”

He didn’t wait for the man’s answer. He simply sped off towards Zach, hoping he was not too late. If Quatach-Ichl hit Zach with some heavy soul magic while he was incapacitated, it would be a total disaster. Damn it, he shouldn’t have agreed to this...

Thankfully, the lich didn’t prioritize finishing off the two downed opponents, partially because it was too busy re-attaching its arms (apparently it just needed to levitate them back to his shoulders and they fused back on their own; such bullshit) and partially because Alanic had launched a savage attack on it almost immediately. The warrior priest launched golden orb after golden orb at the lich, forcing it to frantically shield and dodge, but it was obvious he couldn’t keep it up and was only succeeding in keeping the lich busy.

Zorian finally succeeded in reaching Zach and started dragging him away from the battle. Thankfully, despite taking a soul attack at pretty much point blank, he seemed to be largely unharmed.

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“Fuck, that hurt,” Zach complained. “I hate soul magic.”

He had the presence of mind to whine about things. That was a good sign. He couldn’t have been hurt *that* badly, then.

At this point Xvim also started to stagger back to his feet, apparently quicker to recover than Zach. Unfortunately, Alanic’s attack also started flagging a bit by then, and Quatach-Ichl decided that there was time to put down his two mostly-disabled opponents for good before they could recover. Like the previous two times, he suddenly sped up and launched two dark red orbs – one towards Zach and one towards Xvim.

Zorian immediately threw another absorption cube at the path of the orb, knowing it was probably a waste of time to try and shield against it. The orb was thankfully drawn into the cube and sucked into it, just like the disintegration beam earlier, so that was one crisis averted. However, he was in no position to save Xvim. Poor Xvim, there was no way he could...

Almost contemptuously, Xvim backhanded the incoming dark red orb with his left hand, as if striking an errant child’s ball instead of a magical construct. Against all common logic, the spell didn’t detonate against his hand like a proper magical projectile, and was instead deflected to the side. It impacted the ground to the left of Xvim, blowing up a chunk of the road but doing little else of note.

Uh...

Perhaps it was Zorian’s imagination, but even Quatach-Ichl seemed a little shocked at the sight.

Then the moment passed and the battles began again. Alanic and Xvim began exchanging spell fire with Quatach-Ichl in earnest again, and Zorian took advantage of that to drag Zach away into the relative safety of the battlegroup. By now, the battlegroup itself was starting to recover from Quatach-Ichl’s weird soul wave attack and joined in on the battle with Quatach-Ichl, taking off some of the pressure from Xvim and Alanic. Unfortunately, most of them couldn’t deal with the lich’s counterattacks nearly as well as Xvim and Alanic could, so they tended to die a lot. In less than a minute, more than 20 of them ended up dead, though this didn’t dissuade the rest of the battlegroup from trying to help.

At this point, Quatach-Ichl seemed to have decided he had bitten off more than he could chew and tried to unravel the anti-teleportation ward Zorian erected. A powerful dispelling wave swept through the area, seeking to undo Zorian’s work... and failed. If Zorian had simply covered the area with a free-floating ward, Quatach-Ichl’s ploy would have probably succeeded. However, Zorian had taken the time and effort to anchor the ward to a spell formula, making it far too stable to be destroyed on a whim.

Unfortunately for Zorian, Quatach-Ichl seemed to realize this as well... and the spell seemed to have provided him with some kind of feedback information about the ward, because he immediately went after the ward anchor. In a brief pause between the attacks, he suddenly crouched and jumped, soaring through the air as if gravity held no power over him. He flew over most of the battlegroup and landed squarely next to the ward anchor. The mage Zorian had tasked with the anchor’s defense stood his ground against the lich, along with a dozen others, but they were all swept aside with a casual wave of Quatach-Ichl’s hand.

The moment the defending mages were sent flying, Quatach-Ichl sped up again and surged forward, slamming his hand into the center of the crudely-etched spell formula. The surrounding ground immediately shattered, destroying the anchor, and before Zorian could so much as blink, the lich was gone. Teleported away.

A quick consultation of his marker told him that this time, the lich was nowhere near.

The battlegroup took several minutes to recover, regroup and count their dead, and then continued onward towards the Hole. Out of almost a hundred of them at the start of the battle, only 42 survived until the end, and 5 of those were too wounded to continue on with them.

Zorian felt they had been pretty lucky, all things considered.

The closer they got to the Hole, the fiercer, more numerous and more capable their enemies became. Despite this, they only lost a handful of their remaining mages in these conflicts – as intense as these battles were, they were something the battlemages knew how to deal with. Additionally, they were just one group of Cyrian soldiers pushing towards the Hole – there were other, bigger groups that were assaulting the place from different directions. The invaders couldn't spare to send too much of their forces against a relatively minor incursion like theirs.

Quatach-Ichl left them alone for quite a while after his departure. As far as Zorian could puzzle out from the lich's movements and random thoughts he had lifted from the minds of enemy mages, this was because their clash with the ancient lich kept him away from other, more critical battlefields, which led to a partial collapse of invader defenses around the Hole. Thus, he was too busy propping his forces back up and putting out fires to properly deal with them.

He did not entirely leave them alone, however. He occasionally teleported near them and attempted to catch them off guard in various ways. One such attempt consisted of the lich teleporting high into the air above them and trying to bombard them while flying. Another involved him teleporting a pair of thunder lizards right next to the group. A third one involved Quatach-Ichl teleporting a fair distance from the group and then conjuring a miniature horde of animated creatures to attack them. These attacks never really accomplished much, in large part because Zorian could track him through his crown and thus always knew when he was coming. In any case, Quatach-Ichl never lingered long, teleporting away the moment his latest scheme failed.

Zorian was especially fond of the two thunder lizards the lich brought him – since Quatach-Ichl had taken them away from their controllers, there was no one to contest Zorian's control once he tried to subvert their minds. Instead of the thunder lizards rampaging through the battlegroup, Zorian ended up taking control of them and gleefully used them against every subsequent enemy group they encountered. They were so effective in Zorian's hands that Quatach-Ichl eventually showed up just to get rid of them again.

Too bad the ancient lich didn't linger long enough for Zorian to thank him for his gift.

Unfortunately, there were limits to everything. Once they started getting dangerously close to their destination, Quatach-Ichl decided that enough was enough. He teleported into the area around the battlegroup once again, and this time he brought 15 more mages with him. It was obvious this wasn't going to be just another probing strike this time – the ancient lich was ready for round two.

And his very first move upon teleporting in was to thrust his skeletal hand straight at Zorian, launching a shining green javelin directly towards his chest.

Why? Hell if Zorian knew. Maybe he noticed that Zorian had some way of tracking his movements and detecting his presence. Maybe the way he had trapped the lich in an anti-teleportation ward and subverted his thunder lizards had left a particularly big impression on him. Ultimately, the only thing that mattered was that Quatach-Ichl evidently wanted to see Zorian dead as soon as possible.

Zorian didn't try to use one of his absorption cubes this time – by now, Quatach-Ichl knew damn well that Zorian had those, so he wouldn't have bothered targeting him if he thought they could stop the spell. The way the green javelin effortlessly punched through the multi-layered shields the rest of the battlegroup erected in front of Zorian also led credence to this assumption. Instead, Zorian simply reached into his marker and prepared to end the restart – he had no idea if the green javelin had some kind of soul aspect to it, but better safe than sorry.

Before Zorian could end the restart, however, Xvim made his move. He thrust one hand towards the area in the path of the javelin and the other towards Quatach-Ichl and his group, causing two small spatial distortions to pop into existence. The green javelin had shattered all barriers in its way with effortless ease without visibly weakening in the slightest, but when it encountered the spatial distortion in its way, it simply disappeared...

...only to reappear in front of Xvim, shooting out of the second spatial distortion and hitting one of the mages next to Quatach-Ichl, whose hastily erected shield failed to stop it.

It was a miniature gate, Zorian realized, not a pair of spatial distortions. By placing one end of the gate in front of the green javelin's flight path and the other in front of the enemy mage, Xvim had redirected Quatach-Ichl's own attack against the enemy. For a moment Zorian wondered why Xvim didn't redirect it back at the lich instead, but then realized this was a far more useful outcome. Targeting Quatach-Ichl with his own spell would have been satisfying, but it was unlikely that the ancient lich would have been felled by the javelin, whereas this way they had one less mage they had to fight.

Then the battle began in earnest. The mages Quatach-Ichl had brought with him must have been some sort of elite, because they were far more capable and powerful than the typical invader. Thankfully, despite the losses they had suffered along the way, the battlegroup still had more than twice the number of men that Quatach-Ichl's group had – and the mages that comprised it weren't much weaker than those Quatach-Ichl had brought along with him.

However, it became obvious very quickly that Quatach-Ichl *really* wanted Zorian dead for some reason. While he didn't drop everything to concentrate on killing him, he and his subordinates targeted Zorian whenever they had the chance to do so. It got so bad after a while that Xvim had to drop everything else and dedicate all of his time to keeping him alive.

It was chaos. Swarms of burning stars flew through the air, colliding with defensive barriers and each other. A massive black beam that seemed to drink in the light around it scythed through the battlegroup, forcing Zorian to take a page out of Quatach-Ichl's book and teleport away to evade it. A trio of bright red beams zig-zagged through the defensive ranks, closely hugging the ground in an attempt to get past the shields. A massive animated tiger made of blue flame savaged a pair of mages before pouncing towards Xvim and Zorian, only to hit the thin, barely visible defensive screen Xvim erected around them. The tiger of blue flame passed through the screen without resistance, but something crucial seemed to have been disrupted inside the construct by the passage, because it unraveled a split second afterwards. One of the enemy mages smashed a clay pot on

the ground in front of him, and a dozen or so incorporeal wraiths flew out of the shattered remains, only to get quickly destroyed by Alanic. A dozen or so disgusting, mutated, giant rats tried to ambush the battlegroup under the cover of some very potent invisibility, only to be massacred by Zorian whose mind sense saw through the illusion with trivial ease. Another group of mages tried to reinforce Quatach-Ichl's group, only to die instantly upon arrival as Zach turned the ground beneath their feet into a set of giant jaws that crushed them to death.

"This isn't working," Zach complained to Xvim and Zorian, having retreated to their position. "It's too slow. We'll be here forever at this rate."

"Yes, I'm pretty sure that's what the invaders are aiming for," Zorian said. "They just have to keep us busy until the ritual is finished, not kill us all."

"You know, you and Xvim are pretty much no use in this fight, except as damage magnets," Zach said. A pink, flower-shaped projectile streaked across the sky in a parabolic arc, heading straight towards Zorian, but Zach ripped a chunk of stone from the roadway beneath them and hurled it into the air to intercept it. The improvised projectile not only dispersed the funny-shaped (but probably not-so-funny in effect) projectile, but continued onward towards Quatach-Ichl's forces, forcing them to defend against it. "And I reckon Alanic and his men could hold their ground without me."

"What are you saying?" Zorian said, scanning the battlefield for threats with senses both mundane and supernatural.

"It's only us who really have to reach the ritual site. So let's leave Alanic with the task of keeping Quatach-Ichl busy and continue on without him," said Zach.

Yeah, that sounded pretty logical. Zorian doubted Alanic would have anything against the idea.

"Okay, but how do we do that?" Zorian asked.

"Leave it to me," Zach said, cracking his knuckles. "Xvim, come closer so I can minimize the affected area. The spell is stronger that way."

"What do you intend to do?" Xvim asked curiously.

But Zach didn't reply. The moment Xvim got closer he executed a long and complicated chant and a white, translucent sphere flickered into existence around all three of them. A moment later, it shot into the air like a cannon ball, taking them with it.

After they had reached an impressive altitude, bringing them beyond the range of most spells, the sphere instantly changed directions and flew off towards the hole at incredible speeds. Quatach-Ichl and his army attempted to shoot them down, but the sphere weaved through the attacks like a hummingbird on a sugar high, swerving, altering speed and reversing direction with unbelievable rapidity. What few spells managed to hit the sphere only managed to induce weak ripples on its surface, like pebbles thrown in a still pond.

Despite its great speed of movement and the rapid direction shifts it was executing, Zach, Zorian and Xvim remained safely suspended inside the sphere's center, unaffected by the maneuvering. Zorian was pretty sure the effect of inertia alone should have killed them by now, but they remained perfectly alive and healthy. Well, the sight of some of the dodging maneuvers Zach was executing was making him feel slightly sick, but that was not the fault of the spell itself.

Very quickly, they reached the Hole and unceremoniously plunged into its depths.

Now all they had to do was find where the ritual was taking place.

- break -

The Hole was a big place. Zorian knew the ritual had to be done somewhere around it, and Alanic seemed certain that it had to happen below ground too. However, that still left lots of places to look for. Zorian had expected they would have to spend a fair amount of time divining its exact location and otherwise tracking it down.

In reality, the ritual location was absurdly easy to spot. The moment their flying sphere descended a little deeper into the Hole, they encountered a huge stone platform floating in the middle of the empty space.

"I have a feeling this is it," Xvim said unnecessarily.

Almost as soon as they spotted the platform, the people stationed on it spotted them too. Once again, the sphere was forced to dodge and weave between attacks, but it continued its rapid descend towards their target. Zorian mentally prepared himself for touchdown, but it seemed Zach had a better idea than simply depositing them in the middle of a hostile throng of mages. The sphere was just about to collide with the surface of the platform when it rapidly changed directions and slammed into the gathered defenders, trying to fling them off the edge of the platform.

Loud, panicked screaming erupted from their targets, many of which were too slow to realize what was happening and found themselves stepping into thin air and plunging into abyssal darkness of the Hole.

The sphere quickly circled the entire platform, flinging more people into the dark abyss surrounding the platform. Even more were simply knocked down by the movements of the sphere or dazed and wounded when it impacted them at high speeds. Finally, the sphere ground to a halt and flickered away, depositing Zach, Xvim and Zorian near the center of the platform.

"That spell really takes a lot from me," Zach said, stumbling slightly. "Take care of me while I recover a bit, okay?"

There was no time to answer – though caught off guard by their sudden arrival and the unconventional attack of the sphere, the defenders quickly started throwing themselves against Xvim and Zorian.

Zorian surveyed the situation as they fought. At the very center of the platform was a large stone cube covered in dense, complicated spell formulas. A larger, circular spell formula covered the ground around the cube, centered around it. Above the cube, a large red sphere floated in the air, occasionally rippling and warping under the magical forces it was subjected to. After a few seconds, Zorian realized it was blood. Standing next to the cube was one of the mages, presumably the leader of the ritual. Another six mages stood on the edge of the spell formula circle. All seven were chanting and gesturing wildly, completely ignoring the commotion currently happening on the platform.

Though Zorian would have liked to interrupt the ritual by attacking these seven, he couldn't. Though it was not readily apparent, the center of the platform was protected by a powerful hemispherical shield – he knew because Zach had tried to bowl through their little gathering by ramming his sphere through the platform's center, but ended up bouncing off the invisible barrier defending them. Zorian tried to walk through it, just in case it only blocked magic and not people, but found the barrier as solid as stone.

Zorian also couldn't help but take note of the clothes the seven mages in the center were wearing. They were wearing scarlet red robes that hid their faces behind a veil of supernatural darkness. How very familiar. This was *exactly* the same type of robe that Red Robe had been wearing. Well, the leader of the ritual standing in the center also had a stylized golden dragon embroidered on his robe, so he was a little different, but the other six wore pretty much identical stuff as Red Robe.

Aside from the core of the ritual taking place at the center, there were only two other interesting features at the platform.

One was a rectangular stone slab reminiscent of an altar. Several grooves had been cut into the otherwise featureless rectangle, draining into several stone bowls attached to its sides. The rectangle was completely spotless for the most part, but numerous red splotches could be seen on the floor around it.

Right next to the rectangle was a haphazard pile of dead children. There were four of them in total, and they were completely naked, their skin pale and bloodless and their chests brutally sliced open.

The second place was a collection of seven cages, four of them empty and open, and another three occupied by three more living children. They had already been stripped naked by the cultists, wearing nothing except thick brown collars around their necks. The skin surrounding the collars was red and raw, and in one case outright bloody, suggesting that the children had been desperately trying to take them off at some point. Zorian assumed the collars were what was stopping them from transforming.

The three children consisted of two boys and a girl. The two boys were total strangers to him, but he soon realized that he knew the girl. It was Nocka, the little cat shifter his little sister was friends with in some restarts. The three of them looked subdued and traumatized when Zach, Zorian and Xvim arrived on the platform, but once they realized what was happening and that there was a chance they could be saved, they started screaming for help and shaking their cages without stopping.

Though Zorian felt terrible for it, he ignored them. They were in no immediate danger, as every invader on the platform was either too busy with the main ritual or trying to kill the new arrivals. He simply dived into the heads of two unknown boys and memorized their names, homes and general identity, as well as when and how they were kidnapped by the invaders.

Gradually, the number of enemy mages on the platform fell lower and lower. The pace with which their enemies were dying especially increased once Zach had a chance to recover a bit and join them in wiping them out. Even so, they had been fighting for quite a while at this point, and exhaustion was starting to set in. Additionally, the enemy clearly saw the situation was becoming hopeless and was starting to become desperate.

Without warning, one of the mages pointed both of his hands at Zorian, launching a huge bolt of shining force at him. Zorian shielded, but some part of the spell's effect managed to bypass through the shield and slammed into him, sending him tumbling backwards. He almost fell over the edge of the platform, but managed to glue his hands to the stone floor with unstructured magic in the last moment, leaving him dangling over the dark abyss.

He heaved himself back to the platform, only to find a sickly yellow beam heading straight for him before he could shield himself and dodge.

Just before the beam would hit him, Xvim stepped into its path. His mentor had probably run out of mana by this point, because rather than shield against the spell or reflect it, he simply shielded Zorian with his body.

The yellow ray hit Xvim straight into the chest, dealing no visible damage. Despite this, his mentor immediately slumped to the floor in a boneless manner and did not move again.

With a harsh movement, Zorian blew the attacker's skull with a concentrated beam of force and then quickly moved to check up on Xvim. Sadly, it was as he feared – despite receiving no obvious damage from the spell, Xvim was already dead.

Zorian didn't linger. Nothing good would come from mourning his mentor's death, and the man would be fine in the next restart. The best way Zorian could honor Xvim's sacrifice now was to make sure this entire risky trip had not been in vain.

By this point, most of the enemy mages at the platform had been dealt with, and the ones that were still alive were being steadily picked off by Zach. After a moment's thought, Zorian decided that Zach didn't need his help so he instead approached the center of the platform again.

The seven mages in red robes were still diligently chanting and gesturing, as if nothing outside their little bubble was of concern to them. Zorian did

not know if this was because they had so much confidence in the barrier sealing them off from the outside world or if they literally *couldn't* stop their motions without something going terribly wrong, and he didn't really care. Since he had no way to break through the invisible defensive bubble, he reached out to the seven mages with his mind.

The barrier, strong as it may be, did nothing to halt Zorian's psychic abilities. That was the good news. The bad news was that all seven of them had shielded their mind *incredibly* well. Zorian had never seen mental defenses that strong and sophisticated in a non-psychic individual. They had wrapped their minds in layers upon layers of different barriers, conjured decoy minds to mislead any attackers and even placed some reactive defenses that automatically counterattacked against any mental incursions.

And that was for the six 'outer' mages. The ritual leader had flat out placed his mind under the effect of mind blank, and Zorian couldn't tamper with him at all.

Undeterred, Zorian picked one of the six outer mages at random and began his telepathic offensive.

The mage in question flinched when Zorian started his attack, but said nothing and continued his chanting and waving. Probably couldn't afford to stop then. Zorian completely ignored the decoy mind the mage had set up and set about systematically dismantling his mental defenses.

As seconds passed and Zorian started peeling back layer upon layer of man's mental defenses, the mage in question started to become increasingly frantic. He tried to dedicate some of his attention to fighting off Zorian, but he wasn't psychic and there was only so much he could do to support his mental defenses without resorting to structured magic. Finally, the mage could not stand it anymore and abandoned the ritual in favor of repeatedly recasting his mental defense spells.

Sadly for him, he was far too late for this to work. Perhaps if he had dropped the ritual immediately he could have successfully stalled Zorian's assault, but at this point Zorian had too much momentum and was too familiar with the flaws and peculiarities of his defenses. Barrier after barrier continued to fall.

Meanwhile, the rest of the red robed mages had been growing frantic as well. It seemed that they really needed all six outer mages to maintain control of the ritual they were performing, and the sudden absence of one of them had thrown everything into disarray. The sphere of blood floating above the central cube writhed and wobbled dangerously, and the leading mage kept chanting louder and louder in an attempt to maintain control over it.

Zorian ignored their plight, focusing on the mage he was targeting. At last, the final barrier fell and he dived straight into the man's mind.

"Damnit, get out of my head!" the mage screamed, clutching his head in pain.

Zorian didn't listen to him, of course. He plunged roughly into the man's thoughts and memories, sweeping aside all resistance and seeking out names, goals, passwords, meeting places, addresses...

"No!" the lead ritual mage suddenly shouted. "No, no, NO! We were so close! This can't be happening!"

The orb of blood seethed and boiled, strange shapes akin to mouths and eyes occasionally dancing on its surface, before it suddenly stilled.

For one single second, the sphere of blood hung motionless in the air, perfectly calm and spherical.

Then everything was illuminated in bright red light and darkness consumed Zorian's world.

61. Anthills

Chapter 061

Anthills

When Zorian woke up, he was back in Cirin, being subjected to Kirielle's usual morning antics. That was a relief. When the red light illuminated everything at the end of the previous restart, he had been afraid there would be lasting consequences. There was a primordial involved, after all, and he felt they were not something that should be taken lightly. There was a precedent about them being able to affect souls, considering the role of primordial essence in the creation of shifters.

After chasing Kirielle out of his room, he sat down and performed a quick checkup of his mind and soul for any non-obvious damage they might have received. Only once his self-diagnosis came up empty did he relax.

He wondered what the red light signified. The cultists had obviously lost control over the ritual and it failed in a lethal manner, killing everyone in the area... but he wondered what the nature of that failure was and how extensive the damage had been. It might be that stopping the ritual mid-way was almost as dangerous for the city as letting it run its course.

Well, no matter – they would just have to find a way to foil it before it even started.

As a bonus, stopping the ritual early meant that Nochka and the other shifter children wouldn't get horrifically murdered to power up the ritual. Previously, Zorian had been running on adrenaline, and had more pressing concerns to worry about, such as hostile mages trying to kill him... as such, he had been able to push the emotional impact of those sights aside and not think too deeply about them. Now, however, there were no such distractions present... and Zorian had a very vivid memory, especially after going through all those aranean memory magic training methods.

Damn it. Those memories would bother him for months to come, he just knew it. Especially the part about Nochka. It wasn't like the suffering of the rest of the children left him cold or anything, but they were essentially strangers. He saw all kinds of awful things happen to strangers during the invasion, and was somewhat numb to it by now. But Nochka... he *knew* her. Even before he had gotten pulled into the time loop and she became his little sister's friend, he had known her – albeit only as 'that girl whose bicycle he pulled out of the river'. It made it hard for him to just shove the memories aside in favor of focusing on something else.

Thankfully, he didn't have to look far for a suitable distraction. Zach showed up at the door to his home again, just like he had in the previous restart, giving him someone to talk to. Soon, the two of them found themselves sitting alone in a train compartment, departing from Cirin.

"No Kirielle this time, huh?" Zach said, humming thoughtfully. "I guess this isn't going to be another vacation restart, then?"

"Another?" Zorian scoffed. "Some vacation the previous restart turned out to be."

"Frankly, a lot of that is your own fault," Zach told him. "If you really wanted to relax, you shouldn't have poked around serious matters so damn much. Hell, if you ask me, a proper vacation would involve leaving Cyoria entirely. We can still do that now, if you want. I know this really gorgeous beach in Tetra, way down in the south of the continent..."

"No, I don't think that's a good idea," Zorian said, waving him off. "Don't get me wrong, I do need a small vacation... but I won't be able to relax with all this bothering me in the background. Let's take a couple of restarts to investigate all this new information and *then* we can relax."

"Oh?" Zach perked up, leaning forward on his seat. "So you found out something from that mage you memory probed?"

"Lots of things," Zorian nodded happily. The attack on the hole had been a very risky maneuver, even for a pair of time travelers like them, but the payoff was just as great as Zorian hoped it would be. It seemed that even inside the time loop, the old adage about big gain only coming with big risks was true. "Do you want everything or just the highlights?"

"Give me the highlights for now," Zach said. "We can go into details later."

"Alright," Zorian nodded. He expected as much. "First of all, did you notice what those mages behind the shield were wearing?"

"Red robes," Zach nodded. "Kind of like the one the third time traveler was wearing."

"They're not 'like' the one Red Robe was wearing, they're completely identical," Zorian said. "I'm sure of it. And that is interesting, since those robes are not something you can buy on the open market. They are made specifically for the inner circle members of the Esoteric Order of the Celestial Dragon. No one except them should have one."

"Red Robe could have simply stolen it," Zach pointed out. "Though admittedly, I don't have any idea why he would go out of his way to steal that robe specifically."

"Those robes are supposed to be a marvel of magical engineering," Zorian said. "They are made from very rare and impressive materials – specifically, scarletite threads and crimson sea silk – and densely embedded with powerful defensive magics and privacy wards. If they are as impressive as the mage I memory probed thought they were, I'm not surprised that Red Robe would want one. *I* want one too, now. We're definitely stealing one in this restart so I can take it apart."

"Hell, if they're that good, we're stealing them all," Zach said. "If they're made from crimson sea silk, we can sell them for huge amounts of money based on materials alone. It's a bit unfortunate, though, since now we can't know if Red Robe is just being practical by wearing those robes or if he really is a cultist."

"I think there is a good chance he might be a cultist," Zorian said. "He showed up pretty early in the restart when he went after us, and he was wearing the robes when he did. That implies he has one within easy reach of himself. The time he tried to kill you when you were barely out of bed is especially telling – it sounds like he came rushing at you as fast as he could, with minimal preparations, yet he still had it on."

"That's a good point," Zach said, frowning. "Well, if that's true, then he should be easy to find. Just how many members of the inner circle does the cult have, anyway?"

"Fifteen," Zorian said.

"You got them all from that mage?" Zach asked in surprise.

"Not all, no," Zorian shook his head. "I only managed to find the identities of five of them before the restart ended. But I know how many of them in total exist, and it shouldn't be hard to track down the rest with the information I do have. Especially since I know the identity of the person leading the cult."

"Man, I'm really starting to get jealous of your mind magic," Zach said. "Whenever I tried to investigate the cult, I never really went anywhere with it. Forget about tracking down the leader, I couldn't even identify high-ranking members. Not even truth potions helped."

"Probably because all members of the inner circle, as well as anyone else in important positions, swore a geas to keep the names and identities of their fellow inner circle members a secret," said Zorian. "Mind magic does not care about any of that, of course."

"Yeah, yeah, rub it in," Zach grumbled for a second. "Well, what are you waiting for? Are you going to tell me who the head crazy is, or what?"

"Vatimah Tinc, the head of the local branch of the Mage Guild," Zorian told him.

There was a brief pause as Zach digested this.

"Well shit," Zach finally said. "No wonder the invaders could set up bases beneath Cyoria and operate there unchallenged for more than a month. The man is in perfect position to block and sabotage any kind of investigation around Cyoria he doesn't like."

Zorian nodded wordlessly. Although Eldemar had several institutions dedicated to countering criminal activity and investigating suspicious incidents, the Mage Guild was the first line of defense in that regard. With them subverted, nothing else would work correctly.

"Talk about the fox running the henhouse," Zach said. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised, since it was obvious for years that someone pretty high up was helping the invasion... but this kind of thing still catches me off guard. What the hell does someone like that hope to gain by helping the invaders, anyway?"

"Oh, that's an *excellent* question. Thanks for reminding me," Zorian said. "You see, I found out more about what the inner circle of the cult is planning with their ritual, and I can tell you it's not what their regular members and their Ibasan allies are thinking."

"They're not trying to let a primordial run amok through the city in an attempt to appease their world dragon god that hates all humanity?" Zach asked curiously.

"No," Zorian shook his head. "That's what the regular members of the cult think. The inner circle know that while the ritual involved releasing the primordial into the world, the goal is not to let it do whatever it wants. The goal is to enslave it and get their very own living superweapon and bound wish genie. The imprisoned primordial is supposed to be Panaxeth, He Of The Flowing Flesh, and the inner circle of the cult thinks he can grant them everlasting youth and remake their bodies into something... better."

"Better?" Zach asked, arching his eyebrow. "Is this the kind of better where you end up faster and stronger but covered in eyeballs and tentacles?"

"Well, in the case of that mage I memory probed, it mostly involves him being 21 and healthy again," Zorian said. "And having a bigger penis."

Zach snorted in amusement.

"Panaxeth is supposed to be a fleshwarper, rather than a shapeshifter in the modern sense," Zorian continued. "In theory, it should be possible for it to cure diseases, regress people's age and remake their bodies into some superior form. It's just a question of whether they can control it well enough."

"Can they?" Zach asked curiously. "Control it, I mean."

"No way to know, really," Zorian admitted. "But I doubt it. The idea is to restrain Panaxeth with a binding spell keyed-in to his essence and then subjugate his mind. Even the cultists admit that Panaxeth's ever-changing nature means the binding spell won't stay effective for long. Meaning they have to enslave it within fifteen minutes or less."

"You don't think they can work that fast," Zach surmised.

"I think it might be impossible even if they had all the time in the world to work their magic," Zorian said. "Let me put it this way. When I invaded the mind of that mage at the end, I encountered powerful and sophisticated mental defenses on him. Better than I had ever seen before on a human mage. It took me mere minutes to dismantle them and start rooting through his memories. At the time, I thought the protections were there to compensate for the known weakness of the shield that protected the ritual ground. But that was just a secondary concern – their real purpose was to ward off any mental counterattack from the primordial while they tried to bend it to their will."

"Ah, I get it," Zach said. "You're thinking that if you can get through the shields in a few minutes, the primordial could as well."

"Yeah," Zorian admitted. "It's possible, I suppose, that I'm overselling Panaxeth and that he has no way to strike back at the minds of cultists trying to enslave him. But primordials are supposed to be these ancient beings that gave even gods pause, and Panaxeth's powers revolve around manipulating living flesh, including the nervous system. At the very least, I expect Panaxeth to have incredible mental defenses at his disposal. I bet he could weather mental attacks from anything other than a master telepath with effortless ease."

Zach and Zorian continued talking for another half an hour, discussing the various facts and secrets Zorian had discovered with his memory probe at the end of the previous restart. Eventually, though, the conversation started to wind down.

"Huh," said Zach thoughtfully. "And here I thought the reason Quatach-Ichl didn't follow us was because Alanic kept him too busy to do so."

"In a way, that's true," Zorian said. "If Quatach-Ichl had left the battle to follow after us, his soldiers would have surely perished without his support... and I have a feeling he cares far more about Ibasan mages than he does for Cyorian cultists. In that way, Alanic and the rest of the mages that came with us did keep him busy. Still, if Quatach-Ichl thought there was a good chance the ritual would collapse without his support, he probably would have went after us anyway. Fortunately for us, the cooperation between him and the cult's leadership isn't exactly rosy. The leaders of the cult never told him they would be practically defenseless once the ritual starts, which gave him a skewed image of what kind of forces they had arrayed against us. He had no idea that the seven most powerful mages on that platform had no way to contribute to its defense."

"They were afraid Quatach-Ichl would take advantage of their weakness to off them," Zach surmised.

"Yes, exactly," Zorian nodded. "Especially since they weren't completely sure whether or not Quatach-Ichl was aware of what the true goal of the ritual is. He shouldn't have been, but old, powerful archmages like him are hard to fool and keep in the dark about things. And if he knew they were trying to take control of the primordial, it wouldn't be particularly strange for him to try and sabotage them once they release it from its prison."

For about a minute, both of them were silent. Zorian because he no longer had anything notable to say, and Zach because he seemed to be considering something.

"You know, I've been thinking," Zach said, looking around their compartment. "Why are we still on this train? You didn't bring Kirielle along with you and we're well away from Cirin at this point. Can't we just teleport directly to Cyoria already?"

"Well, yes," Zorian said. "I just figured the train compartment is as good a place to talk as any, you know? Although I'd like to make a detour before we go to Cyoria, if that's okay with you."

"Sure," Zach shrugged. "Where are we going?"

"Eldemar."

"The capital city?" Zach asked. Zorian nodded. "Why?"

"To see if we can find another Key there," Zorian answered. "I've been thinking about the Keys, and how they're apparently treasures of the first Ikosian emperor, and I think there is a chance the royal treasury has one or more of them. I mean, the crown of Eldemar has been trying to acquire the legacy of Ikosian Emperors pretty aggressively. Even if the treasury doesn't contain a piece of the Key, it would be a good idea to break into their archives. They might know where the keys *could* be, even if they don't actually have them. At the very least, their records and secret documents would be a good place to start in regards to our search for the Keys."

"You... want to break into the royal treasury?" Zach asked. After a second of silence, he shook his head and laughed lightly. "Actually, yeah, that sounds like a good idea. We should check out the treasures of Sulamnon and a couple of other large Splinter Nations too – Eldemar isn't the only country trying to collect imperial artefacts, you know."

"I know, but Eldemar is the closest and I'm guessing they already know about similar initiatives of other nations and how successful they are," Zorian said.

"The only problem is that breaking into the royal treasury is no simple matter," Zach told him seriously. "There is no way we can do it this morning with no preparations whatsoever. And even with all our skills, I doubt we can do it without being discovered in the process. You wouldn't *believe* how upset the royals get when an intruder successfully gets into the palace. It's like kicking over an anthill – they would be after us for an entire month, and they're actually pretty capable. It might be best to delay that kind of excursion till the end of the restart."

"Fine," Zorian said. It wasn't like he expected he could just walk into the royal treasury and check thing up at his leisure. "But I still want to check out the defenses so I know what I'm dealing with. I assume from your words that you have already broken in there, so you can tell me the details from your perspective as we walk."

"I never actually managed to break into the treasury," Zach said. "Admittedly, I didn't try very hard. I did it for a laugh, really, to see if I could do it. Well, it turned out to be harder than I thought. From the way the Ibasans managed to assemble their secret invasion, you might think the royals and their forces are incompetent... but you'd be wrong. They guard their treasures very, very well. If only they valued their loyal subjects as much as they do their possessions..."

The last part was mumbled under his breath, but Zorian heard it anyway.

"I knew this could bring a lot of unwelcome attention to us," Zorian said. "That's why I didn't bring Kirielle with me this time. One of the big reasons why I decided not to tangle with House Boranova too much in the previous restart is because that had the potential to get everyone around us in trouble. I guess in the grand scheme of things it doesn't really matter if Kirielle, Imaya and the others suffer due to our actions, since everything will be wiped clean at the end of the month anyway, but I just can't let myself think in such a way."

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"No worries," Zach said, waving his hand dismissively. "I actually appreciate that kind of attitude. I was kind of worried before that you'd try to make me do some awful stuff in the name of practicality, but you're an okay guy."

Zorian found it a bit amusing how trying to rob Eldemar's royal family doesn't qualify as 'awful stuff' in Zach's eyes. It wasn't unexpected, of course, considering how the royal family stood back and watched as House Noveda was looted by Zach's caretaker.

"Anyway, we'll be annoying all sorts of powerful people in this restart," Zorian said. "The royal family, House Boranova and plenty more besides. I intend to go after the cult's inner circle members, and they're probably all very influential people."

"So we're just going to go around stirring up one hornet's nest after another?" asked Zach rhetorically. "Nice. I've done that in a couple of restarts. Fun times."

Zorian gave Zach a blank look. Sometimes, he really envied his fellow time traveler for having had literal decades of restarts to fool around and experiment in.

- break -

In the end, their visit to Eldemar transpired without complications, albeit this was largely because Zorian had Zach telling him what ideas would never work and warning him when something had the potential to alert the palace guards that they were being spied upon. Some of the countermeasures Zach described to him would definitely have tripped him up if he had been performing the attempt alone. The palace wards were so extensive they could even detect when someone was *staring at the building for too long*. Zorian still had no idea how something like that could even work, but he decided to trust Zach that he wasn't playing a prank on him or something.

Somewhat intimidated by the defenses arrayed in front of him, Zorian decided to limit himself to a simple visual inspection, using captured pigeons as his remote-controlled eyes. The palace wards could detect spy animals, but they only reached so high into the air and pigeons had excellent eyesight.

As far as Zorian could tell, his actions were not detected. Even if they were, though, Zach and Zorian had already left the city before making the attempt, and Zorian was controlling the pigeons through a chain of telepathic relays.

The next day they went to Xvim and Alanic to try and convince them that time loop was real and that they needed help. There was a bit of an argument between Zach and Zorian about how to go about it – Zorian argued that they should take their time convincing them, while Zach insisted they should just dump everything in their lap right away and see what would happen. In the end, they decided to go along with Zach's plan – if it worked, it would save a lot of time; if it failed, they simply lost a restart worth of their help, which wasn't too debilitating.

Predictably, neither Xvim nor Alanic reacted well when faced with Zach and Zorian's collected claims, but they both accepted the notes they had entrusted to Zorian in the previous restart and agreed to at least consider their story. It was more than Zorian had hoped to get out of them, to be honest.

Veyers still couldn't be found. Zach confirmed that this was also the case at the very start of the restart as well – he had sought the boy out before coming to meet with Zorian, and Veyers was nowhere in Cyoria even then. As such, on the third day of the restart, Zach and Zorian decided to launch a more intense investigation into Veyers' whereabouts.

Specifically, they decided to break into Boranova mansion and interrogate Andoril Boranova – the man who served as the boy's caretaker ever since his parents had died in the Weeping.

By necessity, their break-in couldn't be very subtle. Although they had fallen on hard times, the Boranova were still an old Noble House, and their manor had very good wards protecting it. Neither Zach nor Zorian were in the mood for spending several restarts gradually mapping their warding scheme in order to subvert it peacefully. As such, they decided to just barge in, make sure Veyers was not hiding somewhere in the house under heavy wards, kidnap Andoril and then teleport to a pre-arranged place so they could interrogate the man in peace.

The initial attack on the manor occurred in the middle of the night (since the city authorities would be more sluggish at that time, what with most people being asleep and all) and consisted of Zorian casting a number of ward analysis divinations of the mansion's wards in order to locate the wardstone powering them. His probing of the building's wards was instantly detected, of course, but it took time for actual people inside the

building to organize, understand what was happening, and muster a response – before they could do anything, Zorian had already found the information he'd been looking for.

"Over there," Zorian said, pointing his finger in the direction of the ward stone.

"Got it," Zach said, quickly starting to perform a long chain of gestures. "I'll clear a way for us."

Soon, a devastating piece of artillery magic hit the wall in front of them, opening a brand new entrance to the mansion in question. They rushed inside, disabling the dazed mansion defenders they encountered before making a beeline towards the wardstone.

Zorian was shocked by how easy the operation turned out to be. No one could stop them – the mansion's inhabitants were caught completely off guard by the suddenness and ferocity of their attack, and most of them tried to fearfully get out of their way instead of organizing some kind of hasty defense against them. In little more than a minute, Zach and Zorian had reached the ward room. The door was made out of thick, alchemically strengthened steel, and was virtually indestructible in the short amount of time they had to do this... but unfortunately for House Boranova, the walls were not similarly durable, and Zach unceremoniously blew the door off its hinges and strolled inside. After that, shattering the golden sphere that served as the anchor for the mansion's wards proved trivially easy.

When the mansion's wardstone fell, all of the wards defending the mansion followed. Sometimes, wealthy families like this one had backup systems in case treachery or accidents resulted in the failure of the primary wardstone, but apparently House Boranova didn't bother with such contingencies. With no divination wards to get in their way, they quickly scried the entire mansion for Veyers, only to turn up empty.

No matter – they expected as much. They immediately set off towards Andoril, who was actually trying to organize some kind of defense after notifying the authorities about a break-in. The group he gathered around him actually provided the only worthwhile piece of resistance during the whole operation, but a lack of mental shields meant they suffered devastating losses before they realized what was happening and could counter Zorian's abilities.

Andoril Boranova was knocked out and captured, and the two of them quickly teleported away from the mansion along with their prisoner. They made several teleportation jumps in quick succession, all of them using different teleportation spells and directions of travel, before finally arriving to a small underground box with no physical exits that they had prepared in advance for the interrogation.

Strangely enough, when they finally woke up Andoril and started asking him about Veyers, the man laughed.

It was a very bitter laugh, but a laugh nonetheless.

"Veyers, Veyers, Veyers! It's always that kid, isn't it?" Andoril sighed. "Alright, what did he do *now*?"

"It doesn't matter," Zorian said, his voice resonant and magically distorted. Both he and Zach were hidden behind several layers of clothing and privacy spells, and the man should be incapable of casting anything, thanks to a magic-disrupting poison Zorian had fed him while he was unconscious. Hopefully the measures they had taken would be enough to keep their identities safe from various investigators, since they intended to let the man go after they were done questioning him. "Where is Veyers now?"

"I don't know," the man grunted, sounding annoyed. Zorian could read his thoughts easily enough, and knew he was telling the truth.

"Aren't you his guardian?" Zach asked. "How can you not know?"

"As if that boy ever listened to me!" Andoril snapped. "They made me the boy's guardian, but never gave me the authority to discipline him. He comes and goes as he pleases. I haven't seen him for an entire week, ever since he got expelled from the Academy."

"Why *was* he expelled from the Academy?" Zach asked.

"He lost his temper and erupted into a fireball centered around himself. No fatalities, but some of the people around him were burned, including a teacher that had tried to restrain him," Andoril said. "The Academy said it was an attack. He says he just lost control over his magic, and that if the Academy's education was worth a damn, he wouldn't have such shoddy control over his abilities."

"And what do you think?" Zach asked.

"I think Veyers did simply lose control over his magic and that the Academy knows it. They were just looking for a solid excuse to get rid of him," Andoril said with a derisive snort. "I don't blame them. I wouldn't want him if I was in their place either. Damn it, Veyers, why do you always do this sort of thing..."

"You're being surprisingly cooperative," Zorian pointed out.

"I'm tired of taking the blame for everything that boy does," Andoril said. "I didn't see the boy for an entire week and the first news I heard of him comes in the form of being kidnapped by a couple of madmen looking for him. Madmen that are willing to launch a frontal assault on a Noble House's headquarters situated inside a major city... and are powerful enough to succeed. I'm not dying for that kid."

There was a brief pause as Zach and Zorian processed this. From reading the man's thoughts, Zorian could tell that the way they masked their identity put the man somewhat at ease – if they had openly showed him their faces, he would have assumed they intended to kill him at the end, and would have been much less cooperative. As it was, he felt there was a good chance they would let him go if he told them what they wanted to

know.

The fact that they were asking about Veyers rather than some other, more serious House secrets was also a factor.

The following hour-long interrogation shed some light on the quarrelsome boy that they had once shared a class with, partially through honest question-and-answer sessions with Andoril and partially through strategic use of thought reading, memory probes and short-term memory erasure. It turned out that House Boranova did have a bloodline, but most of their members never awakened it to its full potential. In its dormant state, the bloodline simply gave a person exceptional affinity to fire magic. Only the main line of the family knew how to 'ignite' the bloodline into its active state, giving the user more impressive abilities.

Although House Boranova hadn't gone extinct during the Splinter Wars and the Weeping, they'd lost most of the core members of the family. Of the main line of the family, only Veyers had survived the tribulations, and his father had died without igniting the boy's bloodline or passing on to him (or anyone else, really) the specifics of the process.

The consequence of this was that some of the more influential members of House Boranova started to question Veyers's right of succession. He was too young, they said, and didn't even have his bloodline ignited. What kind of heir of House Boranova didn't have an ignited bloodline? What made him actually qualified to lead the House? Wouldn't it be better to put someone more proven in charge during these trying times? Someone like... one of them?

The conflict threatened to tear the House apart, until the Veyers faction created a brand new ignition ritual by piecing together fragmented historical sources and a healthy amount of speculation. Pressed for time and reluctant to give someone else the legitimacy of an ignited bloodline, they decided to use the ritual on Veyers right away.

At first, it seemed to work. Veyers developed non-structured fire magic, just like his ignited predecessors, and he could open magical locks that could only be opened by ignited members of the house and access the family's secret areas. The pretenders dropped their claims, and all was well for a while.

Unfortunately, it soon became clear that either the new ignition ritual was faulty or that some kind of specialized training regimen was required to stabilize the ignited state, because Veyers started losing control over his emotions and magic. He became prone to rapid mood swings, laughing uproariously in one second, only to be reduced to near-suicidal depression in the next, and then erupting into murderous rage when confronted. His non-structured fire magic started manifesting itself based on his subconscious desires, frequently spinning out of his control entirely, almost as if it had a mind of its own.

House Boranova hastily found various experts and magical exercises that allowed Veyers to regain some measure of control over himself. None of it was perfect, however, and the complaints about Veyers's leadership returned in full force. Enraged, Veyers tried to have his challengers executed, but House Boranova was in too dire a position to start killing its own members... essentially, even trying to do so would likely result in internal war.

Gradually, Veyers sank into a pit of anger and bitterness at the perceived betrayal of his own family members, and started to lash out at everyone around him. And when he started going to the Academy, this anger was extended to the Academy and everyone in it, since their attempts to help him control his unstable magical abilities didn't work fast enough for his liking. Just like his family, the Academy had failed him.

Unfortunately, since Veyers and Andoril didn't get along very well, the man had no idea if Veyers had any friends or associates outside the House they could talk to. It was unlikely that anyone else in his family would know more, either – Veyers had burned his bridges with most of House Boranova, even the people who had supported him in the beginning, blaming them for the consequences of his failed ignition. At this point, he was pretty much an heir in name only. The only reason he hadn't been stripped of his position already was that there were multiple valid candidates to replace him, and the Council of Elders was afraid they would tear House Boranova apart if they selected a replacement immediately.

They knocked Andoril unconscious and then left him lying in a field near Cyoria, set to wake up after a few minutes. After another half an hour to mask their trail, they both returned to Noveda Mansion. Zorian was technically living in his old dorm building again, but he and Zach agreed it would be better if he moved in with Zach for the duration of this restart. That way they would always be close enough to coordinate with each other to either flee or fight off attackers.

They made a lot of people furious tonight, after all, and they were only going to anger more of them in the near future. If their hunters ended up tracking them down, it was best if they didn't let themselves be picked off one by one.

- break -

The furor created by their attack on Boranova mansion was a sight to see. Zorian had originally intended to attack the Cult's inner members immediately afterwards, but decided to postpone that when he saw the scale of the manhunt launched against them. Cyoria's authorities really didn't like something like that happening right under their noses – between the attack on House Boranova and the frequent monster attacks that had been taking place in the past couple of days, Cyoria didn't exactly look like a safe, civilized city.

Zach and Zorian ended up spending most of the next three days outside of Cyoria, visiting various sites that Zach had found in the past in search of the elusive simulacrum spell. There was probably a more efficient way to find the spell itself, but Zorian was a bit sick of information gathering and this way had the benefit of putting Zorian's combat skills to a practical test against the various creatures and hostile mages that Zach knew about. Zach seemed to find this more fun as well.

They fought through an entire tribe of invisible mountain yeti in order to raid the makeshift treasury they had made from the remains of unfortunate travelers that had fallen to their ambushes. They eradicated a massive jewel wasp infestation from an ancient temple so they could access the secret vault around which their main hive was built. They successfully caught a massive man-eater catfish that was terrorizing the villages of Woga river and extracted a metal scroll case from its stomach, the spells it contained safely protected inside even after years of exposure to stomach acids of the giant catfish. They stormed the tower of a minor necromancer and raided a demon cult.

They didn't find the simulacrum spell, but the restart was only beginning and Zorian didn't feel like they were wasting time. Not only was he gaining valuable combat experience, he was also finding all sorts of interesting magics among their spoils. Although Zach had already sifted through these in search of magic for his own use, he had a different focus from Zorian, and many things he didn't have any interest in were good enough to catch Zorian's attention. Zach had very little interest in spell formula, for instance, whereas Zorian zealously studied every magic item they found in their wanderings, trying to divine their secrets in hopes of deepening his expertise.

Aside from searching for the simulacrum spell and sorting through loot, Zorian also delivered a number of interesting magical creatures to Lukav so the man could turn them into transformation potions. Initial results were interesting, though Zorian couldn't tell yet whether to pronounce the initiative a success or not.

He also visited several of the experts that Xvim had named in his notebook of targets he should aim for. He opted not to attack and memory probe them yet, and simply tried to talk to them to see what he could gain from them peacefully. Sadly, it was like Xvim said – their best tricks they weren't willing to share for any price. On the bright side, even the stuff they *were* willing to share was useful to Zorian – the female mage that specialized in magic sensing techniques was especially useful, allowing him to identify several dead-ends among his ideas and helping him narrow down which creatures had the most useful magical senses to try and obtain. Apparently an Eye Beast – the floating purple blob covered with eyes that had killed him in one of the restarts – was one of the best choices for this.

Sadly, when Zach and Zorian tried to search the cave system beneath Knyazov Dveri for the creature, they could not find it. Even when they checked out the place where Zorian had ended up getting killed by it so many restarts ago.

Five days after they were informed of the time loop, Alanic and Xvim finally summoned them for a discussion. Faced with their own words and secret codes contained in the notebooks Zorian recreated, they tentatively accepted the truth of the time loop. Xvim more so than Alanic, who still seemed to be having trouble accepting something as bizarre as time travel. On the other hand, Xvim seemed to be very ill at ease about the invasion and the plot to release a primordial inside Cyoria, whereas Alanic took that part in stride.

Together, the four of them slowly went through that final battle (which obviously wasn't in the notes Zorian gave them), noting what tactics Quatach-Ichl used, what spells were used and how they fared, as well as the various information Zorian had ripped out of the mind of that cultist mage at the end. Many ideas and suggestions were thrown around, and many more would no doubt be handed out after Alanic and Xvim had the chance to pore over the information for a few days.

Alanic seemed to be especially outraged when he found out about the specifics of the child sacrifice involved in the ritual to release the primordial, and wanted to know the names of the children so he could have someone guard them. Zorian had no complaints about that – it was actually rather relieving to hear, and took some weight off Zorian's conscience for not focusing on them too much.

After that, Zach and Zorian started going after the cult's inner circle. These raids were far more subdued and sophisticated than their direct assault on Boranova mansion, but they were hardly undetected. For one thing, the inner circle of the cult consisted of powerful mages, many of which had influential positions in various organizations – they were rarely alone, and their homes were well protected. For another, Zach and Zorian were after their possessions as well as their secrets. Whenever they gained access to their target's homes, they took anything that looked valuable, interesting or incriminating.

Just as the furor over the attack on House Boranova started to die down and the attacks of the monsters crawling out of Cyoria's underworld began to subside, a new round of scandals erupted in the city as several prominent mages were attacked in their homes and robbed of their possessions. The outrage got so bad that the Crown of Eldemar announced they intend to send a group of royal investigators to inspect the city and its institutions.

It was a bad time to be a Cyoria city official.

- break -

With a dull thud, the only door connecting the Black Room beneath Cyoria to the time magic research facility closed shut. From the point of view of the outside world, it would open on the very next day. From the point of view of Zach and Zorian inside, they had just secured themselves an extra month of time in the restart.

"We did it," Zach said happily. "I really thought we messed things up there for a second, but we did it."

"We did mess things up," Zorian said, inspecting the silky red robe in his lap. It was the fabled red robe worn by the inner members of the cult, one of the four that Zach and Zorian had acquired in their raids against the cultists. "Our forgery of the royal seal was incomplete and the guy inspecting our documents saw through it. I had to edit his memories."

"Ah," said Zach, deflating a little before his enthusiasm returned in full force. "Oh well, all is well that ends well. We didn't forget anything, did we?"

Zorian glanced at the large pile of wooden crates they'd brought with them into the Black Room. There was a little bit of everything there – food, water, books to sift through, magical spells and exercises to test, piles upon piles of crystalized mana to make up for the lack of ambient mana in the Black Room, some interesting magic items for Zorian to study, board games to pass the time with and so on. He couldn't see through solid objects, obviously, but they didn't lose any of the crates in transit so it should all be there.

"I don't think we forgot anything, no," Zorian said, shaking his head. He put the red robe aside for the moment and gave Zach a tired look. "How come you are so excited about this, anyway? You realize you're going to spend the next month cooped up with me in this tiny space, sifting through written records and going through repetitive exercises?"

"Don't be a killjoy, Zorian," Zach said. "This is the first time I've been in a time dilation chamber. This thing could do so much good for us. It's exciting."

Zorian chuckled knowingly. He would see how long this mood would last.

62. Improperly Used

Chapter 062 Improperly Used

Inside the Black Room beneath Cyoria, Zorian sat cross-legged on the floor, eyes closed in concentration. Floating in front of him was a large sphere of water, its surface calm and smooth, without even the slightest ripple disturbing its surface. Around the sphere orbited numerous smaller spheres, each following a different orbit yet somehow managing not to crash into each other.

Without warning, a chunk of crystalized mana sailed through the air and punched straight through one of the smaller spheres in order to slam into the central sphere. The entire system of watery spheres trembled and wobbled for a moment, threatening to fall apart.

But it didn't. After a few seconds, Zorian succeeded in regaining control. Soon, the only evidence of the impact was the chunk of crystalized mana currently floating in the center of the watery sphere and the fact that two of the smaller spheres ended up crashing into one another, forcing Zorian to absorb them into the central mass.

Zorian opened his eyes and glared at Zach.

"It's so booooring..." Zach sighed, idly chucking another lump of crystalized mana at the sphere. Zorian temporarily shifted a portion of his concentration at the incoming crystal, seizing control of it telepathically and hurling it back at Zach. It did nothing, though, since Zach just lazily raised his hand and caught it in his palm.

Zorian shook his head in a mixture of amusement and exasperation. They had only been inside the Black Room for ten days at this point and Zach was already starting to get stir crazy.

For a moment he refocused on the water in front of him, causing all of the spheres to merge together into a thin stream and drain away into the miniature cistern which it had come from. Ten seconds later it was all gone, leaving behind only a wet chunk of crystalized mana. Zorian let it fall and caught it in his palm, before turning his attention to Zach again.

Truthfully, even Zorian found the situation hard to bear. They were trapped inside the equivalent of a tiny apartment, they had virtually no privacy and the lack of a clear day and night cycle was messing with their sleeping habits. He felt he could understand that one group that ended up butchering each other a lot better now.

Even so, this was something that had to be done, and they both knew it. The situation was hard to bear, but they *were* accomplishing things. Zach spent most of his time slowly honing his personal soul awareness and mental barriers, occasionally testing the latter against casual telepathic attacks by Zorian. When he was not doing that, he was either thinking up some way to distract himself or helping Zorian go through the numerous books and documents they brought with them to the Black Room. These gathered texts were either stolen from the stashes of high ranking cultists, looted from the various sites they attacked in their (thus far futile) search for the simulacrum spell, picked up from the aranean treasury beneath Cyoria or simply bought from the stores with their vast wealth. Zach wasn't much of a researcher, but Zorian appreciated his help all the same.

As for Zorian himself, he spent most of his time going through the aforementioned books, practicing shaping exercises and working on his spell formula blueprints. He could not properly test the latter within the confines of the Black Room, both because of insufficient materials and because of the danger of his experiments backfiring in a small confined space, but a lot of spell formula work was theoretical in nature.

"If you're so bored, why don't you finish reading through those scrolls I gave you earlier?" Zorian asked, slowly drawing out mana from the crystal in his palm to replenish his reserves. Since the Black Room was completely cut off from the outside world, all of the ambient mana had been used up by now, forcing them both to use their supply of crystalized mana instead.

"Ugh. Did I ever tell you that I don't really like reading?" Zach asked.

"Yes," Zorian deadpanned. "Many times."

"Well I'm saying it again," Zach huffed. "I don't like to read. I especially don't like to read longwinded cryptic rantings written by demon-worshipping cultists."

"Primordials aren't demons," Zorian pointed out.

"Whatever," Zach said, throwing his chunk of crystalized mana at Zorian again. Zorian tried to catch the incoming crystal with his remaining free palm, but was a lot less dexterous than Zach and would have likely failed to catch it... if he hadn't cheated by subtly altering the crystal's trajectory to hit his palm. He threw the other crystal at Zach, deliberately aiming it over his head rather than straight at him, but Zach still caught it without problems. Was Zach always so accurate, or was this simply a product of endless practice over more than three decades of restarts? "I'm starting to question if those cultist texts are even worth anything. I don't remember us finding anything useful in them thus far."

"Well, if nothing else, they have the most comprehensive explanation of blood magic, including actual guidebooks and casting instructions," said Zorian, picking up a non-descript book bound in brown leather from the stack beside him. The book appeared completely blank at first sight, but if one channeled mana into it in a very specific pattern, words would reveal themselves. "Who knows how long it would have taken us to gather this kind of illegal expertise otherwise."

Zach gave him a silent stare.

“What?” Zorian asked.

“Mind magic, soul magic, and now blood magic,” Zach said. “It’s like you’re *trying* to become as sinister as possible...”

“What makes you think I want to learn blood magic?” Zorian asked, raising his eyebrow at him. “I mean, you’re kind of right, but what gave me away?”

“The fact you’ve gone through those books three times already is kind of a dead giveaway,” Zach said. “Since you’re so interested in the idea, I’m guessing there is more to it than stabbing and bleeding people for power, right?”

“Yes,” Zorian nodded. “There are basically three distinct ways to use blood magic. The first one is to simply use it as a power boost to enhance your spells in a critical moment. Needless to say, this is not very healthy for the mage in question. Life force is critical to our health in a way that our mana reserves aren’t. Even a slight expenditure of life force will leave you tired and weakened, and since life force recovers far slower than mana reserves the effects may linger for days or weeks.”

“Huh,” said Zach thoughtfully. “That sounds kind of like drawing upon raw ambient mana to get out of a bad situation, only better because you’re only risking your health instead of both your health and sanity.”

“Pretty much, yes,” Zorian nodded. “As far as I can see, drawing upon one’s life force is superior in virtually every way to drawing upon raw ambient mana.”

“But not *every* way?” Zach asked.

“Well, it is admittedly somewhat easier to kill yourself by overdrawing on your life force than it is by drawing upon raw ambient mana,” Zorian admitted. “Still, the risks are quite manageable in my opinion. Especially for us, what with our ability to undo any lasting damage caused by training or abusing it.”

“*Can* we simply undo such lasting damage?” Zach frowned. “How are you so sure this won’t be a problem?”

“That special soul awareness training Alanic is putting me through is essentially inflicting a form of life force damage on me,” said Zorian. “Most of the really big symptoms go away after a few hours of any particular session, but smaller ones linger for days afterwards. I tire more easily, lose most of my appetite, suffer from random cramps and pains and so on.”

Zach seemed taken aback at his admission.

“You never mentioned that,” he said.

“I didn’t want to whine,” Zorian said, shaking his head. “It’s a small price to pay for what I’m getting. Anyway, Alanic pushed me pretty hard in the previous restart, so these things never really had time to die down. Instead, they just kept getting gradually worse as the restart progressed. They were never crippling, but it was noticeable. When the restart ended, however, so did all the health issues I had accumulated in the previous restart.”

“And now?” Zach asked, frowning. “Are you getting sicker all the time in this restart too?”

“No, I’m pacing myself better this time,” Zorian said.

“Good,” Zach said. “Even if you can get your health back, it can’t possibly be good for your mind to spend an entire restart increasingly tired and in pain.”

Zorian hummed thoughtfully. That... was a good point.

“So what are the other two ways of using blood magic?” Zach asked after a while, breaking Zorian out of his thoughts.

“Right. The other two methods,” Zorian said. “Well, the second one is probably the most famous one. Or should I say *infamous*? It’s basically ritually killing people to extract their life force, which is then used to cast spells. Usually demon summoning.”

“What?” Zach asked, giving him a strange look. “Why demon summoning?”

“Casting spells with someone else’s personal mana is hard,” said Zorian. “It’s not toxic like raw ambient mana, but other people’s mana is extremely hard to shape and control. This is especially true when that mana was taken forcibly from the target. Using other people’s life force has the same problem, only worse, since life force is so much more potent than regular mana. If you want to do anything fancy with your stolen life force, you need to set up long and demanding rituals. It’s much easier to just summon demons with your own mana and use stolen life force as payment for their cooperation.”

“I thought demons asked for souls as payment,” Zach said.

“They accept both, and more besides,” Zorian shrugged. “It depends on the demon, really.”

"Well, whatever," Zach said, clearly not terribly interested in the discussion about demons. "Since the first method is kind of neat, but situational, and the second method sounds exactly as awful as I feared, I'm guessing it was the third method that got you so interested in this stuff?"

"Right. The third method of using blood magic is related to enhancement rituals," Zorian said, a bit of excitement suddenly shining in his eyes.

Zorian launched into a quick explanation of the matter. Enhancement rituals were complex magical rituals that granted permanent magical enhancements to the target. Superhuman strength, fast healing, flight, fire-breathing, inherent ability to see mana... these were just some of the many possibilities that a caster could acquire by investing in the field.

There was a price, of course, or else they would already be in widespread use. First of all, there was no such thing as a safe and easy enhancement ritual – they were all very dangerous and difficult, with the slightest mistake having the potential to kill, cripple or render insane. Secondly, enhancement rituals effectively turned the target into a magical creature... and magical creatures needed mana to live.

Every magical creature needed a certain amount of ambient mana just to stay alive and fuel their magical abilities. The more powerful they were, the higher the ambient mana levels had to be to support them. Stepping into an area too thin in ambient mana to support them wouldn't immediately kill them, but they would find themselves quickly weakening and wasting away. This was the main reason why powerful monsters from the deeper levels of the Dungeon didn't overrun everything – they would effectively starve to death outside their home areas.

A human, regardless of the manner in which they acquired their magical abilities, also had to pay the price to maintain their existence. A portion of their mana reserves was effectively lost, permanently tied down in the maintenance of the magical enhancement. Their mana reserves' maximum would be permanently lowered.

It was a heavy price to pay, especially for a mage already suffering from below average mana reserves, such as Zorian. Mages interested in magical enhancements had to think very carefully about whether a particular enhancement was worth the price they would pay for it.

That said, while the price *had* to be paid... the size of the price was not set in stone. Depending on the sophistication of the enhancement ritual, the quality of the materials used in the procedure and the skill of the mage conducting it, the enhancement could either cost you half of your maximum mana reserves or a mere tenth of it.

Blood magic, by virtue of interacting with a person's very life force, could allow one to integrate a magical ability extremely well into the target. So well, in fact, that the ability could become inheritable – a true bloodline. In fact, quite a few bloodlines began in this very manner.

Employing blood magic to integrate an enhancement ritual made an already dangerous undertaking even more risky... but the price for an enhancement so well integrated into the target was greatly reduced.

There was still a price. Even with blood magic use, Zorian would still have to give up some of his precious mana reserves to acquire permanent magical enhancements. However, the price was reduced enough that Zorian was no longer willing to ignore the possibility outright.

"It's not a priority, of course," Zorian finished. "But I definitely intend to experiment with the field in the future."

Zach clacked his tongue in dissatisfaction.

"I have to say I'm not too fond of the idea," he said. "Every time I think of 'blood magic', the image of those shifter children from the previous restart pops into my mind."

Zorian flinched a little at the reminder.

"But I trust you not to descend to that level of depravity," Zach hurriedly added. "Just... stay away from the whole 'sacrifice people to summon demons' part of the field, yeah?"

"Yeah," Zorian nodded, a little more subdued.

He had originally wanted to point out that Zach could benefit from enhancement rituals even more than Zorian would, but decided this wasn't the best time to raise that issue.

- break -

Zorian leafed through one of the books on more exotic shaping exercises, searching for something that seemed challenging, but not frustratingly so. Most of the exercises in it were pretty crazy stuff, though, even by his standards. He tried to remember where they had found the book while he leafed through its pages.

After a few seconds, he remembered. It was one of the books they had taken from the aranean treasury. They had also tried to break into that secret room on the ceiling where the Cyorian web presumably kept their *real* treasures, but failed. Despite Zorian's growing skill at disarming magical security systems, all they had succeeded in doing was triggering the safeguards and ruining everything.

No matter. He would figure out how to get inside eventually. The setup was quite good, but it was no longer as arcane to him as it once was. He was pretty sure he could figure out how to dismantle the security spells in another five or six attempts.

"Why do you keep bothering with shaping exercises?" Zach asked him, not bothering to actually look at him. He was too busy juggling a dizzying

number of crystalized mana chunks to devote too much attention to Zorian.

Showoff.

“Because I still haven’t reached the limit of my shaping ability,” Zorian said, sounding as if that was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Zorian, you’re already starting to get better than me in terms of shaping skills,” Zach sighed. “And my shaping skills are good enough to cast just about every type of magic out there. Including really demanding ones like medical magic. What the hell do you even intend to do with crazy shaping skills like that?”

“You can never have too much shaping skills,” Zorian told him.

“You spent too much time around Xvim,” Zach said. “The guy’s brainwashed you.”

“Every improvement of my shaping skills, no matter how minor, means I spend less mana on my spells,” Zorian said. “For a low-mana guy like me, every drop of mana is precious. We can’t all be inexhaustible mana monsters like you, Zach.”

“Hell yeah! I’m the only one awesome like that!” Zach said, puffing his chest in an exaggerated fashion. Unfortunately for him, the action caused him to lose control over the chunks of crystalized mana he was juggling. They clattered to the floor, some of them breaking up into smaller pieces upon hitting the ground. “Oops?”

Zorian snorted in amusement.

“Did you ever find any clues about your mana reserves?” Zorian asked curiously. “There has to be a reason why you deviate so much from everyone else when it comes to your mana reserves.”

“Sadly, no,” Zach said, stepping over the fallen crystals in order to sit down next to Zorian. “No one I consulted about it has any idea how that is possible. Most people think it’s some kind of undocumented bloodline of the Noveda. Although if so, it’s one that shows up rarely and irregularly, otherwise the enemies of our House would have noticed it and noted it in the past.”

“I suppose there is no chance of you just being very, very lucky?” Zorian asked.

“It’s rather unlikely,” Zach said. “I’m sure you’ve noticed by now that my shaping skills aren’t that much worse than yours, despite the massive disparity between us in terms of mana reserves.”

“Of course,” Zorian nodded. “I assumed that’s just decades of practice adding up.”

“Ha. Well, it’s not *just* that,” Zach said. “The fact I was able to keep up with the academy curriculum at all, even before the time loop, pretty much shuts down the theory I’m just lucky. I’m magnitude 50 in terms of mana reserves, but I can shape my mana as if I was magnitude 25 at most. That’s too... *convenient* to be natural.”

“Hmm, yeah,” Zorian said thoughtfully. “Still, magnitude 25 isn’t small at all. I’m surprised you managed to get your shaping skills as high as you did with that as your starting point.”

“I did have a lot of time to get it right,” Zach pointed out. “Considering you managed to catch up to me in a measly five years or so, I don’t think it’s really that impressive. Especially since my shaping skills are as high as they will ever be while yours just keep growing better and better.”

“I’m sure Xvim would be able to find you something to work on if you asked him for help with your shaping,” Zorian teased.

Zach scowled at him, but then suddenly gained a thoughtful look on his face. He kept staring at Zorian for a few seconds, making him increasingly uncomfortable.

“What?” Zorian asked impatiently.

“You know, if you’re really so determined about pushing your shaping skills to the best they could be, you should invest some time in learning medical magic. Or at least, the diagnostic half of it. Many of those diagnostic spells analyze the state of your magic, not just your body. You can use them to map the flow of energies inside of you and get a better picture of your own limits.”

Stolen from its original source, this story is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

That did make sense, sort of. Zorian already had a decent feel for his own mana, thanks to Xvim’s training, but this still sounded like an improvement in that regard.

“Maybe some other time,” Zorian said, shaking his head. “It sounds interesting, especially if I intend to seriously mess around with blood magic, but it does not fit into my current plan.”

“We have a plan?” Zach asked with mock surprise.

“Okay, so it’s a very loose plan,” Zorian admitted. “But it does exist. What, do you want us to make a step-by-step schedule or something?”

They decided to take a few hours to just relax and unwind. They played cards and board games, exchanged stories and even had a drawing competition. Sadly, they couldn't agree if it was Zach's portrait of Zorian or Zorian's portrait of Zach that was better, so the contest was reluctantly pronounced a draw.

They still had ten days to go. Zorian didn't regret coming here in the slightest, but damn would he be glad to be out of this place.

- break -

"Finally!" Zach said, spinning around with his arms stretched out to take in the forest around them. "Finally, after years of imprisonment—"

"Only 30 days, actually," Zorian corrected.

"It felt like years," Zach continued stubbornly. "Damn, I'd never imagined seeing a bunch of trees would make me so happy. Look, Zorian – trees! Trees!"

Zorian smiled, saying nothing. He too was glad to be out, but he wouldn't dignify Zach's overdramatic antics with a verbal response. As if seeking to spite him, Zach walked up to one of the trees and hugged it.

Zorian stopped walking and stared at the spectacle in amusement, wondering how long Zach would keep this up. Especially since Zorian could see a large amount of ants travelling up and down the tree in question, and they didn't seem happy at Zach for disturbing them...

Suddenly, Zach flinched away from the tree with a muttered curse and started shaking the furiously attacking ants off of him. Zorian couldn't help it – he laughed loudly at Zach's misfortune, and then dodged backwards when Zach tried to shake off the ants in Zorian's direction.

"Jerk," Zach sniffed disdainfully.

"Come on," Zorian said, motioning Zach to follow him. "We're not far from Alanic's place. Once we give him the report we prepared for him in the Black Room, we can go and do a 'glad we're out' celebration or something."

During their month in the Black Room, Zach and Zorian had taken the time to compile all the important information they had gleaned from the looted cultist texts. Zorian intended to follow up on that information himself, of course, but it wouldn't hurt to give that information to Alanic as well. Maybe coming at the problem from two different directions would result in something.

"That does sound nice," Zach said, trailing after him. "But I'm the one picking the place. No offense, Zorian, but you have no idea how to have fun."

"I have a feeling I'm going to regret this, but fine," said Zorian.

"It's not true fun unless you regret it immediately afterwards," Zach said sagely.

Alanic was surprised to see them on his doorstep, but his surprise quickly turned pleasant when he realized what they'd brought to him.

"Thank you for this," he said. "I must say, I was a bit disturbed at how lightly you were taking this invasion, time loop or no time loop. It's comforting to realize you really are putting some work into dealing with it."

"It's hard to stay outraged at something for years and years, especially when things get reset once a month," Zach said. "But we aren't ignoring it."

"Just remember to compile a similar report with *your* findings by the end of the restart," Zorian added.

"Of course," Alanic said. "What do you intend to do now?"

"For the rest of the day? Get drunk," said Zach. Ugh, was *that* what he was planning? "Afterwards, well... I guess me and Zorian will continue our search for the simulacrum spell. I'm sure I encountered it somewhere in the past, but I just can't seem to find it. Why is a spell like that so rare anyway?"

Zach probably didn't actually expect Alanic to answer that, but the warrior priest gave him an answer all the same.

"It's because the simulacrum is one of the major stepping stones towards becoming a lich," Alanic said. "If you can cast that, you're halfway there already. Not to mention the spell itself being a complete nightmare for criminal investigators. So anyone who is known to have it is watched more intently by the Mage Guild, unless they are *very* closely aligned with them."

"So... don't tell anyone we can cast simulacrum, is what you're saying?" Zach asked, largely rhetorically. Alanic gave him a blank stare. "Yeah, I figured. But wait, doesn't that mean I should be looking for the spell primarily among groups of necromancers and liches?"

"Yes?" Alanic said, then frowned. "Hold on. You know the locations of necromancer groups and lich sanctums? Just... how many of these locations are we talking about?"

Fifteen minutes later, it had been determined that Alanic would join them on their simulacrum search. And also that Zach would sit down and write down a list of all necromancers, liches, demon worshippers, slaver compounds and other criminal sites he knew of... or at least the ones that he still remembered the exact location of, since he had forgotten quite a few of them by now. Unlike Zorian, he had never acquired some method of

guaranteed perfect memory, and had never been all that good at remembering details anyway.

Zorian had a feeling that Alanic's notes at the end of this restart would no longer be as small and sparse as they'd been at the end of the previous one.

- break -

"This is bullshit," Zach complained, his voice slurring slightly. He downed another glass of hard liquor and narrowed his eyes at Zorian. "There is no way you're so good at holding your liquor. You're cheating somehow. You cheater."

Well, he was certainly right about that. As a point of fact, Zorian was using the trick taught to him by Haslugh, so long ago, and stealthily transmuting his alcohol into sugar. But why would he ever admit that?

He just downed his glass of sugar water and gave Zach a bright, self-satisfied grin.

- break -

In the Ishekatar Sea – the southern sea enclosed by the two 'prongs' of the Altazian continent – there was a pirate ship. Well, there were quite a few of them actually, but this one was important because its crew was mostly composed out of skeletons. The only living crew were a trio of brothers, each of whom was a necromancer of some skill.

The Skeleton Pirates, as they were commonly called by their victims, had been living a pretty good life until now. The trade companies in charge of most merchant ships were notoriously cheap, staffing their cargo ships with the smallest crew they could get away with. Meanwhile, skeletons required no food or pay, and could be packed like sardines into the pirate ship's cargo hold without ever complaining about inhuman conditions or getting sick. As such, when a metaphorical skeleton crew of a merchant ship met the literal skeleton crew of the pirate ship, the result was rarely in doubt. The living sailors were severely outnumbered, and probably reliant on guns for defense, which didn't work very well against skeletons.

The only issue was closing in on their victims before they could get away, but the pirate ship the three brothers used was special. Most of their victims wouldn't even know they were coming until it was too late, and quite a few surrendered their cargo immediately when they realized what they were up against. After that, the skeleton pirates looted everything, throwing some of the skeletons overboard to make space for their new loot – the skeletons were easily replaceable, after all – and went off to sell their ill-gotten gains.

Sadly for them, their comfortable existence had come to an end. The ship's sails were burning, there were several gaping holes blown in the hull, and the sounds of magical combat emanated from its interior. This time, it was the skeleton pirates who were getting boarded.

Inside the ship in question, Zorian was fighting a horde of skeletons.

"This is so stupid," he complained, creating a shining beam of severing force to cut the approaching horde at the knees. He learned the hard way that destroying their heads did very little and that he needed to cut off their limbs if he wanted to take them out of the fight. "Why am I the one fighting mindless skeletons instead of going after living mages vulnerable to mind magic? Zach and Alanic better have a good explanation for–"

The ship shook from another explosion, but Zorian telekinetically glued his legs to the floor beneath him and thus managed to stay on his feet. The skeletons were not so lucky, and most ended up falling to the ground, providing an excellent opportunity to Zorian for finishing some of them off and maneuvering himself into a better position.

He had to hand it to the three pirate brothers running this ship – they'd put some pretty good wards on the vessel, or else it would have long since turned into a pile of sawdust from the intensity of the fight currently taking place. Though now that he thought of it, the pirates were probably powering such strong wards with the souls of their fallen enemies, so maybe it wasn't as impressive as it first looked.

Or maybe the skeletons doubled as mana generators for the wards in addition to being the disposable crew of the ship? There was a certain amount of beauty in making skeletons pull double duty like that. Hmm...

Before the skeleton horde could fully recover and swarm him again, Zorian conjured an animated mass of ectoplasmic threads beside him and started herding all of the skeletons into it. Soon, the entire group was restrained and compacted together into a giant skeletal ball. Zorian then dragged said ball to the nearest hole in the hull and threw it out of the ship.

He then repeated the move with the other skeleton group in the ship. Now, if he was right about his theory the whole warding setup should–

Oh, there we go – the wards were already failing. Wow, they didn't put even the slightest amount of mana storage somewhere as a precaution against a ploy like this? Or at least set things up so they would gradually fade away instead of suddenly crashing down like this? He retracted his earlier praise, this was very amateurish ward making.

He set off towards the heart of the ship, where Zach and Alanic were fighting the actual masters of the skeleton pirates, but when he finally got there the fighting was already over.

"For a group you claimed were such easy targets, it sure took you a long time to finally bring them down," Zorian commented while walking over to them.

"I assume you're behind the ship's wards failing?" Alanic asked, tapping a nearby chest with his battle staff in order to trigger an electrical trap

placed on it. Zorian nodded. "Thank you for that. They were very annoying. It has been a while since I fought in an area that suppresses fire magic so firmly."

"I'm sorry, it's been a long time since I fought them and I totally forgot they had these fancy wards covering their ship," said Zach, knocking on his head with a nervous laugh. "After a while, I just sank their entire ship instead of trying to fight the crew, so my perspective on how easy they were to fight was a little skewed."

Hearing that, Zorian didn't have much hope that the ship's treasure stash held the simulacrum spell. Still, in the interest of being thorough, he joined Zach and Alanic in disarming all the traps defending the treasure stash and searching through the contents. Even if simulacrum wasn't here, there could be something else of note inside. But eventually...

"Found it!" Zach shouted, triumphantly holding a pitch black scroll case above his head.

"What, the pirates actually had the simulacrum spell in their stash?" Zorian asked, surprised.

"Yup, this is it. I remember it very well because the scroll case kept destroying the contents whenever I tried to open it, and it was *so* infuriating. Then I finally managed to get to the scroll inside and it turned out it was just a simulacrum spell. Man, I was so angry about that..."

Zorian stared at the black scroll case for a moment before motioning for Zach to open it. To his surprise, Zach didn't bother unraveling the defensive trap on the scroll case or using a proper unlocking method – instead he sent some kind of magical pulse into the scroll case, causing it to fall apart into hundreds of jagged little pieces, as if it was suddenly sliced apart by hundreds of invisible blades.

Well... he supposed that was one way to defeat the trap...

"May I?" Alanic asked, extending his hand towards the piece of rolled-up leather that had been in the destroyed scroll case. Zach shared a look with Zorian, who shrugged noncommittally. The scroll was promptly handed to Alanic, who unfurled it and scanned the contents.

"It's legitimate," Alanic eventually announced. "Some of the simulacrum versions are incomplete or even malicious versions meant as traps for the unwary, but this seems like the real deal to me."

Huh. Zorian had to admit he hadn't even considered that possibility. He knew that some of the spells out there were fake or traps, but it was rarely a problem, especially if one was careful about their spell sources. He supposed that for illegal or highly restricted spells like this, the percentage of fake spells was much higher than average. Especially if they came on a mysterious scroll like this instead of a published book or something.

Alanic handed the leather scroll to Zorian, who slowly read through it.

Simulacrum, as Zorian already knew, created an ectoplasmic copy of the caster. The copy was fully autonomous, could think and act on its own judgement, and even cast its own spells. However, it had no soul and no mana reserves of its own. Instead, both of these were shared with the caster who made it. That meant that aside from the initial cost of creation for the simulacrum, as well as the running cost of maintaining its existence, the caster also had to pay for every single spell the simulacrum decided to cast.

He explained as much to Zach, who had read the description of the spell once but had since forgotten most of the details about it.

"It's still useful," Zorian noted. "Having another copy of me to help me with purely mental tasks would be infinitely useful. But it's not quite as convenient as I thought it would be."

"Yeah, it's kind of disappointing," Zach said. "It's good as bait and an additional worker to boss around, but I don't think you'll be using it too much in battle."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that," Zorian said. "Sure, I won't be spamming double fireballs with my simulacrum or anything, but my telepathic abilities are quite cheap in terms of mana costs. And they are more useful as a devastating opener than as a long-term tool in battle, so it would be pretty useful if I could make twice as many telepathic attacks whenever I make my move. Double the Zorian, double the mind magic."

"As if your mind magic wasn't terrifying enough as it is," Zach grumbled good-naturedly.

"There are two things you should keep in mind," Alanic said suddenly. "One is that no simulacrum is an entirely flawless copy of yourself. Especially in the beginning, the copies are bound to be greatly degraded version of you, lacking the full extent of your abilities. As your proficiency with the spell grows, you will be able to get increasingly better replicas... but in the end, the simulacrum is just a reflection of you, rather than a flawless copy. This is especially obvious if you keep the spell going for long periods of time. I strongly recommend that you don't keep your simulacrum active for more than a day, or else they will start developing their own personalities and goals that may run counter to your own. People have been killed by their own simulacra in the past. Considering your simulacrum will be a master mind mage like you yourself apparently are..."

"Yeah, I get the picture," said Zorian, wincing slightly. "Don't leave the simulacrum running for too long, or it may decide to overwrite my mind with its own or something similar."

"Yes," Alanic nodded. "The second thing you should keep in mind is that, while a simulacrum isn't identical to you in *every* way, it is a replica of you in *most* ways. For instance, some people react really badly to the knowledge that they are a copy of a person, which causes their simulacra to break down or go berserk immediately after being created. I don't think you and Zach will have that kind of problem, considering the supposed

nature of the time loop, but it's something to keep in mind if you ever decide to share the spell with someone else. Similarly, if you don't like doing something, your simulacrum won't like doing it either... so it's a bad idea to foist things you hate upon your simulacra. This also means that if you can't bring yourself to sacrifice your life for another, chances are your simulacrum won't want to sacrifice itself for your sake either."

In other words, the simulacrum wasn't his personal slave and would only obey orders that he himself would be willing to obey. Fair enough.

After a few more warnings and clarification from Alanic, the three of them left the burning ship and returned to Eldemar. The skeleton pirates would trouble people no longer.

- break -

Zach and Zorian spent the rest of the restart attacking the Cyorian cultists and occasionally going off on further raids on locations Zach remembered from his past. Since they had already found the simulacrum spell, these excursions were technically unnecessary, but they both decided to keep on doing them anyway. Zorian because he wanted the combat experience and had interest in some of the loot that Zach had never cared about, and Zach because he found fighting fun. Alanic joined them often as well, though as the restart gradually approached its end, he became more and more busy with his investigation into the invaders. Xvim was also offered a spot in these raids, but declined to go, saying he was 'too old for that now'.

Four days after Zach and Zorian had left the time research facility beneath Cyoria, the place went into an uproar. It took them four days, but eventually they did realize that something was wrong with the way Zach and Zorian had used the Black Room. Of course, by this time Zach and Zorian were long gone and there was nothing they could do about it, but still. Zorian investigated the issue to see what they had done wrong, and was amused to find that what had really outed them in the end was the fact that they had never submitted a follow-up report to the proper government department. Apparently each group that used the Black Room had to submit a report, in triplicate, explaining in detail how they had used the Black Room and what their gains were. Since Zach and Zorian had never bothered to do so, the administrative assistant in charge of preserving the reports complained to the research staff, eventually triggering the investigation. If they had just sent the stupid piece of paper to the government office, chances were that no one would have said a thing. Zorian doubted anyone even read those things.

Three days before the end of the restart, Zach and Zorian finally executed a plan that had been in the works since the very beginning of the restart – they broke into the Royal Palace of Eldemar, quietly infiltrating the place at first, and then just blasting their way inside when they were discovered half-way through.

They only got about two-thirds of the way in before the palace defenses began to overwhelm them and they were forced to flee, but even this failed foray into the place told them two very important things.

First of all, the royal treasury actually did hold one piece of the Key within its depths. The dagger, if Zorian was interpreting what his marker was telling him correctly. They would have to figure out a way to break into the royal treasury if they wanted to assemble all five pieces.

Secondly, trying to break into the Eldemar Royal Palace caused an unbelievable amount of outrage. The palace guards had followed them for hours after their failed intrusion, only giving up when Zach and Zorian had descended into the deep reaches of the Dungeon to lose them. And even then, that had just given them a few hours of peace, during which Eldemar's royals had apparently been organizing a state-wide manhunt for them.

It had been three days since, and the manhunt had never ended. All the newspapers and town gossips were talking about the failed break-in at the Royal Palace, and there was apparently a huge bounty placed on their heads. The bounty was a bit of a joke, since the Crown clearly didn't know much about them – as evidenced by the lack of pictures or any clear descriptions in the bounty posters plastered everywhere. Thank the gods that both of them were experts in anti-divination spells and that they had the fancy red robes they'd stolen from the cultists.

Still, while the Eldemar forces didn't know their identities, they clearly had some method of tracking down 'those two people who tried to break into the palace', because they unerringly kept coming after them every once in a while. The two of them were constantly on the run, with the longest period of time they had to sit down and relax being about six hours. It was frustrating, especially since neither Zach nor Zorian could figure out how their pursuers kept tracking them down.

"See, I was totally right in saying we should wait for the end of the restart before trying this!" Zach said as they ran towards the small forest nearby, the red robe he was wearing distorting his voice in unnerving ways.

"So what? I never disputed that!" Zorian responded, his voice similarly distorted.

Before they could say anything else, an ear-piercing screech sounded above them, quickly followed by another. Zorian didn't even have to look at the source of the screeches to know it was those two giant crowned eagles coming after them, each with a pair of battlemages riding them. That thrice-damned group was incredibly annoying, always responding first to their every move, cutting off their retreat routes and disrupting their spells until the rest of the pursuers could catch up to them. Unfortunately, the eagles were fast and agile flyers, and the battlemages riding them were incredibly good, so getting rid of them before their allies showed up was virtually impossible. By now, Zach and Zorian no longer tried to engage them – that just wasted time that could be used for running away.

"I don't think we can keep this up for long!" Zach told him as he deflected some kind of multicolored lightning bolt into a nearby bush, which immediately exploded from the force of the spell. "How long?"

Zorian glanced at the city of Cyoria looming nearby. Though it might appear to their pursuers that they were just randomly fleeing around, the two of them had actually been deliberately luring them here. The end of the restart was fast approaching, and the invasion was about to begin...

“I think it will start right-”

Before Zorian could finish the statement, numerous artillery magic flares rose into the air from the hills surrounding Cyoria. The invasion of the city had officially begun.

Zorian grumbled discontentedly. Damn reality always ruined his dramatic timing.

“Nevermind, it’s starting!” he said out loud.

“Yeah, thanks a lot. I would have never known if you hadn’t told me,” Zach said sarcastically.

Zorian said nothing, simply stepping closer to his fellow time traveler. Immediately after, Zach finished his spell and they were both enveloped into a semi-transparent white sphere, which then shot into the air with dizzying speed.

Giant crowned eagles were apparently fast and agile enough to follow after the sphere, which surprised Zorian more than it probably should have. Still, the two of them had an entire army of surprised invaders to serve as their unwilling meat walls – the sphere unerringly homed in on the largest flock of iron beaks they could find and flew straight through it, splattering numerous birds to death and pissing the entire flock off.

Sadly for the pursuing eagles and their riders, furious iron beaks aren’t very discriminating about their choice of targets. Especially when one target was clearly more vulnerable than the other and was clearly trailing after it, suggesting that they were working together.

The two of them didn’t stick around after that – Zach directed the sphere into a nearby building, where it smashed into the wall and crashed inside. This largely got them outside of the iron beak line of fire, since the inside of a building didn’t let them concentrate their forces much and they had a much more attractive target outside anyway. Thus, once they had killed the handful of brave birds coming after them, they just left the area by teleporting to different sections of the city.

Truthfully, Zorian expected him and Zach to spend the entire night leading their pursuers into a series of conflicts with the invaders. Not because they hoped to get something by doing that, but rather because they felt their pursuers were just that stubborn. However, it would seem they had been uncharitable to their opponents, because after the third time Zach and Zorian led the entire pursuit group into an Ibasan army group, they seemed to realize the scale of what was happening and gave up on going after them in favor of helping the beleaguered Cyorian defenders.

Encountering Quatach-Ichl during that third confrontation and losing both of their giant eagles in the process may have had something to do with that.

Currently, Zach and Zorian were sitting on the roof of the Academy’s highest building and observing the fighting.

“Wow,” Zach said. “You know, those mage hunters are kind of impressive when they’re fighting someone else.”

“Yeah,” Zorian agreed.

“So what are we going to do now?” Zach asked. “Just sit down and watch the world burn for a few hours until the loop resets?”

“No,” Zorian answered, shaking his head. “I have a better idea. Let’s rob the academy library.”

Zach looked at him funny, raising an eyebrow at him.

“I’m serious,” Zorian said. “I know there is probably nothing really that important in there, but I have always wondered what kind of spells are kept behind those higher level sections that I was never allowed to go to.”

“That... is a good point,” Zach said. “I can’t believe I never tried that myself. If nothing else, just so I can say I did it.”

And thus, for the next few hours, Zach and Zorian rampaged across the Academy library. While the invaders and the city defenders fought bitter battles across Cyoria, the two of them were peacefully searching through restricted texts, unbothered by the librarians and other security, who had long since fled the building in light of the invasion.

When the restart finally ended and everything went black, Zorian’s only thought was that he hadn’t finished the book he was holding...

...and that they were definitely going to do this again.

63. The March of Days

Chapter 063 The March of Days

To the north of Knyazov Dveri, deep inside the northern wilderness, there was a small, inconspicuous gully with an equally unremarkable cave carved into one of its walls. It was unlikely that anyone who stumbled upon the area would think much of it, though if they were very perceptive or experienced in the ways of the forest, they might have noted that the place felt surprisingly... peaceful.

Yet, it was anything but. The inhabitant of the cave was vicious and powerful, and many creatures had paid with their lives for trespassing into its area. The 'peaceful atmosphere' was simply the result of the beast killing anything edible or threatening in its immediate domain, which caused the larger and more intelligent creatures to avoid the area.

Despite knowing all of this, someone was about to barge into the place and provoke the grey hunter mother lurking inside the cave. Floating high in the air above the area was a wooden platform densely covered in crystalline glyphs, and standing upon it was a teenager that looked like Zorian but arguably wasn't.

He was Zorian's simulacrum, and he had been sent here to die.

From his safe location high in the sky, the simulacrum stared at the pitch black entrance to the grey hunter's lair, nervously fiddling with the watch-like device in his pocket that controlled the platform he was standing on. It would be lying to say he wasn't apprehensive about what he was expected to do. True, this had been his own idea, back when he and the original were still one and the same, but... well, it was one thing to decide to create a copy of yourself to serve as bait for a giant man-eating spider and quite another to come into existence and realize you are to *be* that bait.

He was made in his creator's image... and Zorian? He had a very strong survival instinct. He couldn't remember ever being suicidal, and even after being trapped inside a time loop he shied away from risking his life without a good reason.

He was scared. There, he said it. He was not just apprehensive, he was flat-out *scared!* How could he *not* be? He was going to be torn apart by a giant spider and he was supposed to just stand there and let it happen. It was...

He shook his head, doing his best to calm his thoughts. He *chose* this. He remembered making this plan, remembered all the arguments for why it had to be this way, and it was all just as valid now as it was then. It was only his own cowardice that was making him hesitate now. And while Zorian had never been, nor was likely to ever be some kind of paragon of bravery... he was better than this.

Still. Less than an hour ago, he had been willing to sacrifice his copy for this. He distinctly remembered this. It *felt* like his own decision, even though he technically didn't even exist back then. What did it say about him that he had been so cavalier about the decision back then, but now that he was to be said sacrifice, he found himself having doubts?

One of the rings hanging around his neck suddenly vibrated for a moment. The original was trying to contact him. He sent a telepathic probe into the ring in question, which was actually a miniature telepathic relay, and formed a connection with the mind of true Zorian. He briefly wondered if it was possible to use their soul as a telepathic conduit in lieu of their artificial relays, since they shared one and all. However, he knew too little about soul magic to judge how difficult such an idea would be, so he put the thought aside.

[Ready?] the original Zorian asked.

The simulacrum hesitated, just for a moment. The original seemed... confident. The fear and anxiety that plagued the simulacrum were entirely absent from his progenitor's thoughts. Instead, the original seemed expectant, even excited. What vast differences in thinking, and they had diverged so recently from one another...

Well, no matter. Strangely enough, he didn't blame the original for his attitude. What sense would that make? In the past several restarts since Zorian had acquired the simulacrum spell, he had relentlessly practiced it. By now, any copy he produced was a pretty good rendition of the original. The simulacrum was confident that he was cut from the same cloth as the original Zorian, so chances are that he would have behaved the same if their positions were reversed somehow.

If he cursed Zorian, he cursed himself.

[I'm ready,] the simulacrum sent back.

After a moment's hesitation, he also enclosed his thoughts on using their soul as a telepathic conduit inside a memory packet and sent them over the link to the original. Just in case the original Zorian didn't have the same idea for some reason.

There was a short pause as the original seemed to consider things. When he finally responded a few seconds later, it was with but a single word.

[Go.]

The simulacrum didn't argue or stall for time – he immediately pressed a button on the watch-like device in his pocket, causing the wooden platform to plunge downward with dizzying speed. Somehow, now that the moment of truth had finally come, he was able to discard all his worry

and hesitation and act decisively. He was still scared, but there was also determination there... or maybe it was just resignation? Either way, as he watched the ground rapidly get closer and closer, he knew that he could do it. He could play the role he was meant to play.

Though he was currently standing on a piece of wood hurtling towards the cold, unforgiving ground, the simulacrum wasn't worried about crashing into the ground and dying. The platform wasn't actually falling in the classical sense, as evidenced by the fact it stayed aligned horizontally with the ground instead of flipping around randomly through the air. It was a magical travel device executing a controlled descent, and the simulacrum had full faith in its construction. He remembered making it, after all.

No, all of his worry and attention was being directed at the unassuming cave entrance in the gully. He had come to terms with being torn apart by a giant murder-spider in the near future (well, *mostly*), but whether or not his death would achieve anything was still an open question. The plan wasn't complicated – he just had to lure the grey hunter mother into stepping onto the very wooden platform beneath his feet, which would cause the multitude of traps and restrictive wards anchored to it to activate, sealing the spider's fate. The problem was that the grey hunter was quite canny about recognizing traps. Thus his current method of entry. In theory, suddenly dropping out of the sky right into the middle of the grey hunter's territory should catch the spider off-guard and enrage it enough for it to rush out and attack him without making sure it wasn't blundering into a trap.

In theory. In practice, the grey hunter was annoyingly unpredictable. This wasn't the first time Zach and Zorian were fighting the thing, and their previous clashes with it were... well, they managed to eke out a win in the end. For a certain definition of 'win'. The grey hunter was dead in the end, yes, but in one restart Zach ended up being bitten and couldn't cast anything for the rest of the restart, and in the other Zorian had both of his legs shattered so thoroughly it took him an entire week to heal, even with the best medical care money can buy. Gods that was painful. Thankfully, he was just a copy mind inhabiting an ectoplasmic shell, so he wouldn't be suffering through a repeat of that experience – he had no bones to break, after all.

Hopefully the trap would work. It would be nice to get the spider's egg sack intact (something they hadn't managed to accomplish up until now), if only so he could rub the achievement into Silverlake's face. But barring that, Zorian would settle for a proper victory instead of a pyrrhic win that left them in recovery for the rest of the restart.

The simulacrum frowned. You know what? He wasn't taking chances with this. If he had to die, he at least wanted his death to be meaningful and achieve something. Thus, just before he hit the ground, he dipped into the mana reserves he shared with the original and cast a hastening spell on himself. He immediately felt the world slow down around him, the spell accelerating his personal time flow by about two and a half times. This was not part of the plan – in fact, the original was probably cursing him right now to hell and back for wasting a good chunk of his precious mana reserves – but the haste effect might let him react fast enough to the grey hunter's moves to actually achieve his mission, so the original would just have to deal with it.

The platform hit the ground with surprising gentleness, the powerful wards emanating from it blunting the force of the impact until it could barely be felt. But the simulacrum still felt it and stumbled in place for a second. He recovered almost immediately, but by then the grey hunter was already making its move.

What a fast response. It would seem they had underestimated the murder-spider once again, because less than a second since the platform touched the ground, the grey hunter was already jumping out of the cave entrance. It must have detected the intrusion while the simulacrum was still in the air and was already on the move by the time the wooden platform hit the ground.

With his accelerated perceptions, the simulacrum could see the furry, many-legged body of the grey hunter sailing through the air in all of its terrible detail. The huge glossy fangs, the soulless black eyes, the quill-like fur covering its entire body...

The simulacrum was not ashamed to admit he froze in place for a moment. He regained his wits quickly though, just in time to see the grey hunter slam into the ground next to the gully, kicking up dust and gravel as it immediately launched itself back into the air again. He watched the beast intently, trying to think of the best way to keep it contained on the platform long enough for the traps to fully activate. But something was wrong – the grey hunter was going too high and too fast. At that speed and at that angle of ascent, the spider was...

Damn it, it was going to overshoot his location entirely! It wasn't taking the bait. Maybe it could understand that the platform was a trap, or maybe it knew that the simulacrum was just an ectoplasmic construct and thus didn't find him threatening enough – whatever it was, the grey hunter decided to completely ignore Zorian's simulacrum and the platform he was standing on.

At that moment, the simulacrum was torn between feeling amused and being annoyed. On one hand, having the murder-spider ignore him entirely after all that inner turmoil he went through was kind of funny... but the fact that the spider was clearly going after the original instead was bad and objectively the worst way this mission could have ended. A simulacrum like him was a lot more expendable than the original was.

He thought about trying to telekinetically snare the grey hunter and draw it into the trap, or get its attention by using mind magic... but his memories told him that could never work. The grey hunter had insanely high magic resistance, and trying to affect it with magic directly was like trying to hold a live eel... an exercise in frustration. Instead, he tried something else. As the grey hunter was passing overhead, the simulacrum created a thick rope of magical force and tried to use it to entangle the grey hunter and reel it in onto the platform. Unfortunately, the spider twisted its body in mid-air, avoiding the rope by a centimeter or so. It then managed to right itself fast enough to land solidly on its feet, landing a good distance behind the platform.

Frustrated at the way he was failing his mission, the simulacrum tried to get the grey hunter's attention by firing a ball of entangling ectoplasmic threads at its back. He knew from experience that the grey hunter was strong enough to break through the spell, but, humiliatingly enough, the spell didn't even hit it properly. The spider reacted instantly, rolling to the side to avoid the bulk of the spell. A few threads did manage to snag it,

wrapping themselves tightly around its legs, but the grey hunter just accelerated forward, gouging out clumps of grass from the forest floor as its legs sought greater traction, and the threads that tried to restrain it snapped like they were made of straw. It then sped off into the distance, zigzagging a few times to avoid the handful of overpowered magic missiles the simulacrum had sent after it as a parting gift. Despite being overpowered and cast in haste, the missiles were only faintly visible, existing only as a slight discoloration in the air – a testament to Zorian's mastery of the spell. Despite this, not only could the grey hunter evidently perceive them without even turning around, it moved with sufficient speed and agility to defeat their homing function and dodge them anyway. That shouldn't even be possible, damn it!

The simulacrum stared at the dust trail left behind by the grey hunter, taking a deep breath to calm himself (even though he was just an ectoplasmic construct and didn't really need to breathe). The damn spider didn't even have the decency to turn around and pay attention to him upon being attacked, never mind being tempted to step on the platform. It treated the simulacrum like it was just a particularly aggressive rock or something, instead of an actual threat!

Well. His mission was certainly a failure, but maybe he could help the original in some other way. He started running after the monster and sent a message to the original through the relay hanging around his neck, asking for directions. The original had been observing the event through his senses, so he didn't have to explain much. He was immediately told to 'observe only and stop wasting mana for now'. Wow, what a jerk. He supposed he *had* been a little wasteful with their shared mana reserves, but come on! He was just trying to salvage the situation somehow.

When he finally caught up to the grey hunter, he came upon the sight of a battlefield. Zach and Zorian were both engaging the grey hunter, along with a group of golems (two big and slow ones for defense and ten smaller and faster ones to act as distractions). The grey hunter hurled itself at Zorian – the original one – only to crash into a thick multicolored plate of force and bounce off. Zach tried to take advantage of this and impale it, sending a trio of black javelins at it, but the spider reoriented itself in an instant, dancing around the projectiles like a leaf in the wind and hurled itself back towards Zorian again the moment its legs touched the ground. It zigzagged across the ground, kicking up dust and gravel and unerringly dodging every trap that had been hidden in the area beforehand, including some purely non-magical ones like hidden pits and iron bear traps. Zach did his best to hit it with a multitude of projectile spells, and Zorian directed his golems to block it and try to push it into one of said projectiles or the traps it was avoiding. It was all for naught. The grey hunter's agility and speed was unreal, and the few times it ended up boxed in by the attacks and the traps, it unfailingly identified which attack it could tank without getting hurt.

Zach launched a dense sphere of rock at the back of the boxed-in spider, only for it to kick back with its rear legs like a horse and shatter the sphere of magically hardened rock like it was just loosely packed earth. Zorian managed to hit it with a powerful incinerating ray, but all that did was burn off some of the dense 'fur' covering its body and didn't seem to do any lasting damage. Zach trapped it in a cage of dense, layered force, but the grey hunter mother shattered each one like it was made of paper and burst free before Zach and Zorian could strengthen the prison enough to hold her. One of the smaller golems managed to latch onto the grey hunter's back; without hesitation, the spider rammed itself backwards into a tree, causing the golem to let go.

The simulacrum watched all this, observing the battle and waiting for the right moment to act. He knew that, despite Zach and Zorian's apparent lack of success at damaging the grey hunter, the situation was under control at the moment. The two of them had fought the beast twice already, and though they suffered a heavy price each time, they also learned how to keep it at bay and put pressure at it. The only reason why the grey hunter hadn't fallen yet was that neither Zach nor Zorian were trying their hardest to kill it yet. They were still hoping to get its eggs relatively intact, so they couldn't use area of effect spells as indiscriminately as they should against an opponent like this.

Sure enough, while the battle failed to kill the grey hunter, it was steadily getting pushed back towards the wooden platform as the minutes ticked by. The spider seemed to realize it was getting herded into a trap, however, and stubbornly refused to get pushed onto it.

Finally, after both Zach and Zorian were starting to run out of mana and get physically exhausted, and all but two of the smaller golems had been reduced to scrap, the two finally managed to trick the grey hunter into a trap. Zorian deliberately left himself somewhat open, casting his defensive plane of force relatively high, and the grey hunter took the bait and tried to slide under it to get to Zorian. Perhaps it was getting tired itself and decided to take the chance? Regardless, Zorian had been ready for it and promptly materialized a dimensional gate in front of himself... a gate whose exit point led straight onto the wooden platform. The spider tried to twist itself in mid-air to dodge it, but Zach used a powerful gust of wind to push it in anyway.

And then, just as it was going to slam into the wooden platform and get snared, the grey hunter revealed its final trump card – it shot a strand of silk out of its back end and used it as a lifeline to reel itself to the side of the platform, avoiding it entirely.

"Okay, that does it," Zach growled. "We're taking it down, damn the eggs."

"Fine," Zorian agreed unhappily.

The simulacrum could understand the original's frustration. They were so close to total victory...

One of the remaining golems tried to push the grey hunter onto the platform again, only for the spider to do a backflip – there is no other way to describe it – and land right on top of the golem. It then pushed itself off, using the golem's head as leverage to propel itself away from the risk zone, and shoved the golem straight into the platform in the process.

...and yet so far away.

A giant firestorm suddenly consumed the entire area, courtesy of Zach, and for the first time in the battle, the grey hunter screamed. It was fast and tough, but it couldn't dodge a spell that affected such a wide area and a fire so intense was beyond it to fully shrug off. It was not dead, but large patches of its fur were gone and two of its eyes had burst from the heat.

Its egg sack was reduced to ash in its entirety.

The grey hunter mother let loose an ear-splitting screech of rage for her destroyed eggs and went completely berserk. No longer caring to avoid damage, the spider rushed at Zach, who it correctly identified as the source of the firestorm, at even greater speeds than before. It charged straight through the hail of projectiles launched at it by both Zach and Zorian, losing a leg and another eye in the process, and kept going. It almost succeeded at sinking its fangs into Zach's chest but Zorian managed to recall the boy away before the strike could connect.

A berserk grey hunter was dangerous. They became less cautious and more willing to tank damage in order to inflict some of their own in turn. In their previous clashes with the grey hunter mother, they had been caught off-guard by the change in tactics, which was how Zorian had gotten both of his legs broken. This time, though, they were ready for it... and for someone who knew what was coming, a berserk grey hunter was actually easier to fight than a calm one.

An area-wide freezing spell from Zach, a ball of shredding force from Zorian, and a collective sacrifice from the remaining golems dog-piling it and self-destructing themselves, and the grey hunter was finally dead. Its mangled corpse looked like a living warzone, but as far as the simulacrum was concerned, the fact it still remained in one piece after everything it went through is already amazing.

"It's a shame," the original said, approaching the corpse to inspect it. "I really thought we had a chance of getting its eggs this time."

"I'm just glad I didn't get bitten again," Zach said, rubbing his chest as if trying to ward off phantom pain. "Thanks for the save back there. Anyway, you shouldn't be too greedy. This thing is a pain to fight, even when we're going all-out, never mind trying to capture it. We still have its corpse in reasonably good condition, which means we can make those awesome magic perception potions again. That's reward enough if you ask me."

The simulacrum smiled, remembering how shocked Lukav had been when they had brought a Grey Hunter corpse to him in one of the restarts and asked him to turn it into an enhancement potion. Unfortunately, grey hunters were so rare and dangerous to hunt that there was no publicly available potion recipes involving them, nevermind a specific one that granted the imbiber its senses. Lukav couldn't do it. It was beyond his pay-grade, he said. All he could do was give them a list of better alchemists that could be able to help them, though he warned them that even they would probably have to invent a new potion from scratch in order to fulfill their request. Zach and Zorian had to spend two weeks visiting various potion makers recommended by Lukav till they found one that was capable of working with the corpse in their hands, and even then it took the woman more than a single restart to create the potion. They had to give her the research notes she had made herself in the previous restart and make something up to explain how they had them.

In the end they did get a recipe of turning dead grey hunters into powerful potions of mana perception, but the issues involved had finally convinced Zorian to start learning how to make transformation potions himself. He was still a rank beginner in the field, but even the little he knew was useful. Eagle-eye potions were surprisingly easy to make, and the visual acuity they gave was amazing.

"Yes, exactly," the simulacrum said, approaching the group and startling Zach.

"You're still here?" Zach asked. "Oh, right, Zorian did say the spider ignored you entirely."

"Yeah, the grey hunter had absolutely no interest in me whatsoever. I guess it could tell I'm a simulacrum. Its senses are really something."

"It's something alright," Zach said. "Zorian, are you *sure* that thing isn't intelligent?"

"Yes," Zorian said. "I can't affect its mind, but my mind sense works on it just fine and I can judge its sapience. It's dumber than a troll."

"But it's still about as smart as a crow or a boar," the simulacrum protested against his creator. "It's got animal cunning. Do you remember how Zach dragged us into that bar in Knyazov Dveri and then started a drunken conversation with that group of hunters?"

"Ugh, how could I forget?" Zorian said.

"You know, Zorian, watching you talk to yourself like that is pretty damn surreal," Zach pointed out.

Neither the simulacrum nor the original acknowledged him in any way.

"Anyway," continued the simulacrum. "At one point the hunters spoke about being hired to stop wild boars from destroying the crops around the city and complained about how quickly the wild boars learned to recognize and avoid traps. They said the boars even learned how to spot magical setups, despite not having any magic perception as far as anyone knew."

"Yes, but those are learned skills," Zorian said, frowning. "The boars have to be constantly exposed to traps to learn how to deal with them. The grey hunter didn't have any chance to learn like that."

"How do you know that?" the simulacrum countered. "It's Silverlake who sent us to this place, remember? Logically, this means she tried to retrieve the eggs herself and failed. I rather doubt she tried to fight the grey hunter head on, so..."

"She used traps," Zorian said, finally reaching the same conclusion the simulacrum had. "She used all sorts of traps, and all she did was teach it how to recognize and avoid them."

Zorian looked absolutely outraged at the fact Silverlake had basically trained the grey hunter on how to respond to human attackers and never

even bothered to tell them about it, but Zach just laughed lightly.

“Deceptive mission givers, how nostalgic,” he said. “I remember the first time I got screwed over by one, I was even more incensed than Zorian here. That aside, Zorian, I’m amused that your simulacrum figured it out before you yourself did. How does that work?”

“Differing perspectives,” the simulacrum said with a light shrug.

“We diverged a few measly hours ago,” Zorian said dismissively. “Just how different could our perspectives be?”

The simulacrum frowned, a little annoyed at the response. He didn’t answer with words. Instead he forced a connection to Zorian’s mind and blasted him with a few choice memories. The nerve-wracking wait before the platform’s descent. The terrifying sight of the grey hunter jumping out of the cave and seemingly towards him. The feeling of frustration and powerlessness as he watched the battle without being able to meaningfully contribute anything. Zorian gasped and took a step back, caught off-guard by this sudden pseudo-attack, and gave him a shocked look.

“Very different,” the simulacrum said, and then deliberately collapsed his own ectoplasmic body and dissolved into smoke.

His job was done, anyway.

- break -

It was a beautiful sunny day, and Zorian was standing on an abandoned field, far from anything dangerous or important. He wasn’t alone. Standing around him was a group of familiar people: Zach, Taiven, Imaya, Kirielle, Kana and Kael. They were all gathered around a stone table that Zorian had created out of the nearby ground, watching the potion bottles lined up in the center of it. Each had a slightly different reaction.

Zach looked mildly interested but otherwise calm and collected. Taiven had a distant, thoughtful expression, seemingly consumed in her own thoughts and barely even conscious of her surroundings. Imaya seemed torn between quiet excitement and apprehension, occasionally glancing at Kirielle and Kana with a small frown. She probably thought they were too young to be here. Considering the unhappy, sour look that Kael was giving Zorian, he probably agreed with that conclusion. Zorian was unrepentant, though – if Kael didn’t want Kana here, he could have just refused to bring her along. It wasn’t Zorian’s fault that Kael was too weak-willed to resist his daughter’s whining and relented to her requests in the end.

As for Kirielle, well... she was practically vibrating on her feet from excitement, staring at the potion bottle like she wanted to swallow it with her eyes. A bit comical, but Zorian could understand.

It wasn’t every day that you got a chance to turn into a bird and fly.

“Alright,” Zorian finally said. “I’m giving you all one last chance to back out.”

Besides Kirielle’s loud ‘no’, he received no response. He assumed that meant none of them were stepping out at the last moment, but just to be sure he gave Kael a curious look, since he seemed to be the one most against this.

Kana, whom Kael was currently holding in one hand, noticed the look and gave her father a quiet whine, as if warning him to not even think about sending her away. Kael responded with an amused snort and a casual tap against her forehead.

“I’m going to go through with it, against my better judgement,” Kael said, looking Zorian straight in the eye. “I guess I should congratulate you – it’s been a while since Kana so obviously wanted something. Now hurry up and explain things before I change my mind.”

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“Fine,” Zorian shrugged. “I’ll keep it brief. There are six transformation potions here, all identical. Drink it and you will be transformed into a peregrine falcon.”

“And then we can fly?” Kirielle asked excitedly.

“Of course,” Zorian said. “What would be the point of transforming into a bird if you can’t fly? Though it might take a while before you can control your new body correctly, so don’t be surprised if your initial attempts turn poorly.”

“What if someone falls from the sky for some reason?” Imaya asked. “Or if something tries to eat us?”

“That’s why there are six potions instead of seven,” Zach noted. “I’ll remain untransformed and step in if someone messes up. As for something trying to eat you... well, it shouldn’t happen. But if it does, Zorian will be flying beside you and give them hell. There is nothing in the area that can survive against him.”

Mostly because of his psychic powers. For normal mages, transforming into a non-humanoid form was quite risky, as they would lose access to all structured spells. Zorian’s mental powers were just as usable as a falcon as they were when he was human, so he was not nearly as defenseless.

“Okay. It’s comforting to know you’ve put some thought into this and that it isn’t something you’re doing on a whim,” Imaya said. “But isn’t this horribly expensive? Don’t get me wrong, I’d like to try being a falcon as much as the others, but... it just seems so wasteful to spend all these potions for what is essentially playing around.”

Ah, yes – Imaya was the only adult here that hadn’t been informed about the time loop. One of these days he was going to tell her the truth just to see how she reacted.

He spent a few seconds trying to put together a convincing response in his head, but before he could vocalize it Taiven already butted in to explain instead.

“Don’t worry about that,” Taiven sighed. “It’s secret so I can’t tell you the details, but the cost of these potions is so small for these two as to be functionally irrelevant.”

A few more clarifications later and the potions were distributed to everyone present except Zach. Originally Zorian intended to drink his potion first to reassure the others that it worked correctly, but apparently Kirielle didn’t need convincing and immediately drank hers when Zorian handed a bottle to her. She transformed without any issues and the rest of them were treated to a sight of a brand new female falcon flailing around on the grass for a good minute or so. She had attempted to take flight immediately and found that it was not nearly as easy as one might think.

After that the rest of them drank the potion and transformed as well.

The next several hours were kind of a mixed bag. On one hand, nobody ended up getting hurt. On the other hand, it turned out that Zorian had vastly underestimated how difficult it was to control a completely alien body for most people. He had thought that his initial attempts at being a bird were bad, but he was like a born genius compared to what his current pupils displayed. After some thoughts, he came to the conclusion that this was probably another thing that benefited from him being ‘Open’, as aranea would call it. The entire point of his psychic ability was that it gave him greater awareness of his own mind and allowed him to process mental information from completely foreign sources – that was why he was able to contact and read other people’s minds so easily, why divinations that dumped information straight into the mind of the caster worked better for him, and probably why he could handle being transformed into a completely foreign body far better than, say, Imaya or Kael.

He suddenly understood a lot better why transformation magic was so relatively niche, and why shifters were still envied by those who wished to take on the forms of other creatures. Learning how to control a different body than the one you are used to was hard for Zorian, and it was apparently even harder for other people. Anyone who wanted to benefit from transformation magic couldn’t do it on a whim – they had to practice with their new form a lot before they could use it in any serious manner.

Still, by the time the potion wore off, everyone had managed to take flight at least once. This was mostly because Zorian was present, though – he used his telepathy to directly *show* people how a falcon is supposed to move, sometimes even puppeteering their movements for a few seconds to demonstrate what they were doing wrong. If they had been trying this alone, chances are they would have required at least three or four sessions to get it right. And it was entirely possible they would have ended up hurting themselves in the process.

The common consensus at the end was that being a falcon and flying through the air under their own power was amazing and that maybe they should do it again some time. Kirielle also excitedly floated the idea of turning into a dragon next time.

He probably spooked Imaya and Kael something fierce when he didn’t immediately veto the idea.

- break -

“What are you doing?”

Zorian stopped drawing the bowl of fruit in front of him to give Kirielle a strange look.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Zorian asked. “I’m drawing things.”

Zorian didn’t really know why he was doing it, to be honest. He didn’t think himself an artist, but he felt like trying a new hobby since his old one of reading fiction was starting to get a little stale. There were only so many good stories out there and he had read just about everything that interested him at least twice by now.

He would probably get bored of drawing eventually, but he had only been doing this for the past three restarts and for now he found it kind of relaxing.

“Since when do you draw?” she asked, nosily sticking her head over him to study his work. “Is this related to that mysterious artist of yours?”

For a moment, he was confused what she was talking about before he remembered that was how he had explained those old drawings of hers he had given her at the beginning of the restart. He had been steadily compiling her work over the past several restarts, giving her the updated collection in every restart. Since she disliked drawing things that already existed among the drawings given to her by Zorian, this forced her to continually pick new things to draw every time.

Much like his decision to start drawing, this effort was motivated purely on the ground that he found the result kind of amusing.

It was a bit wasteful in terms of mental space, but that was no longer the issue it once was. Ever since he opened the Matriarch’s memory packet, he had plenty of space for things like this. In addition, he had recently developed a better, more efficient method of storing notebooks than his original improvised setup. He no longer recorded the entire structure of a notebook, opting to just memorize the text and the diagrams inscribed within. A seemingly simple idea, but one that had taken him months of tinkering to get right.

“Yeah, I guess it is,” said Zorian. After all, it was unlikely it would occur to him to start drawing if it were not for Kirielle.

“Is she a girl?” Kirielle asked conspiratorially.

Zorian’s mouth twitched in amusement.

“Yes,” he said with a bashful cough. “As a matter of fact, she is.”

Kirielle grinned impishly, looking very pleased with herself for figuring it out.

“I knew it!” she crowed. “What’s her name? Do I know her? When can I meet her? Oh and what about...”

It took Zorian at least a half an hour to get her to leave him alone, and somehow he had managed not to laugh at her face throughout the whole thing. Sometimes he really surprised himself.

- break -

Zorian turned the solid iron sphere in his hands, staring at it thoughtfully. He would undoubtedly look weird and maybe kind of crazy to any passerby that might be looking at him, since the sphere was totally invisible to the naked eye. Fortunately for him, the only other person inside the room was the very person who had given him that sphere so he could focus on the object of his study without being distracted by the mutterings of random strangers.

The sphere in his hands was a complex, multi-layered thing surrounded by a dense cloud of different wards stacked upon each other. The jigsaw-like arrangement of metal plates that made up its physical structure was liberally peppered with both mechanical triggers and glyph clusters that would destroy the fragile core buried in the heart of the sphere if he tried to open it incorrectly. He was supposed to retrieve said core whole and intact, so that was obviously an unacceptable outcome. He had to navigate the virtual maze of stacked wards and then carefully dismantle the sphere to retrieve the core hidden within... and he had to do it without being able to see what he was working with, since the invisibility field was tied to the very core he was supposed to retrieve and couldn’t be deactivated until he got access to it.

Oh well, time to get to work.

The sphere’s invisibility was a pain, but it didn’t leave Zorian stumped. His magic perception had been steadily advancing ever since Xvim had introduced him to the skill, and recently he had undergone several giant leaps forwards in that regard. Partially this was due to the augmentation potions made from the grey hunter’s corpse, and partially it was because he and Zach had been throwing obscene amounts of money at various experts so they would teach them their skills.

He focused his senses on the sphere, trying to make sense of it. After about ten minutes of passive observation he was confident enough to move on to more active methods. He carefully analyzed the contraption with a multitude of divinations, some general and some incredibly focused and specific. Slowly he bypassed or neutralized the outer wards so he could start dismantling the physical structure of the sphere...

It took him more than two hours of challenging work, but he was successful in the end. He held a bright red crystal in his hand and handed it to the middle-aged bearded man that had been watching him as he worked.

“Excellent! Excellent!” the man said happily. “That was truly impressive. You’re even better than your brother was at your age.”

Zorian smiled at the compliment, not saying anything. His outrage at being constantly compared to Daimen had cooled down considerably over the years, but he didn’t trust himself not to sound bitter if he tried to respond with words. He would just nod and quietly take advantage of the fact that this man had taught his brother and looked at him favorably because of it.

“I couldn’t help but notice that you didn’t use a divination compass while you worked,” the man said, leaning back in his chair. “Do you not need it?”

“No,” Zorian said honestly. “I just dump all the information the spells give me directly into my head. I’m innately talented at interpreting that, so there is no need to bother with a divination compass. Besides, I find that most physical tools discard a lot of important information given by the divination, simply because they have no way of displaying it.”

“Ha! Of course they do, that’s why ward breakers like us pay huge sums for ever more sophisticated divination compasses. In my estimation, you are already at the level where generic, store-bought crap can’t satisfy your needs. You’d have to contact a mana forge and buy a custom built one. Of course, if you’re really capable of comprehending the spells in your mind, maybe that’s just pointless cost for you, I don’t know.”

Zorian hummed thoughtfully. He was honest about not needing a divination compass, but he supposed it wouldn’t hurt to check out the fancier, custom-built ones. Who knows, maybe there was something he was missing with his current methods. It cost him nothing to buy a box of them and then dismantle them to see how they worked.

A few hours later he left, carrying a list of divination compass makers and a letter of recommendation without which those high-level experts wouldn’t even deign to speak with him. He soon arrived at the local park where Zach was already waiting for him, sitting on the bench and feeding the pigeons with bread like some old pensioner.

“Already done?” Zorian asked, mildly surprised. Zach was supposed to check out the combat magic instructors in the city, which should have taken him a lot longer than this.

“None of them are worth our time,” Zach said, shaking his head and throwing another chunk of bread at the small throng of pigeons in front of him. “Larsa is Falkinea’s biggest and most important city. You’d think they’d have a respectable selection of combat instructors but they’re nothing special. I guess it’s true what they say about Falkinea being the weakest of the Big Three in terms of military might.”

Zorian nodded, accepting his judgement. Zach had spent decades in the time loop pursuing combat magic excellence, so he knew what he was talking about. Even though Zorian required a completely different selection of spells to be an effective combat mage than Zach did, he had faith that Zach was keeping that fact in mind when checking these people out.

He plopped down on the bench next to Zach, marveling at the way the pigeons failed to react to his sudden movement. If these pigeons ever landed in Cirin, they would be all caught before nightfall and barbecued. Say what you want about Falkinea’s lack of military might, they really were a prosperous nation.

“What do you think about your newest instructor?” Zach asked. “Is he any good?”

“He’s good,” Zorian nodded slowly.

“But?” Zach asked, sensing there was more to it.

“He’s not teaching me everything he’s got,” Zorian sighed. “And I don’t think there is a way to convince him to do so. He’s very impressed with me, but...”

“But he’ll only teach his best secrets to a formal apprentice, and even then you’d have to stay with him for a year or more before he would consider it,” guessed Zach.

“Something like that,” Zorian nodded.

“That’s pretty much what Xvim said would happen,” Zach noted. “You never did go around mind probing people on that list, did you?”

“No, I had been contacting them and trying to get them to teach me their skills ‘the proper way’. I had been hoping it won’t be necessary,” Zorian said, frowning. “And in a way it really *hadn’t* been, if only because up until now I had plenty of worthwhile things to learn even without resorting to that. But now... I don’t know. If we want to get at the dagger in the royal treasury, we’re going to need to become a lot better at ward breaking and the like. And these are not skills that people are willing to trust a stranger with, especially not one they’ve met less than a month ago. These are highly restricted, sometimes outright illegal skills. Most of the experts I’ve been talking to won’t even admit they have them, much less agree to teach them to us.”

He hadn’t been met with total failure. Two of the experts on Xvim’s list actually proved willing to teach him to the best of their ability – one because he happened to be in debt and was desperate for large sums of money, and one because he was a mind mage who found Zorian’s innate mental abilities endlessly fascinating. It was kind of interesting to compare structured mind magic to his own abilities and see how they fare against each other, and though he was unlikely to ever use structured mind magic himself, it did inspire him to take his mental abilities in new directions. However, just two experts out of the large list Xvim had given him was...

Well, frustrating. Especially since it wasn’t just a moral issue – it was so much more useful to learn from people when they were honestly trying to teach you something. Because of the need to know which are the right questions to ask and a lack of back and forth between the teacher and the student, mind magic interrogations were far inferior to having a willing teacher. If Zorian had to memory probe Xvim every time he wanted something from him, for instance, the benefits would be but a fraction of what he got out of the man through his current methods. Well, unless Xvim was secretly hiding something of crucial importance from him, but Zorian kind of doubted that.

“What about targeting criminals?” Zach asked. “You’ve established links with Cyoria’s criminal underground through the contact lists the aranea left behind, haven’t you?”

Yes, he certainly had. Interestingly, most of these were not ‘cloaked, shady men in dark alleys’ but rather otherwise respected merchants and (somewhat less respected) mercenaries. He had used his mind magic on these people a lot more freely than he had when interacting with legitimate experts and instructors, but truthfully? There was a reason why most of these people used their abilities for crime instead of opening a legitimate business. They just weren’t good enough. Most of them had a neat trick or two, and Zorian copied those from them when he could, but in general they had nothing that couldn’t be acquired easier elsewhere. Probably the most useful thing he obtained from these people was a channel for acquiring illegal materials and the knowledge of how to hire unscrupulous mercenaries without getting ripped off or ending up in jail. Useful things to be sure, but that wasn’t what Zach was asking about.

“It wouldn’t work,” Zorian said simply, shaking his head. “They don’t have what we need.”

“Alright,” Zach said, not pressing the issue. “To be perfectly honest, I think we’re doing just fine as it is. You shouldn’t feel pressured to do this if you don’t want to. We’ll manage somehow.”

Zorian said nothing to that, not really sure himself what the correct answer was. There was a part of him that said he was being stupid by refusing to employ his mental abilities to their maximum extent, but he suspected that once he started to casually assault people for no reason other than them having things he wanted, it would be hard to take a step back. You are what you do. If he started going down that path, it would change him, and not for the better. Sure, having those skills would greatly increase the chances of him successfully escaping the time loop, but was there any point to that if what came out at the end was a monster?

Zorian rose from his spot and walked away. Zach followed him, throwing the entire remains of his bread to the pigeon throng as he left the bench. They left the park and its dangerously fearless pigeons and continued their conversation on foot.

“Underwhelming results aside, this is a nice city,” Zach said. “Was there anything else you wanted to do here?”

“Yes, actually,” Zorian said. “There is a famous golem maker here and a couple of spell formula crafters for hire.”

“You really are determined to spend all of our money, aren’t you?” Zach asked rhetorically.

“Of course. It’s completely useless to leave it sitting there without use. It’s not like we can transfer it between restarts,” Zorian said.

He actually wasn’t going to seek instructions from these people – he was going to hire them to do work for him. He had been doing that for several restarts now, paying various spell formula experts to design or improve blueprints for him. Then he took the finished designs and gave them to the same people in the next restart in order to further refine them. Sometimes he also gave them to different people, just to see what different takes they have on the problem.

He did the same with warding experts, golem makers and alchemists. All of those fields took a lot of thinking and testing, but the finished designs were fairly compact and could be used by anyone, making them really convenient to advance in this fashion. At some point he was probably going to hit a point of diminishing returns with this, but that point was a long way off at the moment. Besides, when that happened, he might be able to take the collected knowledge he gained this way and trade it to people for their professional secrets. Magical knowledge and techniques could tempt some people in a way that money never could.

The snide part of Zorian informed him that he was robbing these people just as surely as a memory probe would have, only using more roundabout methods. Zorian told it to shut up and that it just wasn’t the same.

- break -

Simulacrum number two was bored and the cause was easy to understand – he was attending academy classes like a normal student. Zorian hadn’t been regularly attending classes for quite a while now, even when trying to stay on the teachers’ good side, since doing that was a huge time sink and provided him with no benefits at this point. Unfortunately, *he* didn’t have a choice in the matter. The original had gotten it into his head that he should check how obvious a simulacrum’s disguise was by having them interact with a bunch of people on a regular basis... which somehow meant being sent back to school.

Okay, okay, so he actually knew what the logic behind that was. He had all of the original’s memories, after all. The idea was that the academy was full of mages of all sorts, and his classmates were at least passingly familiar with him, so if anyone could notice there was something wrong with him, it would be them.

They didn’t notice anything wrong, of course. The simulacrum actually broke off from the script entirely – he was supposed to stay inconspicuous but he decided to show off his future knowledge as much as possible instead – and nobody raised a fuss. Unlike Zach, he was known to be a good, diligent student. They probably thought he had studied ahead or something.

In any case, the mission was less one of nerve-wracking infiltration and more of an exercise in resisting soul-crushing boredom. The only good thing about the situation was that he would only have to tolerate this for one day – the original had been very zealous about dismissing his simulacrum at the end of each day, so he wouldn’t have to be here tomorrow too.

Why couldn’t he have been like the simulacrum number one, who was mapping the local underworld, or simulacrum number three, who was arranging a trade deal with one of the aranean webs near Knyazov Dveri?

Well, the current class had finally ended during his internal whining, so he could-

“Wow, Zorian, you got every question on that unannounced test correctly! How did you do that? I checked and some of those questions aren’t even in our textbook.”

Zorian turned around in his seat, looking at the girl speaking with him. It was Neolu. When he had arrived to the academy, he had quickly realized that she considered him to be something of a friend, even though he had no memory of ever really interacting with her before the time loop. How was that possible? Well... he wasn’t the first simulacrum that was sent on this mission. And apparently one of the previous simulacra was similarly bored out of his skull here and decided to go off the script and befriend her. And then never bothered to inform the original about it.

Simulacrum number two didn’t intend to inform the original either. The whole thing was harmless and imagining the original’s reaction when he finally found out was kind of amusing.

He leaned forward a little in a conspiratorial manner and motioned for Neolu to come closer. She did, and from the corner of his eyes he also saw Akoja leaned in a little so she could eavesdrop on them better.

“I have a time machine,” he whispered to her solemnly. “And I’m using it to cheat at school.”

He heard Akoja snort softly in the background. Neolu, though, gave him a weird, considering look.

“Really?” she asked suspiciously, like he had just told her something unlikely but still entirely possible.

That... was not the response the simulacrum had expected. He stared at her face for a second, at a loss about how to answer that. Hmm... now that he thought about it, Neolu was a bit cute. She had a pretty face and her naiveté could be kind of endearing, in small doses. He had looked down on her in the past, thinking she was kind of dim and flighty, so he had never really thought about it much. But seeing how he was going to live less than a day now, he found himself a lot more forgiving than he would usually be.

"No, I was just joking with you. I don't really have a time machine," Zorian explained patiently.

"Pity. Having a time machine would be grand," Neolu said, smiling. "Sometimes I really wish I could go back in time and fix things before I mess up."

"Don't we all," Zorian shrugged. Too bad the time loop didn't work like that. After a bit of thought he tore off a sheet of paper from his notebook and wrote down the questions for tomorrow's spell formula test and handed it to Neolu.

The moment she realized what she was looking at, her eyes widened comically.

"Is this—" she began, only for Zorian to cut her off.

"Hush. I never handed you anything, okay? See you tomorrow, I guess."

Akoja gave him a *very* disapproving look afterwards. Apparently she figured out the general nature of what he did from the clues in front of her and she didn't like it. Her disapproval died down considerably when he handed her a copy of the questions as well, though she did mumble something about cheating being wrong.

The simulacrum rolled his eyes at the statement and went back to Imaya's place to report to the original.

Somehow, he didn't think that would actually stop her from making use of the information tomorrow.

- break -

Eight restarts had passed since the time Zach and Zorian had first tried to break into Eldemar's royal treasury. Their priorities during this time consisted of investigating the invasion forces, looking for possible signs of Red Robe, trying to track down the rest of the missing Key pieces and figuring out some way to leave the time loop. Of course, since actually retrieving even the known pieces of the Key was impossible with their current skills, and they had no idea what kind of abilities they would need to retrieve the rest, a large portion of their efforts was dedicated to elevating their magical expertise in various ways.

Zach did his best to focus on strengthening his personal soul awareness and mental defenses, but both of those skills were very tedious to improve and Zach was pretty impatient by nature. He often spent a lot of time trying to figure out some way to improve his combat magic, even though he was already very good at that and any improvements tended to be very marginal.

As for Zorian, he did a little bit of everything, from pursuing more mind magic lessons from the aranea (though he had picked all low-hanging fruit in that regard and was starting to hit the point of diminishing returns) to working on his golems and magic skill. However, the bulk of his effort centered around mastering dimensionalism and time magic as much as possible, in the hopes that doing so would give him some clue as to how they could escape the time loop. Thus far, he didn't have any solid leads in regards to such an escape route, but he did learn how to open dimensional gates and haste himself, so at least he accomplished something.

Currently, Zach and Zorian were inside a Black Room – but not the same Black Room as the one in Cyoria. This was the result of a considerable effort to find other Black Rooms across Altazia, since making use of the one in Cyoria twice remained as impractical as ever. So far they had managed to find two more – one in Sulamnon and the other in Cwenjar, a small Splinter State on the border of Eldemar. Unfortunately, these were a lot less impressive than the one Eldemar had built. The Sulamnese one could only be activated for twelve days, while the Cwenjari one could only last for five. But still, 17 days was 17 days, and Zach and Zorian had been dutifully making use of them anyway.

It might actually be a good thing that these Black Rooms were less effective than the Cyorian one, since suffering through three months of isolation in every restart would probably be really unhealthy for their psyche.

Especially considering Zach was already going crazy, even though they were currently in the Cwenjari Black Room and there was only one day left before they could leave.

"Damn it!" Zach swore, the complicated geometric shape above his hand winking out as he lost control of it. Lately he had been trying out some very exotic shaping exercises in another bid for improving his combat magic, but evidently it wasn't going as well as he hoped. "Okay, I've had enough of this! Done! I'm *done!*"

He shouted this overdramatically to the sky (well, to the ceiling, since they were in-doors) while keeping his hands raised in the air. Somehow, Zorian was getting the idea that there was more to this than his momentary failure to figure out a random shaping exercise.

"You're still angry about what happened with Alanic and his soul awareness training, aren't you?" he surmised.

Zach responded by swearing up a storm, which Zorian took as confirmation that he was correct.

It happened in the previous restart. Alanic had finally judged Zach to have reached a point in his soul awareness where he could move on to the

more dangerous version of soul training that Zorian had undergone. Zach was very excited and confident, but the moment Alanic touched Zach and tried to separate his soul from his body, Zorian's marker activated and the restart immediately ended.

The marker woven through their souls was a curious thing. It was hard to figure out for the same reason that memory probes were hard – you had to pretty much already know what you were looking for before you could find it. You couldn't just browse through it for interesting information like you would a book and the like. You had to know which was the right question to ask.

Now armed with the knowledge of what was possible, courtesy of what he had seen his own marker do in that terminated restart, Zorian had no problems leveraging his hard-won soul awareness into figuring out what happened.

The marker, as it turned out, had a contingency that terminated the current restart if 'significant tampering' of the controller's mind or soul is detected. It was unclear what exactly would qualify as 'significant tampering', but apparently even wrenching a soul out of the Controller's body was enough to trigger it.

In Zorian's marker, this function was non-functional, which was why he could go through Alanic's soul training without any issues. Zach's marker, however, was not defective in this manner. It detected Alanic's training as an attack upon the Controller and reacted accordingly.

This information helped answer a few questions that Zorian had been wondering about for quite some time. Such as why Red Robe had done such relatively minor damage to Zach's memories – he probably *couldn't* have done more than he did. In fact, the real surprise was that he had managed to do as much as he had without triggering the restart. If Zorian was reading his own defective marker correctly, the contingency in question was quite trigger happy – whoever made it was a big believer in the 'better safe than sorry' school of philosophy when it came to the safety of the Controller. Red Robe must have spent multiple restarts figuring out a way to get past it to the extent that he did.

This would also explain why Zach had been so relatively unconcerned in the past about having his soul or mind targeted. He had probably been hit by spells like that plenty of times, but that just ended his current restart prematurely. With that in mind, his attitude might not have been as foolish as Zorian had thought it was.

Of course, no defense was unbeatable in the end. Liches, for instance, commonly possessed a very similar contingency that wrenched their soul back to their phylactery when exposed to things like hostile soul magic. Which was how Quatach-Ichl, as someone who had probably fought quite a few rival liches, instantly knew how to bypass it when Zach foolishly told him he would survive bodily destruction. As for how Red Robe bypassed its protection to mess with Zach's mind, Zorian wasn't quite sure...

...but he had a suspicion it was related to Red Robe's use of non-structured mind magic. He distinctly remembered that Red Robe had been using non-structured mind magic on both him and Zach, despite being fairly bad at it. Which was kind of foolish of him at the face of it, since structured mind magic would have probably served a non-psychic like him a lot better in most regards. However, if the marker's contingency was aimed primarily at countering structured magic, and non-structured magic bypassed it to some extent, his choice of attack mode made perfect sense.

At first, the idea that the marker's maker didn't take non-structured magic fully into account when designing the contingencies sounded like an unbelievable oversight to Zorian. However, the more he thought about it, the more sense it made. Non-structured magic was a lot rarer in the past, both due to the more primitive shaping instruction at that time and because magical bloodlines used to be smaller and less sophisticated. The marker, and even the time loop itself, may have been built with a set of assumptions that were simply not valid today as they once had been. And whoever had activated the Sovereign Gate either couldn't or wouldn't update it to take modern circumstances into account.

"...all that time I *wasted* on those exercises!" Zach shouted, his rant finally dying down as his anger ran out of steam

"It's not that bad," Zorian assured him. "Yes, you lost out a fair bit by not being able to go through the same training I did, but you still managed to achieve some elementary soul awareness, and that's not nothing. It will allow you to cast defensive spells on your soul, at the very least. Which is a must if we ever want to fight Quatach-Ichl and take his crown. So you didn't waste anything. The only real loss is that we lost an entire restart to that."

Zach winced. "Yeah, in retrospect, we really shouldn't have tried that at the very beginning of the restart."

"Hindsight is always perfect," Zorian shrugged. "It's just one restart and we learned very valuable information from it. We'll manage."

Zach sighed and plopped down on the floor again with a heavy grunt. He was quiet for a moment.

"It just seems like we haven't accomplished all that much in these past seven months or so, you know?" he finally said. "I mean, we investigated all the high ranking members of the cult and none of them are obviously Red Robe. We also can't locate Veyers at all – it's like he just vanished into thin air. We have yet to successfully extract the damn dagger from the royal treasury and we can't even find the rest of the Key pieces..."

"Okay, that last one isn't really true," Zorian said, interrupting him. "We may not know their exact location, but we do know where to look for them."

Their search for the missing pieces of the key had been long and expensive. Such a project would have been impossible to finish in any reasonable amount of time by just two of them working alone. So they didn't even try. They outsourced their work to numerous information brokers, both legal and criminal, paying huge sums to have them and their agents check up on rumors and stories of Ikosian inheritance floating around. They hired museums and historians to comb through historical records in search of any scrap of information related to the objects. As for themselves, they made themselves useful by breaking into government records of Eldemar, Sulammon, Falkinea and other Splinter States. The buildings that

held those records were not nearly as well defended as the royal treasury, and the Splinter States had made their own attempts to locate these important historical objects.

Thankfully, those efforts were not without results.

“Knowing that one of the pieces is in the deepest part of the Xlotic desert, that another had been lost gods know where in the jungles of Koth and that the last one was stolen by some asshole who took it with him to Blantyrre is not very helpful,” Zach groused. “All it tells us is that searching for the rest of the Key on Altazia is probably pointless. And how are we supposed to get to these places to search for the missing pieces, anyway? Just *getting* to Koth would take us almost an entire restart, nevermind actually searching for it. If that information is true, we’re kind of screwed, Zorian.”

“Maybe,” Zorian agreed. “But you see, I have a plan...”

64. Distance

Chapter 064

Distance

Eldemar and Koth were very far from one another. The exact distance was hard to pin down, since the name 'Koth' covered a pretty big area on the southern continent, but Zorian estimated it to be around 7000 kilometers minimum. Worse, this was a straight line distance, so the actual journey would be even longer. It was not impossible to make that journey in the span of a month, but just reaching the place was not enough for Zach and Zorian – they needed to reach it with plenty of time to spare, or else they would have no time to search for the piece of the Key that was supposedly lost there. Additionally, if they spent most of their time in transit to Koth, they could not make use of the Black Rooms scattered across Altazia. Thus, by committing themselves to such a journey, they effectively lost more than a single month of time.

There were two main methods of traveling from Eldemar to Koth. The simplest, as well as the cheapest method was to board a ship at the city of Luja and make your way to Koth by sea. Even the cheaper ships would get you there within a month, and the pricier vessel may make the journey in as little as 20 days! Well, assuming the ship didn't get sunk by a tiger-striped nautilus or something along the way. But he heard those were pretty much exterminated along major shipping routes, along with sea hydras, razor sharks and flying barracudas, so probably not. In any case, this was the method Zorian's parents were using to get to Koth, as they were not in *that* much of a hurry and didn't want to spend more money than they needed to.

The second main method was utilizing the existing network of teleport platforms that connected most major settlements on Altazia and Miasina. It was pricier than ship travel, but that was not an issue for Zach and Zorian. A bigger problem was that while this method was faster than ship travel... it actually wasn't *that* much faster. Using publicly available information, Zorian calculated that it would take them 15 days to reach Koth by using the teleport platform network, and that was under ideal conditions. The issue was that the teleport platform network worked on a strict schedule that couldn't be sped up – the network spanned over numerous different countries, after all, and none of them were willing to let mass teleport traffic go in and out of the country with no control or supervision. Each platform had security checks and border control that travelers had to go through, and that took time. A lot of time, according to Zach – he had already tried to use the platforms as a method of reaching Koth once, purely on a whim, and it actually took him most of the month to reach his destination. Would Zorian be able to do better? Doubtful. Even if Zorian offered to pay extra, the teleport operators would refuse to make an off-schedule platform activation just for his sake – who would cause an international incident just for some extra cash? And even if Zorian went wild with his mind magic and convinced them to make an exception for him and Zach, the destination platform security would not be inclined to play along. Depending on the destination, they might even shoot him on sight – there had been cases where teleport platforms were used for raids and surprise attacks, and some places were very trigger happy about un-announced teleports.

All in all, Zorian didn't think he could optimize the teleport platform to any significant extent. They were a very fast and convenient method if one was traveling to a destination that was a couple of jumps away, but they just weren't designed to get people over vast distances as fast as they were willing to pay. If anything, the speed of transit was deliberately throttled to more manageable levels, so that the local authorities could exercise some measure of control over it.

Unfortunately, there were no other routine methods for crossing such large distances. Not many absurdly rich people needed to get from Eldemar to Koth as fast as humanly possible in any given year, so no widespread service provided it.

That left unconventional methods. Zorian had considered some wild ones, such as stealing one of the few existing airships to make the journey or transforming into a migratory bird and flying there, but ultimately dismissed them as too fanciful to really work. Besides, methods like that didn't solve the problem of losing access to Altazia's Black Rooms, and would require them to dedicate at least several restarts in pursuit of exotic skills that were unlikely to be useful for anything else. Being able to pilot an airship was good for bragging rights and not much else, unless you were actually an airship pilot by trade.

Eventually, his thoughts turned to the gate spell and his recent practice of making heavy use of simulacra. Probably because that was what he had been working on recently. By themselves, neither of the two spells was the solution to his problem... but combined together, they could be.

The simulacrum had no range limit as far as Zorian was aware – it had to be created next to the caster, but it could then roam as far away from the original as it wanted. The gate spell, on the other hand, was largely limited by its rather miserable range... unless there were people on both ends of the gate working in tandem to stabilize it. If there were people casting the spell on both ends of the gate, then it also didn't have a known range limit. In practice, the gate spell was rarely utilized in this way, both because people capable of casting the gate spell were as rare as hen's teeth and because actually coordinating two such people to synchronize their casting over large distances was hard. It was often quicker and more practical to simply chain teleports from place to place than to go through such a hassle.

With the simulacrum spell, Zorian didn't have to worry about finding another person capable of casting the spell. He could effectively be two or more people at the same time. And while coordinating the spell over continental distances was a bit of an issue, it was not insurmountable. In the worst case, he could simply instruct his simulacrum to leave a trail of telepathic relays along its path and maintain contact that way.

One nice thing about the idea was that while his simulacrum was traveling to Koth, he would be able to stay in Eldemar and wouldn't lose access to the Black Rooms in that particular restart. One not so nice thing was that this would permanently tie down one of his simulacra, leaving one less for him to boss around. He could only maintain three simulacra at most without his mana regeneration going negative, so that was not an entirely irrelevant cost.

Additionally, that would require him to discard his previous rule about only allowing simulacrum to exist for 24 hours. However, he didn't really foresee much problems with that – his simulacrum had been really well behaved, all things considered. His current simulacrum could be kind of cranky and weird sometimes, but they were clearly him and had his best interests at heart. Still, maybe he should start considering some kind of countermeasure in case one of his simulacrum went rogue and tried to take over? But any countermeasure he designed his simulacrum would know about. Argh...

In any case, that still left the question of how the simulacrum was going to reach Koth in a reasonable amount of time. It was nice that Zorian wasn't going to have to dedicate half a restart to such a journey and lose access to the black rooms, but the fact remained they would only have 15 or so days in each restart left to conduct a search for the Key. He needed something better than that.

That was why he decided to talk to the Silent Doorway Adepts. It could turn out to be a massive waste of time, but if they really knew something about the operation of Bakora gates, that could be precisely the solution he needed.

After all, why bother setting up a brand new gate network if one already existed, and was largely unsupervised to boot?

Thus, Zach and Zorian were currently standing in front of the Silent Doorway Adept representative, Refuge in Void. She was a skittish little thing, twitching and shuffling in place all the time, acting way too nervous for a professional negotiator. Then again, how many humans interacted with aranea so heavily they learned how to read their body cues? Maybe it was Zorian who was weird.

Surrounding them were eight other aranea, serving as guards. There were originally four of them, but the Silent Doorway Adepts brought in another four once they realized what Zach and Zorian were after.

The negotiations weren't going too well.

"I am sorry, honored guests, but we really cannot help you with this," the Silent Doorway Adept representative said, using a vocalization spell to speak out loud instead of resorting to their usual telepathy. She was either not very proficient in the spell or was trying to unnerve them with amateurish psychological warfare, because her voice was weirdly resonant and distorted. "The Bakora Gate in our possession is simply a treasured historical artifact. It has great sentimental value to us, but we know of no method to actually make it work."

Her middle legs twitched slightly, an obvious nervous tic that plagued her since the very beginning of these talks.

"But please," she added, trying her best to sound sincere, "if you find anything regarding the activation of Bakora gates, contact us immediately. We are as interested in this matter as you are."

"I'm sure you are," said Zorian, clacking his tongue unhappily.

They had tried just about everything they could think of to secure the web's cooperation on this – they had offered confidential information on surrounding polities, offered rare materials and money, offered knowledge of secret aranean techniques they had gotten from the other webs in various restarts and they had offered an utterly ridiculous amount of crystalized mana for it. It was all for naught – the Silent Doorway Adepts remained obstinate in feigning ignorance on the matter.

He exchanged a long look with Zach, who just shrugged in response. This meeting was largely Zorian's idea. Zach came to the meeting while under the effects of the mind blank spell and mostly remained silent – a fact that surely wasn't helping the Silent Doorway Adepts relax around them. Still, that was the whole point – Zorian deliberately instructed Zach to do that, as an unspoken intimidation attempt. He knew from his past dealings with the Silent Doorway Adepts that merely being polite and generous wasn't going to accomplish anything, so he brought Zach along to show them he wasn't someone they could dismiss out of hand. In a way, it worked – Zorian was sure the web would have chased him off by now if he had come alone, but since there was a mind-blanked mage standing next to him, looking all grim and imposing, they remained polite and treated him far nicer than they did in the past.

It was true, what they say – negotiations tended to go better if you brought both gifts and an armed entourage, as opposed to just gifts.

Unfortunately, their hosts seemed to be running out of patience, as Zorian spotted some of the guards shifting their positions, as if preparing themselves for a surprise attack.

"Please don't do that," he said with a sigh. "You have no chance against us in an actual fight. I'm sure you've noticed that my friend here is under a mind blank, and I assure you he's as good as you'd think. I am not that bad at fighting myself, if you'll permit me to be a little immodest, so don't discount me as a threat either. You would only be walking into your death if you attack us. Don't do this to yourself!"

"If you are so confident in your combat prowess, why not just attack us and take what you want by force?" Refuge in Void said. Perhaps it was just Zorian, but she sounded a little bitter to him. "Why negotiate with us at all?"

"Because it's the right thing to do," Zorian told her matter-of-factly. "We're not brigands."

"I see. So your friend here...?" she asked, leaning slightly towards Zach, who raised his eyebrow at her curiously.

"It's just a precaution," Zorian said. "Unless you attack me, this meeting will not degenerate into violence."

Also, he was not at all sure he could figure out their secrets from reading their minds. The sort of knowledge about the gate he wanted was likely held by a small selection of their experts and maybe leaders, and they were liable to have protected it well. In the past, when Zach and Zorian

raided aranean webs, their elders had the annoying tendency to erase their own memories in regards to important secrets, rather than let them fall into their hands. Since the two of them hadn't been after their closest secrets back then, this had been a minor matter back then. Now, though, it would be a giant show stopper.

"In that case, I will be frank with you – we are not willing to divulge our secrets to you," Refuge in Void said. "You're just wasting both of our time here."

"At *any* price?" Zorian frowned.

"I'm afraid so. I honestly can't think of anything you could offer us that would make us reveal our closest mysteries to you."

Well. This was... not unexpected. It was time to bring out his secret weapon, then.

"Let's test this with one last offer, then," Zorian said.

"Sure," Refuge in Void said, projecting a mixture of relief and disinterest, as if she was just pleased this was about to end.

"Me and Zach here are time travelers," Zorian said. "And we can help you send messages from your current selves to the Silent Doorway Adepts in the past."

There was a short pause as the aranean representative froze for a second and then shook her forward legs in a strange gesture.

"Well," she said. "I have to say, this... this is the first time anyone has tried *that* argument. I find myself curious... do you have *any* kind of proof for that statement?"

"Three days from now, you are going to send a team of three aranea to an old contact in Tozen to pick up another shipment of crystalized mana," said Zorian, causing the representative to freeze again. "However, it will be a trap and two of them will never return."

"That doesn't—" Refuge in Void started saying.

"Two days after *that*," continued Zorian in a louder voice, cutting her off, "you will finally track down the Red Scrolls of Tmilicen, but your previous buyer will say he is no longer interested in them. He will instead point you to Padina's Magical Museum as a possible buyer. At the same time, you will come into possession of a box of emberheart crystals..."

After Zorian made another ten or so predictions, Refuge in Void finally broke down and went to speak with her elders. An hour later, he was handed over to someone higher in the chain of command – specifically, Glittering River of Stars, who was some kind of vice-elder as far as he could figure out. She was a lot less obstructive than Refuge in Void had been, but still not willing to talk to him about Bakora gates.

"We will need some time to confirm these... predictions of yours. I'm sure you understand," Glittering River said apologetically. She really sounded apologetic, too! She was a much better actor than Refuge in Void had been.

"I understand," Zorian said, nodding slowly. "It's fine. We didn't really expect to get your cooperation after one attempt, anyway."

"But that's okay," Zach said with a sunny smile. "We have as many attempts to get this right as we want to."

To her credit, Glittering River did not shift or twitch uncomfortably, as Refuge in Void had been prone to, but Zorian could tell she was uncomfortable anyway. They had explained to her the general nature of the time loop they were in, but neglected to mention some important details – such as that they were on a time limit or just how crucial Bakora gate information might be to them. Zorian wasn't sure how much the Silent Doorway Adepts really believed about their story, but they were clearly spooked enough by the implications to humor him for a bit.

"Incidentally, if there is a way for me to prove my claims easier to your web in future restarts, I'd love to hear it," Zorian said.

"We will have to discuss things before I get back to you on that," Glittering River said diplomatically.

After that, they were basically ejected out of the colony and told to come back in a week. Considering that Zorian had been afraid they would laugh them straight out of the room the moment they mentioned time travel, he considered this already a victory. So long as they didn't reject the idea out of hand, he was sure they could prove to them that the time loop was real. They may not have literally infinite retries like they had implied to Glittering River, but what they did have should be more than enough.

"We seem to have frightened them pretty badly there," Zach commented on the way back to Cyoria. "Especially when you started mentioning the deals you've made with other webs and how you intend to repay them after you get out of the time loop. You'd think they'd be happy about their fellow webs being rewarded, but apparently not."

"The last time one of the aranean webs got massively superior to others, they swept over the entire continent, conquering or supplanting every rival colony in the way," Zorian pointed out. "They've got every right to be worried."

"Huh, I hadn't thought of it that way," Zach said thoughtfully. "I mean, you've already told me that, but I just hadn't considered how that would affect their attitudes. It's good I left the negotiations mostly to you, then. You really understand aranean psychology way better than I do."

There was a short silence before Zach spoke again.

“So... do you really intend to just hand down knowledge to other webs like that?” he asked curiously.

“Of course,” Zorian nodded. “Not to every single web I interacted with, admittedly, but every web that has been especially helpful to me is bound to get something for their trouble.”

“What about help of the human variety?” Zach asked. “Do they get any repayment?”

“That’s a bit more dangerous, since they are far more likely to track me down through my gifts than the aranea. I want to pay people back for their help, but I don’t want to suffer just because I have a sense of honor,” said Zorian.

“Yeah, some people are really shameless,” Zach agreed. “Give them a finger and they’ll try to bite off the whole arm. And some might just be too curious for their own good.”

“Yeah,” Zorian nodded. “I intend to try and repay people anyway, but I’ll have to be a lot more careful and selective about it.”

“Makes me feel a little guilty,” Zach admitted. “I don’t think I’ve ever seriously considered paying people back for things I got from them over the restarts. Invite me when you start finalizing those plans, okay? I think I have a few people I should really reward somehow for all the good they’ve done to me.”

“Sure,” Zorian nodded.

“So,” Zach continued. “The Silent Doorway Adepts. Do you think their leadership will believe us in the end?”

“Maybe. But even if they do, it’s no guarantee that they’ll agree to a trade,” Zorian said, shaking his head sadly. “If they’re paranoid enough, any deal with us might seem like shooting themselves in the foot. They have no way to make sure we’re actually going to keep our end of the bargain once we’re outside the time loop. Who’s to say we won’t just pump them for every secret they have and then unceremoniously discard them? You know, like the Ghost Serpent thought we would do to it?”

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Zach made a sour face. He didn’t like to be reminded of the snake spirit – he had been severely insulted by its accusations, taking them much more personally than Zorian himself did.

“In any case,” Zorian continued, “Even if these negotiations fail, it’s not the end of the world. There is at least one other group that seems to have insight into how Bakora gates work – there is a fully functional gate mechanism beneath Cyoria, courtesy of the invaders, and it’s supposed to be heavily inspired by Bakora gates.”

“None of the Ibasans know how that thing works,” pointed out Zach. “I bet only Quatach-Ichl really does. So that doesn’t really help us much.”

“Yeah, probably,” Zorian agreed. He had delved into the minds of enough high-ranking invaders to realize that the gates probably weren’t made by any of them. Either Quatach-Ichl was the only one who knew the secrets of their construction or the other builders weren’t allowed to be part of the invasion force. It would make sense if it were so – the gates were one huge advantage for the Ibasans, and they definitely didn’t want that secret to fall into the hands of Eldemar’s mages. “But I wasn’t thinking of finding someone to memory probe for the information. I was thinking of simply taking over the gate site and analyzing the gate scaffolding itself.”

Zach raised an eyebrow at him

“I thought you said that would take months,” he asked curiously. “Maybe years. What changed?”

“I realized I was being kind of an idiot,” Zorian said. “Sure, it would take a long time if I tried to figure it out all alone... but why do that? Why not bring a small army of experts down there and have us all tackle it together?”

Zach hummed thoughtfully.

“It would have to be done very, very carefully, unless we want Quatach-Ichl to come crashing to the party,” he said. “But then again, that’s true for anything involving the invasion, isn’t it? Yeah, it’s worth a try. Let’s do it.”

“We’ll wait for the day of the invasion,” Zorian said hurriedly. He could see Zach was getting fired up and he would rather not go get himself killed in the middle of the restart due to his impatience. “The security of the gate is laughable if you time things right.”

“Oh, right, you did mention that,” Zach said, deflating a little. “Man, I feel so angry at myself for never figuring that out before you told me. I never did manage to step through the gate myself, you know? Even when I was fast enough in carving my way through the defenders to avoid Quatach-Ichl showing up to get rid of me, the defenders always collapsed the gate before I reached it.”

“I still can’t believe you just made a direct, frontal assault on the Ibasan base instead of trying to infiltrate it,” Zorian said. “Why the hell did you think that would work?”

“I’m not good at infiltration,” Zach said with an unrepentant shrug. “Besides, it almost *did* work. It’s not stupid if it works, right?”

They spent the rest of the journey home arguing about whether or not there is any difference between ‘almost worked’ and ‘ultimately failed’.

- break -

“What do you mean, I have a date with Akoja?” Zorian asked his simulacrum incredulously.

“Just what I said,” the simulacrum said, unconcerned with his agitation. “She asked me to meet her in that little tea house two blocks from the academy and I accepted.”

Zorian felt the urge to throw a lightning bolt at his damn simulacrum, but he knew that wouldn’t actually help him feel any better. If anything, it would just complicate things further by denying him much needed answers as to *how could this happen!*?

“You can’t just decide things like this on your own!” Zorian hissed to his simulacrum in frustration.

The simulacrum arched his eyebrow at him.

“Well it’s true,” Zorian insisted. “I know you’re my simulacrum and I told you to do whatever, but you should have contacted me for opinion before agreeing to something like this.”

“Are you saying that if you had been in my place, you would have blown her off when she asked to meet?” his simulacrum asked with a knowing smile.

Zorian frowned. If this were before the time loop? Yeah, definitely. Now? No, not a chance. He wasn’t interested in dating Akoja – he didn’t think their personalities meshed well – but he’d give her a chance at least.

He hated that gods-damned smirk that was on his simulacrum’s face right now, but he was right that Zorian would have likely made the same decision in his place.

“This is just-” Zorian started, before stopping himself with a sigh. “When?”

“Two days from now,” the simulacrum said.

“How the hell did this happen?” Zorian asked. “I knew Akoja was kind of crushing on me, but she never tried anything until now. What changed? What did you *do*?”

“Actually she did set up a meeting with you once, remember?” his simulacrum said. “Only she chickened out at the end and nothing came of it. But I doubt it’s going to be like that this time, since she set up an actual date for it and all. Anyway, *I* didn’t do anything, it’s your previous simulacrum that did.”

“What do you mean?” Zorian frowned. He’d been doing a lot of frowning ever since this conversation started.

“Apparently they’ve been pretty active among our classmates without telling you. They’re hanging out with all sorts of people and then leaving out that detail when making their final reports. In particular, they’ve been interacting with Akoja heavily enough that she apparently felt confident enough to ask me out.”

Before dismissing a simulacrum, Zorian always made sure to ask it for a memory packet of everything important that had occurred to it during its short life. This was usually accompanied by a verbal report, since Zorian found it useful to chat with his simulacrum from time to time to see how they’re faring. This did mean he had to rely on the simulacrum being able to effectively summarize their existence for him, but there was no real alternative. If he asked the simulacrum for memories of their entire existence, he would never be able to digest the memory packets in any reasonable amount of time. Interpreting 24 hours of memories, no matter how mundane, would take him at least a couple of hours... and he usually had more than one simulacrum active at the time. He could only rely on his simulacrum to pick what they felt was important and pass it on.

“Why would they do that?” Zorian asked.

“No idea. But if I were to guess... because it’s kind of funny to imagine your reaction when you finally find out,” his simulacrum said, grinning. “I’m certainly amused at your predicament.”

“My predicament, huh?” Zorian said slowly, giving the simulacrum a nasty look. “Actually, I have a better idea. You are going to do it.”

“But I’m going to go away at the end of the day,” the simulacrum said, confused.

“Not anymore,” Zorian said. “I’ve been thinking of relaxing the 24-hour rule, and you’re going to be the first test subject. Congratulations – you’re going to remain active for more than a day, just so you can take responsibility for what you’ve done.”

“Hey, hey,” the simulacrum protested. “Wait just a minute here! Don’t you think it’s kind of an asshole move to send a simulacrum on a date instead of you?”

“Why?” Zorian asked with a malicious smile. “You’re the one she spoke to, so it’s only fair that you be the one to do it.”

“Yes, well... I’m still just made of ectoplasm and we’re meeting in a tea house,” the simulacrum said. “I’ll probably be expected to drink

something, and I kind of can't. I'm totally solid and homogenous from the neck down."

Huh, he didn't know that. He knew that simulacrum had to sleep just as well as he did, because he tried to leave one to work over night once and found it snoring on the floor in the morning. As for things like food and water, he'd never really thought about it – the spell description on the scroll said a simulacrum didn't need any sustenance besides magic so he didn't think there was anything there to worry about.

"You know what?" Zorian sighed. "You're right. I should be the one going, if only for Akoja's sake."

"Right. I'm glad you can see reason," the simulacrum said, clearly relieved.

"However," Zorian added with louder voice. "That doesn't mean you're completely off the hook. You remember what I said earlier?"

"No?" the simulacrum said slowly.

"I said I was thinking of relaxing the 24-hour rule," Zorian patiently reminded him. "That still applies, and you're still going to be a test rat for that."

He quickly gathered all the maps, brochures and partially filled out information tables and unceremoniously thrust them at the simulacrum.

"Congratulations," Zorian said blandly. "You just earned yourself a one-way ticket to Koth. Your job, which you have no option but to accept, is to find a way to cross more than 7000 kilometers in less than a week. Good luck."

"Oh, come on!" the simulacrum protested. "That's impossible and you know it! Hey! Hey, come back here!"

But Zorian wasn't listening. He had less than two days to figure out what kind of nonsense his previous simulacrum had set up for him.

Beside the current situation with Akoja, that is.

- break -

The small, out of the way tea house Zorian and Akoja were currently in had a bit of a reputation among students. Not all of them – before the time loop, Zorian had no idea it even existed – but among the more relationship-focused students of the academy, this place was famous as a good place for a romantic meet-up. As such, there was no doubt in Zorian's mind what Akoja was trying to say when she asked him if he wanted to meet with her here – the fact she picked this place in particular made it pretty clear she was expressing romantic interest in him.

The... *date*... had gone well in Zorian's opinion. Neither Zorian nor Akoja were very talkative people, so most of the time passed in awkward silence. Still, they did chat a little and he didn't make Akoja run off in tears or storm off angrily out of the tea house – considering how his previous evening with Akoja had gone, this was a massive success!

He gulped down the last dregs of his tea, which had gone thoroughly cold by now, and took a good look at Akoja. She looked away shyly, projecting a mixture of discomfort and excitement in response to his attention. She was a thin girl, with short brown hair and expensive-looking glasses. The clothes she wore were fancier than she usually had on her, but still very conservative and modest – all muted colors and not a bit of extra skin visible anywhere.

She wasn't a classical beauty, but he'd still describe her as kind of attractive. Especially when she was blushing and being shy, like she was right now.

She was so hard to figure out. Yes, she was kind of crushing on him, but he was pretty sure there was more to it than that. Out of concern for her privacy, he had refrained from peeking at her surface thoughts and limited himself to what his passive empathy was telling him. The more the date progressed, the more certain he became that she wanted to bring some topic up to his attention, but somehow she always backed down before she went through it. What was that about? He thought about calling her on it, but was reluctant to do so – things were going pretty well thus far, so why risk ruining things?

Besides, if this thing was actually important to her, she would surely summon the courage to bring it up eventually...

"Thank you for agreeing to see me," Akoja suddenly said, straightening herself a little. "I, um... can I ask you something?"

"Yes, go ahead," Zorian nodded.

"I know... that you don't get along all that well with your family," she said, before stopping to study his reaction.

Oh boy. No wonder she was so reluctant to bring this up, whatever it was. If she were to start a conversation like that with the pre-time loop Zorian, it would be treading on very dangerous waters. Now though... well, Zorian liked to believe he had progressed a little since those days, so he just motioned her to continue.

"A-Anyway," she continued hurriedly, "you kind of indicated that you want to become independent because of that. Find a high-paying job somewhere, get yourself a home and such..."

Zorian gave her a curious look.

"I was wondering if you could give me advice in that regard," she finally asked.

“How to achieve your own independence?” Zorian asked.

“Yes,” she confirmed quickly.

“Why?” he asked curiously. “I thought you got along great with your family.”

“I do,” she said. “We’re pretty close to each other and I have no problems with them. I’m fortunate that way. It’s just... I don’t really have a good relationship with anyone else.”

Zorian was about to say something before she cut him off.

“Except for the teachers, I know,” she added, giving him a warning look. “But they don’t really care about the students half as much as they pretend to. Especially not students of average talents like mine, who come from a non-magical background and only have their work ethics to lean on.”

Zorian hummed thoughtfully, not really understanding what she was getting at. As for Akoja herself, she remained silent and thoughtful for a few seconds, and Zorian got the impression she was thinking of how to explain things further. Thus, he simply waited and refrained from interrupting her.

“Did you ever get the impression that the academy was just milking us for cash?” she finally asked.

Zorian reeled back a little, caught off guard by the question. *Did* he think that? Well, there were plenty of things he felt they were doing wrong, but...

“No, not really,” he admitted. “Sorry. Why do you think so?”

“Well, until the Splinter Wars and Weeping thinned out the number of Noble Houses and other ‘respectable’ sources of students, the Cyoria’s Royal Academy of Magical Arts didn’t even *think* of allowing people like us, with no prominent ancestry, into its halls. I’m pretty sure we’re only here because the academy was faced with a choice of either cutting costs or accepting riff-raff in for money. And picked money in the end, of course.”

“Ah,” Zorian said. “Yes, you’re probably right there. But I wouldn’t describe that as ‘milking us for money’ personally.”

“Maybe I’m just getting paranoid,” Akoja sighed. “I’m getting a bit disappointed in academy staff these days. Anyway, the point is that I’m not sure how useful the academy diploma is going to be for me. My family paid a lot of money for me to be here, and they expect great things from me in the future. When I had just come here, I thought that if I just tried my best in class and excelled, that it would all work out. Now I’m not so sure. And I don’t want to go back to my family and beg for help. They’d help me, I know... but I don’t want to disappoint them. I don’t want to be a burden.”

“So you’re hoping I can give you some advice in how to find a well-paying job, affordable housing and so on,” Zorian finished.

Before the time loop, it was unlikely that Zorian would have been able to advise her much. At the end of the day, his idea was quite similar to her own – excel in your studies and everything would hopefully work itself out in the end. They just had a slightly different definition of what constitutes excelling. Now, though, he actually could recommend a few places to her. He had checked out the employment opportunities a couple of times, though by that point he had been severely overqualified for most of them and had abandoned the project in disappointment. Still, he felt that it was actually smarter of her to forget about that for now and focus on excelling in her magic studies... though perhaps in a slightly more focused manner.

“Just pick one field of magic and focus the bulk of your effort there,” he said. “I’d normally suggest spell formula, since being good at those is very well paid... but I noticed you don’t like math much, so maybe not. How do you feel about alteration?”

“It’s fine, I guess,” she shrugged.

“Try focusing on that, then,” he suggested. “It’s one of the better paying fields. Plus, Ilsa is a master of that type of magic and she seems to like you, so you might be able to get some help out of her with that as your focus.”

“I see,” she said, looking thoughtful.

“Also, I’m pretty good at alteration,” he noted. “I might be able to give you a bit of help if you get stuck with it.”

Actually, he would be able to help her with just about any field of magic. But it would sound stupidly boastful to say that, so best to be a little modest about his self-praise.

There as a long pause as Akoja digested all this and fiddled nervously with her teacup.

“So,” Zorian said, ending the silence. “Was this all?”

“Hm?” she mumbled, broken out of her reverie. She looked panicked for a moment. “Oh. Well, I... yes. I guess.”

“I see,” Zorian said. “That’s a bit of a shame. When you asked us to meet here, I thought you were actually asking me out on a date.”

“I, w-well, it’s not... it was part of the whole, I-” she stammered.

“Relax, I’m just joking with you,” he said with a light laugh.

“Jerk,” she huffed. “But, um... I kind of do like you...”

“I have to be honest here – I’m not really interested in relationships right now,” he told her bluntly. So long as he was stuck in the time loop, he had no intention of pursuing a relationship with anyone. “I know this sounds a little heartless, but...”

“I understand,” she sighed, sagging a little. A surprisingly level-headed reaction to a rejection. “Since you’re being so honest, tell me straight – do I have any chance at all with you?”

“I don’t know,” Zorian admitted. “We’re so different from each other...”

“How so?” she asked, sounding more curious than insulted. “We seem quite similar from where I’m standing.”

“Well, you’re far more concerned about rules and reputation than I am, for one thing...” Zorian said.

She gave him an exasperated look.

“I’d have to be blind to not notice that you don’t care about propriety to the same extent I do,” she said. “Yet I still like you. Surely that means I’m willing to work with you on it, right?”

‘Work with me or work on trying to change me?’ Zorian wanted to ask. He could be wrong, but he got the impression that Akoja saw him less as his own person and more as raw material to turn into something more to her liking. But no, that would be too confrontational and the date would only go downward from there. So he just glossed over her question and moved on.

Despite him refusing to become an item with her, the date ended pretty amiably from there. Perhaps because he didn’t categorically refuse her and she still thought she might have a chance with him? Whatever the case, they agreed to meet again next week in a more neutral location, ostensibly so Zorian could give her the material he gathered about potential places of employment, costs of living in different cities and so on.

He didn’t know what to think of the whole thing in the end. When he heard his simulacrum had set him up on a date with Akoja, he thought this could only end badly. In his opinion, he and Akoja were very incompatible with one another. After today’s meeting, though, he could almost see it working out in the end.

He so didn’t need this right now...

Well. Could be worse, he supposed – his simulacrum could have set him up with Neolu instead. He had found out that she was also someone they had befriended over the course of the current restart, for whatever reason, and a sneak peek at her thoughts told him she wasn’t exactly opposed to getting involved with him. If he had ended up on a date with *her*, everyone in the academy would have known about it by the end of the day. At least Akoja had some sense of discretion. Thankfully, Neolu was kind of traditional in mindset, and would never ask someone out the way Akoja did – she would expect a guy to make the first move.

He was going to have to supervise simulacrum he sent on boring tasks like going to class a lot closer in the future.

- break -

“You have got to be kidding me,” simulacrum number 2 said incredulously. “500 silver coins just for a teleport to Zixia? Do you think I grow money on trees or something?”

The man he was talking to, a bald, heavily-tattooed man in his forties, simply scowled at him in response.

“No like, can get lost,” he told Zorian in broken Ikosian.

The simulacrum sighed in frustration and walked away. The original might be swimming in cash right now, but he wasn’t. There was only so much money he could take with him when he left Eldemar, so he couldn’t afford to be too profligate with his funds. This was especially true because every country had its own currency, so he couldn’t just bring stacks of paper money to pay people with – Eldemar’s paper bills weren’t worth much outside Altazia. Hell, they weren’t worth much in some places in Altazia, either. One of the tiny statelets he visited hated Eldemar so much he had nearly gotten attacked when he tried to pay a mage with their money.

No, if he wanted to complete his journey, he needed to carry things that had more universal value – gold, silver and gems. And since those things were both heavy and fairly bulky, he could only bring so much with him.

Simulacrum number 2 grumbled to himself disconsolately. When he had started his journey, he was so sure he had thought of a genius solution. If the teleport platform network was too slow and inconvenient, he thought, why not just find teleport-capable mages and pay them to teleport him personally? Combined with an occasional teleport of his own when he couldn’t find anyone willing to provide this service, and he felt the idea of getting to Koth in less than a week might not be so crazy after all!

Well... it was a little harder than that. First of all, he had a somewhat skewed image of how common teleport capable mages were. Especially mages that could teleport over large distances and could bring other people with them. These kind of people were very rare, and could only be

reliably found in large cities and other places where mages naturally congregate. In addition, not every such mage was a heavy traveler, and often had an extremely limited selection of places they could teleport to. Finally, on top of all that, accepting Zorian's deal was technically illegal dodging of border checks – some mages wouldn't do it at all because of it, or charged very steep prices for their services.

But still, despite all these issues, the plan had been working fairly well so long as he was still traveling through Altazia. Once he entered the Shivan Archipelago and the Xlotic states, though, another problem with the idea made itself known.

He didn't speak the local language.

Zorian knew three languages – the common Ikosian that was spoken throughout Altazia in various dialects, the local Khusky tongue that peasantry around Cirin used in their daily lives and the 'High Ikosian' that was used in scholarly works and international trade.

Even among mages, fluency in High Ikosian was not common. Thus, if Zorian wanted to question people for information and negotiate, he often had to resort to common Ikosian. This worked out pretty well in Altazia, but quickly became a big headache outside of it. It was true that both the Shivan Archipelago and the Xlotic states were once part of the Ikosian empire, but while these places spoke common Ikosian, this was such an alien dialect of Ikosian, at least to Zorian's ears, that he could barely understand them. Additionally, many of these places were like Zorian's own home region, in that many of the regular inhabitants spoke mainly in their own native tongue and only knew the smattering of common Ikosian for use in trade and such. The Ikosian Empire may have conquered these places and forced the Ikosian language to be used by the administration, but local languages were still there beneath it all.

This was especially true in Shivan Archipelago, where every damn island seemed to have its own local language and dialect.

He thought that was bad, but as he traveled ever southward along the coast of Miasina, he realized this problem was only going to get worse. Koth had never been successfully conquered by Ikosia, due to being separated from northern Miasina by a giant desert (much smaller in those times, but still present) and an imposing mountain range that cut the continent nearly in half. As a consequence, they spoke completely alien tongues that Zorian couldn't understand in the slightest.

On top of that, the further south he went, the darker the people's skin tone became, and the more exotic their facial features got in comparison to his own. People recognized him as a weird stranger on sight, and were intensely suspicious of him the moment he approached them.

The area he was currently in was especially bad, because it was very sparsely populated and the settlement he was in was the only congregation of mages for several hundred kilometers around... and the people inside it *knew it*. Which was why they were trying to bleed him dry whenever he tried to purchase their services.

Oh well. It could be worse.

He could still be attending classes at the academy, for one. Now *that* would have been a real nightmare.

He did wonder how the original's date with Akoja went, though. He would have to pester the original for details again when he contacted him for his daily report.

65. Dangerous Ground

Chapter 065 Dangerous Ground

Far to the north of Cyoria, square in the middle of a heavily forested mountain range, there was a secluded valley devoid of any vegetation. Instead, it was covered in sharp, broken rocks of all shapes and sizes. There was no obvious reason for the place to be so lifeless and desolate, especially considering how verdant the surrounding mountains were. As he stood on a cliff overlooking the valley, Zorian wondered about that. Was the valley so rocky and desolate because of what made its home here, or was it the other way around and the valley's inhabitants had picked it precisely because it was so suitable for themselves? Probably the former, but one could never quite know... there could be some subtle geomantic magic surrounding the place.

"Zorian," Zach said, interrupting his thoughts. "The view is... nice, I guess. If you like rocks or something. But why the hell are we here, exactly?"

"You have no appreciation for nature's wonders," Zorian sighed. Assuming this was actually a natural wonder, that is, and not something the earth elementals had done to make their home more comfy for themselves, anyway. "You were with me when we talked to that hunter community a few hours ago, weren't you?"

"Yes," Zach nodded. "You told them we're searching for elementals and they sent us here. Which is fine and all, but *why* are we searching for elementals all of the sudden? You should know by now that I really hate the whole mysterious act. If you don't start explaining things right now, I'm starting a wrestling match with you right here on the edge of this cliff."

Zorian gave him an incredulous look, before pointing at the sharp, spike-like rocks at the bottom of the cliff.

"Don't think for a second I won't," Zach warned. "One restart cut short is a small price to pay if it will teach you not to do this crap anymore."

"It wasn't anything sinister," Zorian sighed. "It's just that it's a pretty crazy idea and I didn't want to bother you with it. I did say you could sit this one out, didn't I?"

"You forget who you're talking to," Zach smiled widely. "I'm the guy who fought the most infamous dragon of our time just to see if I could do it, descended as deep into the Dungeon as I could before dying and took on the entire Ibasan invasion force all by myself. I'm no stranger to crazy ideas."

"True," Zorian said.

"Besides," Zach said, sounding more serious this time. "We're in this together. Stop trying to do things alone, it's getting seriously annoying."

"Fine, fine, I get it," said Zorian, raising his hands up in defeat. "Look... the point of all this is to try and find where the other primordials are imprisoned."

"What?" Zach asked incredulously. "We're having so many problems with this Panaxeth thing, and you want to find *more*?"

"Yes," Zorian nodded. "Well, maybe. As I said, it's a pretty crazy idea. It's just... I was thinking I might need to set loose a primordial into the world, and I realized that doing that with Panaxeth wouldn't be a good idea. Panaxeth's prison is in the middle of Cyoria, and too much attention is already on it. So I thought, why don't I find my own primordial, then? One that is in some isolated place where nobody is going to disturb us while we work?"

Zach looked at him like he just declared he was secretly a shapeshifted dragon and started sprouting horns.

"You did this on purpose, didn't you?" he asked.

"What, described the idea in the most disturbing possible way?" Zorian asked back with a smirk. "Yeah." He shook his head. "It's true, though – that's essentially what I was thinking about."

"Why, though?" Zach asked. "Is this about finding a way for you to leave the time loop?"

Zorian looked at his fellow time traveler in surprise.

"Don't be so surprised," Zach scoffed. "You already told me how space itself seemed to collapse when Panaxeth tried to leave his prison. It's natural to wonder if that kind of spatial hole could be used to fashion some kind of passage out of this place. I've thought of it too. Admittedly, I have no idea how you could actually go about doing that..."

"Neither do I," Zorian admitted. "But it's the only thing I could think of."

Zach hummed thoughtfully. "I thought you said the restart immediately collapsed when Panaxeth got out of his prison, though?" he said. "Last I spoke to you, you thought Panaxeth getting out of his box was one of the conditions for terminating the time loop. Did you change your mind about that or do you have a way around that?"

"It's obvious the time loop can be fooled in many ways," Zorian said. "As such, I thought that maybe if we enclose the area in a pocket dimension and *then* release the primordial, the time loop might not detect that as a breach."

"Why do you... oh!" Zach said, eyes widening as he realized what Zorian was getting at. "Because the primordial is still technically imprisoned! It would have to breach the pocket dimension we created before the time loop would consider it 'free'."

"That's the idea," Zorian said with a nod.

"Would the primordial have any trouble doing that, though?" Zach asked with a frown. "I doubt we could make a prison anywhere near as strong as these divinely crafted prisons that are currently holding them."

"We could always layer multiple pocket dimensions around ourselves," said Zorian. "At least I hope. I don't know how pocket dimensions work, but they can obviously be stacked on top of each other to some extent. Otherwise, the time loop wouldn't be able to recreate the various pocket dimensions scattered around the world."

"You know, this raises an important question," Zach said. "Where are we going to find someone to teach us how to make pocket dimensions? I mean, that's one of the rarest magical disciplines out there. I don't think I've ever encountered a mage that can create one. I admit I haven't been looking for those secrets very hard, but still. What's worse, you're talking about pocket dimension creation of incredible scale and sophistication – we need someone who is incredibly good at this obscure magical skill, not someone who can barely do it. Finding such a person... I think this could be even harder than gathering all of the pieces of the Key."

Zorian patiently listened to Zach's concerns, nodding slightly from time to time. It was all so very true. And yet...

"I'm pretty sure I already know a mage that is very good at creating and manipulating pocket dimensions," Zorian said.

"What? Who?" Zach demanded.

"Silverlake," Zorian said, sighing heavily. He really didn't want to admit he needed her, but...

"The crazy witch lady that sent you to kill the grey hunter?" Zach asked incredulously.

"The same," Zorian confirmed. "Think about it. Why else can't we locate her damn hut? I refuse to believe her wards are good enough to resist a systematic sweep of the whole area from both of us. It's just not possible. And she isn't editing our memories, either – unless she is a godlike mind mage that makes even aranea elders look like children in comparison, I would at least be able to tell my mind had been tampered with after the fact."

"You think she hides her hut inside a pocket dimension?" Zach asked.

"I don't see what else it could be," Zorian said.

"Huh. Well, I guess we better find a way to get those stupid eggs soon, then," Zach said with a careless shrug.

As if that would be the end of it. Zorian had a suspicion that even if they brought Silverlake the eggs, this would just be the start of their headaches with her.

Regardless, this was the end of that topic for a while. After a short discussion of the best route to take through the rocky labyrinth, they used a flight spell to float down the cliff and onto one of the bigger rocky outcroppings jutting from the valley. From there, they decided to conserve mana by trying to advance on foot. Also, the hunters claimed that the earth elementals did not appreciate people flying over their home and would hurl rocks at people who offended them in such a way.

An hour later, they realized they had taken the place too lightly. The landscape held no predators trying to ambush them, but it was exceptionally hard and dangerous to traverse on foot. The ground was rough and uneven, with a labyrinthine arrangement of ridges and rocky outcroppings, and it was often far less solid than it appeared to be at first glance. A careless step could easily result in it crumbling away beneath one's foot, with disastrous consequences – the stones of the valley were very angular and sharp, and sometimes even shaped like knives and caltrops, so any falls or imbalanced flailing easily led to serious injury.

Neither Zorian nor Zach ended up injured, but it did make their progress terribly slow and miserable.

"Ugh," Zach said, casually firing a weak disintegration wave at the nearby rock in order to smooth it out a bit. Once all the edges and spikes were gone, he sat down on the stone and gave Zorian a long look. "I must say, those hunters we talked to have quite a penchant for understatements. When they said the elementals were 'a bit tricky to reach', I expected something easier than this."

"Well, they've been living in these mountains for months," Zorian said. "Maybe for them, this *is* just tricky rather than a hard slog. But yeah, this is getting a little ridiculous. At this rate, it will take us a whole day to reach the center."

"So... do we just fly there or what?" Zach offered.

"The hunters said the elementals fire on people flying over their home," Zorian said, shaking his head. "I know we could probably survive their barrage, but we're here to ask for their advice. We don't want to piss them off before the talks even begin. Let me try something."

Having said that, Zorian quickly fished out a brilliant red potion out of his backpack and downed it.

Grey hunters had amazing senses. The most prominent of these, of course, was their ability to sense magic, but that was actually just the tip of the iceberg in regards to a grey hunter's ability to perceive the environment. By now, Zach and Zorian had figured out that grey hunters also had an incredibly acute ability to sense air currents and the vibrations in the ground. Together with their amazing magic perception and other, more mundane senses, it gave grey hunters an almost omniscient awareness of everything in their immediate vicinity. The potions of grey hunter perception that Zach and Zorian had been creating in recent restarts mostly ignored all of these in favor of focusing on the grey hunter's magic perception. This was both because they were treading new ground and had to prioritize, but also because even if they could condense the totality of grey hunter's perception inside a single potion, it was doubtful that either of them could process the information without blacking out.

Recently, though, Zorian had decided to experiment a little with the tremor sense part of the grey hunter's perception and commissioned a potion that would grant this ability from the alchemist they were working with. That was the potion he had just drunk, and this was going to be its first real field test.

About 10 seconds after he drank the potion, Zorian felt his skin tingle before his awareness... expanded. It was muted at first, but that changed quickly the moment Zorian took a step forward. He felt his foot hit the ground in a way he never had before, and the alien sensation almost brought him to the ground right then and there. A strong, vivid pulse emanated from his foot, spreading itself through the rocky labyrinth around him before being reflected back at him. In less than a second, he had a three dimensional map of his surroundings impressed into his mind.

"Give me a few minutes to get used to this," he told Zach.

After fifteen minutes of pacing back and forth and jumping in place, Zorian was reasonably sure he could crudely interpret what his new sense was telling him. However, even this, which was probably just a shadow of what the real grey hunter was capable of, should allow him to effortlessly navigate through the valley. He motioned for Zach to follow him and they restarted their journey towards the elementals' home.

Travel was very fast this time. Every step that Zach and Zorian took sent vivid pulses through the ground around them, mapping their surroundings in Zorian's mind and allowing him to identify which ground was too unstable to support their weight. Zorian felt this was probably how the grey hunter always managed to detect buried traps that Zorian had tried to snare it with, even if they were totally non-magical. Every time it performed one of its damn jumps, the shockwaves generated by its landing would pulse through the ground around it, informing it of not just the layout of the ground around it, but also of its contents.

But that was a thought for another time, because it wasn't long before they had finally reached the place they had been looking for.

They knew they had reached it because the rocks around them crumbled to pieces and six earth elementals stepped out of them to block their path.

They were a diverse bunch. One was a huge boulder with four stubby legs and a pair of massive rocky arms that could probably crush both of them to paste with a single hand swipe. The other was a six-legged cat-lizard-something carved out of shiny stone, its knife-like scales bristling at their intrusion. The third was a giant elongated human head, soundlessly bobbing up and down through the ground, which rippled and flowed like water in its presence. The fourth was an incredibly lifelike obsidian centipede, looking more like an actual monster than an elemental spirit.

The fifth and six earth elementals, though, were clearly the leaders of the bunch. Both of them were around three and a half meters tall, fairly humanoid in appearance and armed with actual metal weaponry that looked human-made rather than formed out of stone and the like. One of them had a muscular-looking figure and four faces arranged around its head, and carried in its hands a massive sword. The other looked like an old man, with a beard made out of knife-like stones and a long, whip-like tail trailing behind him. This one carried a huge mace in his hands, waving it in the air menacingly.

After a few tense seconds, the four-faced elemental stepped forward towards them

"Forbidden," he told them simply. Zorian kind of expected the elemental's voice to be all booming and gravely, considering its size and composition, but it was actually very crisp and spoken at normal volume.

"We bring gifts," Zorian countered, bringing out a box out of his jacket pocket and showing the contents to the giant elemental in front of him. Zach proceeded to do the same.

The boxes held a pair of fist-sized red stones, glowing with inner light. The so called 'dragonheart stones' were highly coveted by some magical creatures, including earth elementals. These stones were hard to acquire, as they could only be found deep within the Dungeon as a rule, and humans had no real use for them aside from making expensive jewelry and trading them to creatures that coveted them. Thankfully, Zach had encountered an entire cave full of them at one point, so it was simple enough to acquire some.

The moment the earth elementals saw the stones, they quickly changed their tune. The lesser elementals around them tried to scuttle over to have a closer look but the two leaders quickly caused them to stay back with a few menacing movements. After that, the four-faced elemental spoke again, again limiting himself to a single word.

"Come," he said simply.

The four lesser elementals stayed behind, while the two humanoid giants led them to one of the large rock formations that turned out to be hollow. Inside, they found an interior that wouldn't look terribly out of place in a human dwelling – there were tables, chairs, shelves, cabinets and even

some potted plants. Items of obviously human making were scattered throughout the area, some of them hopelessly broken. Zorian assumed they were battle trophies to warn and awe human visitors against treachery, but it was hard to be sure – spirits were notorious for having very alien sense of aesthetics, so maybe the elementals just found the arrangement pleasing to the eye somehow.

In the back of the chamber, opposite of the entrance, stood the elemental they came here to see. Stonechild, the elder elemental.

Zorian didn't know what he had expected to see. A massive stone monolith with a giant face carved in it? A miniature mountain? A larger version of the humanoid elementals that escorted them to this place?

What he definitely didn't expect was to find himself facing what appeared to be a ten-year-old boy. And not one that was crudely carved out of stone, either – Stonechild's form was incredibly lifelike and realistic, and he looked like nothing more than a real human child, if one whose skin was bit browner than was common this far to the north.

There was only one thing hinting at Stonechild's elemental nature – his eyes were solid black, devoid of any internal structure a real human eye should have. It was as if someone set out to make a flawless human replica but then ran out of patience in the end and decided to just socket a pair of polished black gems into the eye sockets and call it a day.

"Welcome," Stonechild said, his voice steady and very natural sounding. He smiled reassuringly at them. "We don't get many visitors here, so my manners are a little rusty and I have little to offer you with. I apologize in advance for my poor hospitality. Would you like a glass of water?"

Zach and Zorian glanced at each other uncertainly. This... was not quite how they had imagined the great elder elemental would behave towards them.

"I could go for a glass of water, yeah," Zach said with a shrug.

Stonechild nodded to himself in satisfaction and walked over to a nearby shelf, which held several ceramic jugs and a collection of glass containers of various sorts. Stonechild picked up what was clearly a pickle jar at first, but then hesitated for a moment before putting it back on the shelf. He then picked up a proper drinking glass instead.

Zorian watched as the elder elemental went about pouring Zach a glass of water, shifting in place nervously. Strange as it may sound, Stonechild worried him a lot more than the two hulking elemental guards that stood vigilantly by the entrance of this place. He didn't look as imposing as them, but his appearance was a dangerous sign all on its own. It was well known that when it came to spirits, the more humanlike they were, the more wary one had to be around them. Not necessarily because that made them more powerful, but because it meant they understood humans well enough to pretend to be one. This understanding, in turn, meant they could counter, fight and manipulate humans in a way their more ignorant fellows could not.

Stonechild's understanding of human mentality and culture made him a lot more dangerous than he would be if he was just a bit more powerful than your average earth elemental.

It was interesting to see this kind of an elemental here in total wilderness, though. Elementals were some of the most ancient spirits known to man, but also one of the most alien and incomprehensible. The vast majority of them couldn't even speak in a human-comprehensible manner, nevermind understand human logic and attitudes. This inability of human and elementals to understand one another, coupled with the fact that elementals often occupied land that humans coveted and that elementals typically reacted to provocations by attacking any human within reach (most elementals had trouble telling human individuals apart from one another), led to many bitter conflicts between the two groups in the past. Elementals that understood humanity to the level that Stonechild did were vanishingly rare and usually involved the elemental in question allying itself to a human community for several generations. Most of them served as protector spirits of various Houses or brokered some kind of trade deal with the local authorities in exchange for being left alone.

For Stonechild to live in this kind of isolated location, away from any significant human community, yet still know so much about them... it was weird. Zorian suspected he might have originally lived somewhere in the south, but was driven away from his previous home by something.

"I hear you bring gifts for me," Stonechild eventually said.

"We sure do," Zach grinned. The two of them handed their dragonheart stones to the elemental, who accepted them without any apparent excitement or comment. He rotated the stones in his palms for a few moments before setting them aside on the nearby table.

"It is a good gift," Stonechild said. "But is it really a gift? I would never claim to be an expert on humanity, but in my experience your kind is rarely this generous for no reason."

"It's a gift," Zach said. "We do want something from you, but we're willing to pay for it. Those stones are yours no matter what you do."

"Even if I throw you two out right now?" Stonechild asked curiously.

"Even then," Zorian confirmed.

"Hmm. I think I like you two," Stonechild said. "So what is it that you want from me? I warn you in advance that I dislike fighting. Me and my kind will not be your mercenaries, no matter how much you offer to pay."

"We're only after knowledge," Zorian said.

“Only knowledge?” Stonechild repeated, his black eyes narrowing slightly. “And yet you’re willing to pay such a heavy price, just for a chance to petition me for it. It is surely not ‘just’ knowledge, then. What kind of forbidden secrets are you after?”

“We want to know where the primordials were imprisoned,” Zach said.

Thus far, Stonechild had been very serene and self-assured in his mannerisms. It was somewhat at odds with his child-like appearance, to be honest. However, when Zach mentioned what they were after, Stonechild actually flinched a little.

“Why would you seek the ancient blood?” Stonechild asked, leaning forward towards them. “No matter what your reasons are, you’re only inviting disaster upon yourself. There is no gain to be had there.”

“You say that, but I heard there are people who gained great powers by binding the blood of primordials to themselves,” Zorian said. It wasn’t something he intended to do, but he still wanted to hear what Stonechild had to say about it.

“Artifacts of forgotten wars at the beginning of time,” Stonechild said, waving his hand dismissively in the air. “Should you find one of these out there in the vast world, unclaimed by anyone, that is obviously a great boon for you. But to tamper with the cages that hold back those of the ancient blood is utter foolishness. Since the time of their imprisonment, no one has ever received gift from their kind.”

“Are you saying they’re actively malicious?” Zach asked curiously.

“Do you hate the bugs eating your crops? Do you torture mosquitos for drinking your blood?” Stonechild asked. “We are all nothing to them – elemental and human both.”

“Right, right, we’re not people to them so they can do whatever they want to us,” Zach said. “It’s fine, though – we don’t really want anything from the primordials themselves. What we’re really interested is those fancy pocket dimensions that hold them”

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“Pocket what?” Stonechild asked, cocking his head to the side in confusion. Apparently he never encountered that particular term and couldn’t figure out the meaning from the context provided.

“Their cages,” Zach clarified. “The thing that holds them outside our reality.”

“Ah,” Stonechild nodded. “That is... less disturbing. But I caution you to forget the idea anyway. Cracking the prisons is probably beyond you... thankfully... but you might end up accidentally contacting the prisoner or attract unwanted attention. Few such prisons are truly unguarded.”

“We’d really want to take a look at one, anyway. Do you think we could come to some kind of agreement?” said Zorian, motioning towards the dragonheart stones with his head. “There are more stones like that where those came from. And we might have more gifts for you besides.”

“Even if I was willing to help you with this, I honestly do not know where the ancient blood was buried,” Stonechild said. “I cannot help you.”

The elder elemental disguised as a child glanced towards the stones for a second before shifting his attention back to them.

“However...” he said. “I might know a couple of other elementals that would be able to help you.”

“Ah, that’s fine too, I guess,” Zorian said. “I suppose you’d be willing to give this information to us?”

Stonechild smiled widely.

“For a price,” he said.

- break -

“Yes,” Glittering River of Stars said, sagging a little. “We will agree to let you observe us use the Bakora Gate in exchange for... I can’t believe I’m saying this... time travel related favors.”

“Finally. It was about freaking time,” Zach muttered under his breath.

It turned out he hadn’t been quiet enough, because River of Stars bristled slightly at his words and immediately turned to him.

“What would you know? This was a difficult decision for us! Even if you’re telling the truth about time travel, we have no way of enforcing this deal! You can renege on it easily enough, and we won’t even know an agreement existed in the first place!”

“Yeah, and that’s why your elders refused to accept a mere promise alone,” Zach shot back. “We paid you an absurd amount of crystalized mana and other valuables for this ‘favor’. *Plus* we destroyed that nest of serpent-bearded toads for you as a sign of good faith.”

“And if you’re telling the truth about the time loop, none of that will matter in the long run, will it?” River of Stars asked rhetorically.

Zorian thought about getting involved, but ultimately decided that any words would just be throwing oil into the fire. Truthfully, he understood the

doubts and hesitation of the Silent Doorway Adepts all too well. He would feel the same in their position. He actually hadn't expected this negotiation to succeed at all in this restart – he expected it would take at least two or three times before he learned how to approach them correctly. However, saying that out loud would be the equivalent of shooting himself in the foot. The aranea probably wouldn't appreciate it much, and Zach would feel betrayed. His fellow time traveler had been getting steadily more annoyed with the colony as they dragged their many feet and the end of the restart inexorably approached, so he probably wouldn't appreciate Zorian taking their side – even as a diplomatic tactic.

Thankfully, after staring at each other really hard, Zach and River of Stars decided to mutually back down.

"Whatever," River of Stars said. "The elders have reached their decision, so there is no point in arguing this. Is there anything else?"

"Yes," Zorian spoke up. "Do you have something that would help us convince your web we're telling the truth in future restarts?"

"Ah, yes," River of Stars said. "There was some discussion about that. We have... something. We have no idea how useful it will be to you, since we've never actually made any contingencies in case of time travel being real, but you of all people can afford to do some trial and error on this. Hold on."

She was still and silent for about ten seconds, probably engaging in telepathic communication with the rest of her web.

"Prepare for a memory packet transfer," she told him, before sending a telepathic probe at his mental shields.

Zorian allowed her to establish contact, and she immediately shoved a small memory packet at him. He quickly perused the contents, noticing it mostly held meaningless strings of numbers (well, meaningless to him at least) as well as some kind of detailed map of the region surrounding their web. He unraveled the memory packet and repackaged the information into a memory packet of his own – that way he wouldn't have to worry about it decaying on him the way the matriarch's memory packet did – and then gently pushed at the connection with River of Stars, signaling to her to end the connection.

She did as he asked, but she couldn't help but take a quick peek at his memories as she withdrew. Zorian didn't even try to stop her – instead, he simply pushed a memory of him being stabbed to death in one of the earliest restarts at her memory probe, causing her to flinch a little and hastily break contact.

"It's rare to see a human so well versed in telepathic conflict," she said, a little awkwardly.

"Thank you," Zorian said. "Can we see the gate now?"

"Yes," she confirmed, a little more respectfully. Apparently his little show of telepathic sophistication had humbled her a bit. Huh. He made a mental note to challenge one of their elders to a telepathic duel in future restarts, just to establish his telepathic credentials. Maybe they'd look down on them less if he did that. "I'll lead the way."

River of Stars led them down the twisting tunnels of the aranean settlement, far deeper into the colony than they'd ever been allowed to go before. There, in a large underground chamber, stood a circular stone platform that held a familiar black icosahedron that was the Bakora gate. Well, it was familiar to Zorian at least.

"You've never seen a Bakora gate before?" Zorian asked Zach, who was currently slowly circling the construct and inspecting it curiously. "In all those countless restarts, it never crossed your mind to seek one out?"

"No, why would it?" Zach asked, poking the black bars experimentally with his finger. "They don't work and nobody knows how to activate them. I'm no researcher – if countless scholars couldn't get anything out of them, what could I do? It's really similar to the Ibasan one, though... you can clearly tell they were inspired by one of these things when they made theirs."

"The fact that there is another gate-using group operating around is disturbing," a nearby aranea commented. "You should have mentioned that information earlier when you spoke with us."

"Sorry," Zorian shrugged. "I didn't think it was important. So how will this work exactly? Considering you gathered no less than fifteen araneas here, I'm guessing the activation requires some kind of group ritual?"

"It is a ritual, yes," the aranea confirmed. Her name was Marvelous Geode, if he remembered correctly. Well, her name was quite a bit longer than that actually, but that was what it shortened to anyway. "It's not the 'correct' way to activate the gate, but it's the only way we know."

"What does the ritual involve, exactly?"

"Well..." she hesitated. "First of all, we need to establish contact with the spirit of the gate..."

"Wait, the gate has a *spirit*?" Zorian asked incredulously. He focused his mind sense on the gate for the moment. "I don't sense a mind within it."

"Of course you can't," she said. "The spirit is completely disconnected from the Great Web. Its mind is permanently dark, much like your friend's mind is under that spell he keeps constantly active around us. Yet, the spirit is very much real."

Marvelous Geode stood a little straighter, giving him a challenging look, as if daring him to contradict her. He didn't. While the idea of the Bakora gate having a spirit was a bit weird, he would trust the Silent Doorway Adepts on this. They did get the gate to work, after all, unlike everybody

else.

“So how did you find out about this spirit, then? Do you have someone with soul perception or something?”

“The spirit cannot be detected through the soul, either. Its soul is shrouded somehow, and does not show up on casual inspection, even if one is a necromancer. One has to contact the spirit in a very specific way before it will deign to reveal itself,” Marvelous Geode explained.

That... well, it certainly explained why this gate spirit had remained an unknown thus far. However...

“How did you even find out about this, then?” Zorian asked curiously. “Did you just tinker with the gate and end up contacting the spirit by accident or...?”

“Well, there was admittedly a whole lot of tinkering involved. The founder of our web was obsessed with the gate and invested a lot of her time and energies on it. That said, we were rather certain that there was a spirit in there so our tinkering was directed at establishing contact with the spirit right from the start,” Marvelous Geode said. “After all, Bakora gates were said to be able to open up dimensional passages to each other, entirely on their own. That goes against everything we know about magic items. I’m told you’re quite an artificer, so you no doubt know that magic items never really cast anything – they can only ever maintain a spell that is anchored to them, and anything else is an illusion achieved by shifting the spell in question into different modes. For the Bakora gates to be able to open and close dimensional passages to any gate in the network, they had to be some kind of spellcaster. And spellcasting requires a soul.”

Zorian hummed thoughtfully. Pretty solid logic there, he had to admit. By now, Zach had long gotten bored of staring at the gate and walked over to stand beside him. As for the rest of the aranea that weren’t explaining things to Zorian, they were busy carting large quantities of crystalized mana to the vicinity of the gate.

“The local area has insufficient quantity of ambient mana to power the opening of the gate,” Marvelous Geode explained. “Once the spirit is contacted and starts opening the dimensional passage, we have to evaporate a large amount of crystalized mana and funnel it into the gate or the process will fail.”

“Why not just move the gate deeper into the Dungeon?” Zach asked.

“They can’t,” Zorian said. “It’s well known that Bakora gates cannot be moved from their spots or they literally fall apart. Most experts are guessing that the icosahedron bars are only the tip of the iceberg and that part of the gate is embedded into the surrounding rocks and the like.”

“Yes,” Marvelous Geode said. “We have heard about that, which was why it was never attempted. There was some talk about drilling a hole to the deeper layers near the gate in order to create an artificial mana well... but nobody really knows just how much damage to their surroundings Bakora gates can take before they break down, so that idea never went anywhere. The gate is too precious to risk like that, even if it *would* save us a lot of money.”

With all preparations done, Marvelous Geode excused herself and joined the rest of her fellows in setting up the ritual to contact the gate spirit. After some frantic running and pushing, the araneas entered into a circular formation around the icosahedron, forming three concentric lines around the object. Then they all started casting.

Twenty minutes later, they were still going at it with no visible change.

Eventually Zach couldn’t take it anymore and leaned in towards him.

“Zorian, do you understand *anything* that is going on here?” Zach whispered to him. “I’m not an expert on aranean magic, but they seemed to be just repeating the same movements over and over again...”

“Yeah,” Zorian agreed, studying the ritual with a frown.

It was... strange. He could vaguely recognize the spell they were casting as some kind of soul magic ritual, similar to the protection rituals that Alanic had taught him. Things that even a person like him with no soul perception could use. These kind of rituals were lengthy and crude – the magical equivalent of groping in the dark – but sometimes it was enough. Lukav had used something similar when he had analyzed his soul in the past for damage and the like.

However, the ritual Silent Doorway Adepts were performing didn’t look like any ritual spell he knew of. Not that Zorian had witnessed all that many group rituals, but this was still...

He suddenly realized what was bothering him – the movements of the aranea weren’t nearly as synchronized as they should be.

“It’s not really a group ritual,” Zorian whispered back to Zach. “They are all performing the same ritual spell independently of one another. And then, when they’re done, they just start over and do it again and again.”

Zach stared at the fifteen araneas surrounding the gate for a few seconds, before leaning towards Zorian again.

“Are you saying,” Zach asked him incredulously, “that they’re basically *annoying* the gate spirit into revealing itself?”

“Uh, no. That’s not what I was getting at,” Zorian replied. “I think the ritual they use is flawed, and only works when everything aligns just right...”

but since they don't really know how the gate functions internally, they can't aim for those circumstances specifically. They can just repeat it over and over and hope that it eventually works."

"Why have fifteen of them doing it at once, though?" Zach asked. "If the circumstances aren't right for one of them, why would it work for the other fourteen?"

"If you look at them closely, you will see they're not casting the ritual in unison – that's what tipped me off as to what they're doing, actually. They've staggered their casting so that they all finish the spell one after another. I think that, in practice, getting the ritual to work is just a matter of very specific timing. By constantly bombarding the gate with contact requests, they make it more likely that one will actually connect."

"Ah, I see... so the ritual could conceivably be done by one person alone, but they would likely miss many windows of opportunity and take way longer than a group like this," Zach said. "Well... this will be very annoying if we want to use this ourselves."

"Yeah," Zorian agreed unhappily.

Not only was the ritual an aranean creation, meaning Zorian would have to convert it to human-style spellcasting before he could make use of it, but it was also a very inelegant solution that would be a pain to set up for someone other than Silent Doorway Adepts. Even if he hired enough mages for this kind of setup to work, he would still have to teach them the spell itself and then train them to stagger their casting correctly. Even then, they would never be as good at it as the aranea, since they didn't have years of practice with the setup like they did. And the aranea were already at it for half an hour and still going, so he shuddered to think how long it would take under less than ideal circumstances. Just how long would this-

A flash of bright light in the center of the icosahedron marked the opening of a dimensional gate instead. The aranea immediately stopped their repetition and scrambled throughout the chamber in a sort of organized chaos, evaporating the chunks of crystalized mana and feeding it to the gate mechanism. The spatial doorway steadily grew, eventually stabilizing into a circular hole in the air that led... elsewhere.

Zorian glanced at his pocket watch. It took the aranea about 40 minutes to open the gate, most of which was spent on contacting the gate spirit.

Marvelous Geode scuttled over to them, looking very pleased with herself.

"The passage is open," she said.

"Does it always take this long to open?" Zach asked.

"Oh no... this was quite fast by past standards. Sometimes it takes as much as two hours before the gate spirit will deign to respond. This is an auspicious omen for this cooperation."

Zach and Zorian looked at each other unhappily. Two hours...

"You can try going through it if you wish," Marvelous Geode said.

"Where does it lead, anyway?" Zorian asked.

"Sulamnon, not far from the port city of Hitamtep," she said. "Eldemar and Sulamnon have been engaged in a trade war for a while now, so trading there is quite profitable."

"You'd probably get a better return by going to more distant lands, though," Zorian noted. "Are there distance limitations on Bakora gate use?"

"In theory, no. In practice, getting to very distant lands is impossible for us. In order to connect with another Bakora gate, we need to first travel to said gate through some other means and contact its own gate spirit. Only after we receive a... sort of mental key from the gate spirit, can we use our own gate to reach it."

"So each gate has its own secret password and you need to get it before you can travel there?" Zach summarized.

"It's not very secret – the gate spirit will freely give you its key if you can contact it. But yes, that is essentially correct," the aranea confirmed.

"Sounds like you could use someone that can freely travel over human territory and access distant Bakora gates," Zorian noted.

"Well, yes. That *is* the primary thing that our elders hope to gain from this deal," Marvelous Geode said carefully. "If you could help us acquire keys to distant gates, this could easily catapult our webs to unbelievable prosperity. Especially if you can secure us a connection to Miasina. There are no aranea there, as far as we can tell, so it's pretty much virgin ground for us to settle... an entire continent worth of it."

In the end, the two of them did step through the gate and explored the other site a bit. The Silent Doorway Adepts were, as it turned out, a territorially discontinuous web, with semi-autonomous colonies established around each of the gates they traveled to on a regular basis. The colony back in Eldemar was clearly the main one, though, and that probably wouldn't change any time soon since the sub-colonies were denied the knowledge of the gate activation ritual.

They didn't venture forth from the aranean colony too much. Two people with an obvious Eldemarian accent were unlikely to be viewed favorably by Sulamnese inhabitants – the two countries hated each other, after all.

The moment Zorian returned to Cyoria, he sat down at his work desk, called up a memory of the ritual, vividly preserved in his mind, and set about understanding it and taking it apart. He respected the aranean achievement and dedication, but there just had to be a better way of doing this.

- break -

"I see," mumbled Zorian to himself, turning the telepathic relay in his hand. The innocuous-looking metal plate was connected to the long, long chain of telepathic relays that his simulacrum left behind him, like breadcrumbs, as it traveled ever further south. He occasionally received reports and memory packets from the simulacrum, detailing the issues his copy had encountered on the journey.

"Something good?" Zach asked.

"My simulacrum has finally reached Koth," Zorian said. "Or at least the port town of Jasuka, which is generally considered to be the entry port to the region."

"Man, finally," Zach said. "The restart is going to end in less than two days. I was starting to wonder what was taking him so long."

"It's not that simple..." Zorian protested, feeling compelled to defend his copy. It was a hard and frustrating journey and Zorian was honestly grateful to his simulacrum for actually attempting his task seriously instead of doing a half-assed job or giving up half-way through.

"I know, I know," Zach said, waving his hands in a placating gesture. "There is no need to get all protective of your precious copy. I'm certainly not going to complain about not having to do anything but wait while your simulacra do all the work. And the traveling speed is bound to improve as your simulacra figure out better traveling routes in the future. But you have to admit this is kind of disappointing."

"Yes," Zorian admitted. "Especially since all of my simulacra get dismissed when we enter Black Rooms and get cut off from the outside world. We really need to figure out how the Ibasans stabilize their gates, or else I'll need to send a simulacrum to Koth at least twice per restart."

"We could always find a Bakora Gate in Koth, send your simulacrum there to open our own gate and then bring a bunch of Silent Doorway Adepts through it to ask the gate spirit for the password," mused Zach. "Then we can just go and use the aranean gate in future restarts."

"It's a nice idea, but who knows how long it would take to set up?" Zorian asked rhetorically. "I don't know if you noticed, but the Silent Doorway Adepts are a rather suspicious bunch. I don't know how quickly we can convince them to cooperate in the future, but..."

"Yeah, now that you mention it, I don't really like the idea," Zach agreed. "How is your analysis of their contact ritual going?"

Zorian's face twisted into a grimace.

"That bad, huh?" Zach asked with a grin.

"I'll say this: there is a reason why they're still using that stupid method instead of switching to something better. I don't think I'll figure out something better any time soon," Zorian explained unhappily.

"You might want to work with them instead of away from them in the future," Zach noted. "They're annoying jerks, but I'm sure they're as interested in making the contact ritual better as we are, and they have way more experience with it than you do."

"I guess you're right," Zorian agreed. "I think-"

He stopped talking when he noticed his simulacrum was trying to contact him again. Huh. That was fast. Wonder what that was about...

"Uh, Zach?" he eventually asked.

"Yeah?" Zach asked curiously.

"Do you have anything you should be doing in the near future?"

"I'm bored out of my skull and you know it," he said. "Why?"

"The simulacrum says he's in the jungle to the west of Jasuka and that he's found a perfect spot for the gate. He's asking if we want to try opening one right now," explained Zorian.

Zach thought about it for a few seconds. Or maybe just pretended to think about it – Zach had a flair for dramatics like that.

"Why not?" he finally said, jumping to his feet. "Let's go see Koth."

- break -

Gate was an amazing spell in Zorian's opinion. Teleport was arguably a more useful piece of magic, despite the range limitations that forced mages to chain teleports if they wanted to cross any appreciable distance, but it just didn't have the same emotional impact that a dimensional gate did. There was just something emotionally satisfying about crossing continental distances in a single step.

For example, Zorian had just followed Zach through the dimensional passage he and his simulacrum had opened, and suddenly went from a hastily secured underground room in Eldemar to a steaming, verdant jungle in Koth.

It was... louder than he thought it would be. The sheer cacophony of different sounds was impressive, but he imagined that would get tiresome very fast.

"You have no idea," his simulacrum grumbled, having read his thoughts. "I especially hate that one bird that keeps making sounds reminiscent of a dying man's scream. I really wish that it would shut up already. I even thought of tracking it down so I could kill it, but I can't seem to find it in all the foliage. You'd think something that loud would be trivial to track down, but..."

"Anything special we should keep in mind here?" Zorian said, cutting the simulacrum off before he could get going. He knew himself – once he started complaining, there would be no end of it.

"Yeah, the wildlife is absolutely terrifying," the simulacrum said. "At one point I saw ants the size of my thumb dismembering some kind of jungle cat, and some of the snakes can fly. No wings or anything, they just kind of silently float through the air like they were swimming through water. And that was in the first hour or so."

"Yeah, I heard the southern jungles make the Great Northern Wilderness look like a playground," Zach said, picking up a dried branch off the jungle floor and taking a few experimental swings with it. "Not sure how much of that is true and how much of it is just southerners trying to make themselves look tough, but there is probably some truth to it. If nothing else these jungles should be more unpredictable than our forests, since the wildlife is more diverse here."

"I was also told by the natives that foreigners often get sick not long after coming here," the simulacrum said. "It's not a single disease either – there is a whole bunch of things you could contract here. Most of them aren't lethal, but they can leave you bedridden for weeks. Not a problem for a simulacrum like me, but you're going to have to stock up on cures before you start wandering around the region."

"Great," Zorian clacked his tongue unhappily. "Another thing to worry about."

"Hey," Zach said suddenly. "Don't get mad at me, but... didn't you say your eldest brother is active around here?"

"Yes?" Zorian said, drawing the word out unnecessarily. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Well," Zach began carefully, "I know you don't like him, but we're kind of total strangers here. We don't know the language, we don't know the culture, and we don't know how to navigate the local authorities. Your brother, on the other hand, probably does. And he probably has existing contacts all over the place that he could refer us to..."

Zorian made a really sour face at that. Yeah, he could see the logic in that. Especially since they were on a treasure hunt and his brother was... well, a treasure hunter. He probably could help. And, as much as Zorian hated to admit it, probably would be *willing* to help.

But he so, so, didn't want to ask Daimen for help...

"We don't have time for that right now," Zorian said curtly. "The restart is ending soon."

Zach chuckled in amusement.

"But you agree that we should see him?" Zach asked, face full of mirth. "I say, I didn't think it would be that easy."

"It's a matter of survival," Zorian's simulacrum grumbled. "We can't let our personal grudges get in the way of that. In the grand scheme of things, this is nothing."

Well put, simulacrum number 2. Well put.

"That's good," Zach said. "You know, I'm really looking forward to meeting the guy. Maybe punch him in the face if he's as bad as you obviously think he is..."

Zorian and his simulacrum shared an exasperated look between themselves. Still, he couldn't deny that a part of him was interested in seeing how a meeting between Zach and Daimen would go. He hoped that Daimen still had that competitive streak and challenged Zach to a sparring match or something – watching Zach wipe the floor with him would be pretty damn satisfying. Not as satisfying as Zorian doing so himself, of course, but pretty close. Plus, he would be lying if he said he wasn't interested in what exactly his brother had been doing down here in the south that occupied him so. And why were his parents coming here to meet with him, anyway?

Hmm...

Perhaps, before he sought out Daimen here in Koth, he should have a chat with mother at the start of the next restart.

If nothing else, that way he wouldn't have to search for him all over Koth.

- break -

The people guarding the Ibasan gate beneath Cyoria were a cranky and unhappy bunch. In theory, their task was one of great importance – they

were guarding the Ibasan route of retreat, making sure no Eldemarian battle force could close the gate, or even pass to the other side to wreak havoc on the base of Sudomir, their ally. In practice, this was seen as punishment duty. Having been stationed here, they were denied a piece of the action happening above, and thus the glory and looting opportunities that came with it. Besides, what were the chances that the beleaguered Cyorian defenders could not only afford to send some of their battle mages down here, but that they also knew exactly where to go in order to find the Ibasan gate site? No, the idea was absolutely ri-

“Hook goblins!” someone shouted. “We have hook goblins incoming!”

No one was worried at first. Hook goblins were ferocious and very deadly if one allowed them to get close, but they weren’t particularly tough and went down easily before concentrated spellfire. Indeed, the first wave was nothing special, lulling the Ibasan defenders into a false sense of safety. But as they killed one wave of hook goblins, then two, and then *another*, they realized this swarm of them was a bit larger than they were used to. Then a couple of mages got a strange headache at the most inconvenient of times and failed their spells, and some of the hook goblins managed to close into melee range...

The defenders dissolved into chaos. The troops manning the defenses may have thought the attitude unfair, but there was a reason why the Ibasan leadership considered most of them to be the dregs of their invasion force.

The commanders of the force delayed asking for help as long as possible, afraid of what their superiors would say if they proved unable to contain even a simple hook goblin incursion. What a humiliation that would be!

That changed when an entire regiment of steel golems came running into the gate chamber, following behind the last hook goblins. Each of them carried a rifle and a belt full of spell bombs, and they were far more resilient than mere hook goblins.

More importantly, they signified a clear Eldemarian attack on the gate chamber. This was no longer just an unlucky incursion of Dungeon denizens but an organized assault. In fact, most of the Ibasans suddenly realized that the hook goblins were probably just a setup to soften them up before the real assault force arrived!

At this point the Ibasan defenders abandoned their pride and tried to contact the small elite Quatach-Ichl had left by the dimensional gate itself. If this was an Eldemarian attack, then there was no shame in summoning Quatach-Ichl to save them...

Unfortunately, Zach had already taken care of the gate battlegroup by then, freezing the war trolls into icy statues and disabling the mages. No one would be coming to save them. The final nail in the coffin was when Zach and Zorian stopped hiding and joined the golems and hook goblins in finishing off the Ibasans.

The force arrayed before the Ibasan defenders was so overwhelming that many of them surrendered rather than keep fighting till the bitter end. This was a bit of an unforeseen problem, as neither Zach nor Zorian had the heart to just massacre people who surrendered in cold blood, but they also didn’t trust them not to start something while they were distracted. After some heated discussion, they ended up solving that by using sleeping gas bombs on them until they were all knocked unconscious.

They were just finished with that when a small metal plate hanging off Zorian’s hip suddenly shook and Alanic’s voice emanated from it, faint but crisp and perfectly audible.

“This is Alanic, code Tharo eight seven four. You should be done by now. Is the chamber clear?”

“This is Zorian, code Raha one one eight,” said Zorian back into the plate. He personally thought it was kind of unnecessary, but Alanic insisted that these codes were used every time they made contact with one another through the communication plate. “Everything is clear on my end. You can bring everyone into the gate chamber.”

Five minutes later, a seemingly endless stream of people poured into the former Ibasan base, led by Xvim and Alanic. Some of them were soldiers and battle mages, here to ensure the safety of the gathered people from the Dungeon denizens, but most of them were various artificers, scholars, dimensionalism experts, spell crafters, and so forth. They were all led into the center of the chamber and presented with the Ibasan gate.

They all gathered around the gate, scrutinizing it intently... some with obvious enthusiasm and some with professional stoicism

“Alright everyone,” Xvim told them. “We have only a few hours to figure this thing out as much as possible, so do your best. Mister Kazinski and mister Noveda here are the leaders of this project, so please report all your findings to them. Don’t be fooled by their young age, they very much have the confidence of the authorities in this matter.”

And thus, almost a hundred respected experts gathered from all over Eldemar set about studying the Ibasan gate and how it could be recreated.

66. Marred Perfection

Chapter 066 Marred Perfection

For nearly six years now, Zorian had been living in this endlessly repeating month. It felt longer, to be honest. So many things had happened, and his worldview had undergone such radical changes, that he felt it would only be right if the whole thing had taken place over a decade or more. It made him wonder how the original Zach would compare to the boy he had come to know – they seemed vaguely similar at first glance, but those were no doubt just surface similarities. There was no way that Zach had stayed the same over several decades, Zorian just hadn't known the boy all that well before the time loop and thus couldn't spot the differences.

Nevertheless, Zorian had spent a bit over half a decade in the time loop, and in all that time he had never really sat down with his mother to have a chat about things. Some people would have been very ashamed about this, but not Zorian. Indeed, he felt that one of the really nice things about the time loop was that he could virtually eliminate his interaction with his parents.

Now, for the first time in years, he was going to strike up a conversation with Mother... and it would be about Daimen.

He hadn't thought he'd ever want his parents to talk *more* about his older brother, but life was funny like that sometimes.

"Actually, this reminds me of something," Mother said. "Your father and I are going to Koth to visit Daimen."

Oh good. He'd been waiting for her to mention their trip to Koth. Thankfully, this wasn't something he had to steer the conversation to – despite her choice of words, the topic was clearly at the forefront of her mind. She found a way to bring it up in every single restart.

"Well that's a little sudden," Zorian commented lightly. "What brought this up?"

If his mother was surprised by him showing actual interest in family matters, she didn't show it.

"It's only proper for us to visit Daimen from time to time," she said in a lecturing tone. "It has been nearly a year since we've last seen each other. Family ties are important."

"Uh huh," Zorian said in a patronizing tone. "Wouldn't it make more sense for Daimen to visit *you* instead? Seems that would be way easier than you travelling all the way to Koth."

"Well," she said, pausing a little. "You're probably right about that. But you know how driven Daimen is. He's been really fired up about whatever he's been looking for. There is no way he'd take a break right now, not even to visit his family."

"I see," said Zorian. The old, bitter part of him knew that they would never have been so understanding if *he* had tried to do the same. No, had he ignored his family for nearly a year, missing all the family dinners and such, he would have never heard the end of it. But that wasn't helpful right now, so he pushed such thoughts away and focused on something else. "Since he won't come to you, you'll come to him. Fair enough. Although, if this is a family meeting, how come you aren't making the rest of us take the trip with you? It's not much of a family reunion if more than half of it isn't even there."

"How do you know we aren't making you come with us?" she asked curiously.

Zorian paused for a moment. Crap... she hadn't actually mentioned that part yet, did she? Oh well, this was pretty easy to salvage...

"What, you're going to stop me from going to the academy at the very last moment?" Zorian asked her with a raised eyebrow. "Or Fortov? Or drag Kirielle around a completely alien country where she is liable to pick up ten different exotic diseases in a matter of days?"

"Actually, it's good that you've reminded me about Kirielle—" she began, only for him to cut her off almost immediately.

"I'll do it," he said.

She blinked in surprise, momentarily stunned into silence.

"I beg your pardon?" she asked.

"You wanted to ask me if I would take Kirielle with me to Cyoria, right?" Zorian 'guessed'. "I imagine this was why you even brought this topic up in the first place. I'll do it. I'll take her with me to Cyoria."

"Yesss!" Kirielle yelled, cunningly hidden just out of sight so she could eavesdrop on their conversation.

Zorian rolled his eyes at her outburst and even Mother felt the need to direct an exasperated look in Kirielle's direction. Not that the little imp saw it – she was still hiding and pretending she wasn't spying on them.

"That was surprisingly easy," Mother commented, shifting her attention back to him "I know Kirielle has been a little difficult lately. I'm glad you can see beyond that."

"Yes, well, now that we've gotten that out of the way, we can go back to discussing your actual reasons for rushing to Koth so suddenly," Zorian said.

Mother gave him an appraising look.

"Why do you care about this so much?" she asked. "Not that I'm complaining about you taking interest in family matters. In fact, I think it's a positive thing. However, you can't deny that this is somewhat unlike you."

"And you can't deny this trip is somewhat unusual," Zorian immediately shot back. "You're leaving Kirielle in my hands for at least two months and probably more, which you probably don't like at all..."

"I'm sure you'll do fine," she interjected.

"...and you're leaving your company without proper leadership in the middle of the summer, which I'm sure is driving father more than a little crazy," finished Zorian, ignoring her comment.

It wasn't that their business couldn't survive without them for a few months. The company his parents had built was long past the phase where they needed to get personally involved in every little detail or business deal – so long as no crisis popped up, they could easily leave the whole thing to their subordinates for a couple of months. But what if there *was* a crisis? There was no way his parents were not thinking about this and worrying. Especially father, who seemed to think most of his workers were either lazy or incompetent. That is, if Zorian had interpreted his father's random grumbling correctly over the years.

"Your father has indeed been a little hesitant to leave the company to its own devices for so long," Mother admitted. "But it's..."

She hesitated, visibly considering whether to tell him the truth or not. Not for the first time, Zorian wondered if he should just use his mental powers and read her thoughts. He really didn't want to. Even though they didn't get along very well, there was just something very amoral about intruding on his mother's thoughts like that.

"It's what?" he asked slowly.

"You're very pushy today," she remarked, an unhappy frown on her face.

"You keep criticizing me for not thinking about the family and our reputation," Zorian said, not able to keep a flash of annoyance out of his voice. "Yet now that you clearly have some kind of family emergency on your hands, you are keeping me in the dark about it. I think I have the right to be a little rude."

"It's not a family emergency," she said, rubbing her forehead in frustration. "Not like you're thinking, anyway. It's just..."

She sighed, deeply and heavily, like she was carrying some kind of great weight on her shoulders.

"Can you cast some of those privacy wards that prevent sound from leaving the area? This is not something that I want Kirielle to hear."

Zorian nodded and promptly erected a two-layer barrier – one to block out sound from leaving the room and the other to prevent anyone from stepping foot in it without exerting a considerable amount of physical force. Just in case Kirielle decided to be a bit bolder than usual.

"It's done," Zorian told Mother. "Now what's this about?"

"Daimen is getting married," she finally admitted.

Zorian stared at her for a second, trying to process that. What? That was the big secret?

Okay, so he could understand why his parents would consider this to be big news. However, he expected them to be... well, *happier* about it. The way mother behaved, he would have thought that somebody had died, not that a wedding had been announced.

"I don't understand," Zorian admitted after a few seconds. "Why is this such a bad thing? If I remember correctly, you even made some pointed noises to him that he wasn't that young anymore and that he should think about settling down. Is there something wrong with the fiancée?"

"The girl is fine," Mother sighed. "She's from a powerful family of mages that are movers and shakers in their state. She's basically local nobility."

"So he's marrying into nobility, then?" Zorian asked. "Funny, I would have expected you to be ecstatic about that."

Mother gave him a rather unamused look.

"No? You don't like the fact that he's marrying into nobility?" Zorian asked, baffled. He honestly didn't understand why Mother disapproved of this so much. This sounded like something she'd be thrilled about.

"It isn't a good thing that she's local nobility. That only makes things worse," Mother explained. "Bad enough that he wants to marry some distant foreigner when there are so many perfectly good local girls he could go for. Daughters of influential families that would be happy to forge ties with us in exchange for getting a genius mage of his caliber into their fold. But nevermind that. I could stomach this if this was just random girl he picked up in Koth and brought home. But this girl... she's practically a princess. There is absolutely no way she would agree to move here to Altazia with

Daimen. Instead, it will be *him* staying in Koth with *her*.”

“Ahh...” Zorian said, finally understanding what the issue was. If Daimen married this girl and remained permanently in Koth, his parents would gain nothing from this. Even though he would be marrying into nobility, it would be very distant, foreign nobility. That would only give his parents some mild bragging rights, but none of the practical benefits that marrying some influential family in Eldemar (or at least in a country on the same continent) would.

Plus, if Daimen remained in Koth, his parents would only ever see their favorite son (and his new family) once in a blue moon. The distance between Koth and Eldemar was not something casually crossed.

“So,” Zorian said. “I’m guessing you’ve already tried to talk him out of this through your letters?”

“Yes,” Mother said. “We wrote to him at length as to why this is a poor idea. No matter how amazing he thinks this girl is, he could do so much better here in Eldemar.”

“But Daimen didn’t listen to you?” Zorian surmised, not without some schadenfreude at their predicament.

“He said he loves her,” she said, shaking her head sadly. “He won’t budge an inch on the matter. He won’t even delay the marriage, much less cancel it. Keeps insisting she’s perfect and that he can’t let the opportunity slip away. It’s too sudden! Why won’t he listen to me!”

Zorian clacked his tongue. He didn’t know why she was so surprised. Love always made people unreasonable, and Daimen had had his parents doting on him for as long as Zorian could remember. Why would he give up what was apparently the love of his life just because his parents didn’t approve?

That said – and Zorian couldn’t believe he was thinking this – he actually agreed with Daimen here. What right did their parents have to get in between him and his new fiancée? It was ultimately his decision to make.

Though admittedly, it was also his parents’ right to drop everything and go all the way to Koth to try and convince him otherwise in person.

“I suppose you think that going there and trying to convince him face-to-face will be more effective than letters,” Zorian surmised.

“You can never be as convincing in a letter as you can when being physically there in front of someone,” Mother said. “But I don’t know whether that will be *enough*, that’s all. We still have to try. I know he’s young and in love, but he’s making a big mistake and he needs to know that.”

“Hmm,” Zorian hummed. “Alright. I’m not going to get involved with this and I’m sure you don’t expect me to. Thank you for explaining things, at least.”

“Don’t spread this around,” she warned. “I’m telling you this because I know you can keep a secret. There is still a chance we can set this right.”

“Alright,” agreed Zorian easily. “Quick question, then. Do you know what Daimen has been working on in Koth and where he is right now?”

“No, he was always very secretive about that. He was worried someone would intercept his letters and beat him to his prize. The world of treasure hunters is very competitive, from what I hear. We agreed he would come and pick us up in Jasuka once we arrived there.”

Zorian nodded. About what he expected, really. It made sense for his parents to arrive in Jasuka, since the city was the main entrance port for ships entering the Koth region from the north, and it made sense for Daimen to go and meet them there. Sadly, this meeting was too late for Zorian’s purposes, so he needed some clue with which he could track his eldest brother down.

Like, say, the identity of this fiancée of his.

“Do you know the name of this girl he wants to marry?” Zorian asked. “Or maybe the name of this noble family of theirs and which country it is from? I’m curious.”

“Her name is Orissa Sqi Taramatula, of the Taramatula family,” Mother said. “They are from the state of Haramao, wherever *that* is. Supposedly they’re very distinctive, because their family magic is based around these... *magical bees* that they cultivate.”

“Bees?” Zorian asked curiously.

“Yes. They breed several species of magical bees and use their secret family magic to control and direct them. They’re supposedly very versatile,” Mother explained. “They produce some sort of extremely valuable honey, they can be deadly in battle and they’re very good at tracking things down. It’s this last thing that led Daimen to contact them. He hired their best trackers for his mission, and the daughter of the family head came along with the group. One thing led to another and, well... now we have this situation on our hands. Hopefully her family is as unenthusiastic about this as we are and we can get their help with this.”

Ha. It would seem that Daimen was finally going to learn how unpleasant their parents could really be when they disapproved of their children’s choices.

In any case, this was probably already enough information to track down Daimen – this Taramatula family sounded like they would be trivially easy to locate, and they probably knew where Daimen was. Still, it might not hurt to see if he could get anything else out of mother – maybe Daimen let something important slip through in his letters.

He opened his mouth to ask another question, only to get interrupted by a knock at the door.

Oh right. Ilsa was here to talk to him.

Mother motioned for him to go open the door, and Zorian obliged her. Continuing the conversation would have to wait until he dealt with the academy representative.

- break -

Xvim's home was currently host to a very unusual group. Zorian, Zach, Xvim, Alanic, Kael and Taiven were all gathered in Xvim's living room, poring over the various documents Zach and Zorian had collected over the restarts. Everyone who was aware of the time loop was there. Zorian would have normally left Kael and Taiven out of this meeting – Kael because he had told him to keep secrets from him in subsequent restarts and Taiven because she never fully believed in the time loop anyway – but Xvim and Alanic insisted that they should be involved with things this time. This wasn't something Xvim and Alanic usually did, but Zorian had come to expect these kinds of sudden requests from them lately. Ever since they had started leaving messages and research notes to their future selves via Zorian, their actions tended to vary a lot from restart to restart.

Zorian saw no reason to refuse the request, so Kael and Taiven got to join them this time.

Unlike everyone else, Zorian didn't bother reading any of the documents. There was no need to. He was, after all, the one who had taken all the various notes and records and turned them into the relatively concise reports they were currently reading. Well, he and his simulacrum, anyway – he tended to delegate this kind of work to his copies these days. He just had to remember to read through their finished work at least once or else they would try to sneak things in as a form of silent protest against being given boring chores to do. But really, what did he have them for if not so he could delegate the boring, time-consuming stuff to them?

"Well, that is good news, about the Ibasan gate," Zach said, leafing through the information they gathered on the structure in the previous restart. "I was all but sure that Quatach-Ichl had stuck a human soul somewhere in there to make the gate. I mean, even the Bakora gates require some sort of spirit to function like they do."

"Bakora gates open portals all on their own, though," Zorian said. "The Ibasan gates don't. They just keep a portal someone else created open indefinitely."

"Yes, it's hard to see what a soul in there would do, except maybe provide a power source," Alanic spoke up. "It's not like sticking any random soul in there would allow it to open dimensional passages on its own. I guess if you added a soul of a willing mage in there, like Sudomir did with his wife –"

Enjoying this book? Seek out the original to ensure the author gets credit.

Kael made a very sour face at the reminder about that. He didn't have a very high opinion of Sudomir's 'act of love' and flat out said so earlier. It didn't help that Sudomir had pretty much hunted down all of Kael's friends and would have likely done the same to the boy if he hadn't been scouted out by the academy by then.

"-then maybe you could improve the efficiency of the structure or something," Alanic finished. "Otherwise, there would be little point to it."

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining," Zach said. "I mean, if the Ibasan gate is just a spell stabilization frame made out of exotic materials and spell formula, that means we can copy their design easily enough, right? Zorian?"

"I'm not sure something this intricate and advanced deserves to be called 'just' anything," Zorian remarked. "As for recreating it... well, if it were just you and me working on this, I'd say it would take us *years* to figure out how to reproduce it. But since we'll be using the whole 'army of experts' approach we used in the previous restart... it will still take at least a year, but probably not more than one."

"Still a year?" Zach whined, visibly disappointed. "Why?"

"The short time during which we have access to the gate is really hampering us," Zorian explained, clacking his tongue unhappily. "We may have an army of experts, but they only have a couple of hours before the end of the restart to examine the gate. There is only so much they can do in such a short time."

"Why not just attack the base before the end of the restart?" Taiven asked. "Is this Quatach-Ichl really that unbeatable?"

"Yes," Zach and Zorian answered in unison.

"Okay, okay, no need to pile up on me," she grumbled. "And is there no time during which he's absent from Cyoria or something?"

Zorian was just about to explain why that wouldn't work when he remembered something. He reached for a nearby stack of papers and started quickly leafing through a timeline of the invasion he and Zach had painstakingly made. A definitive timeline was, of course, completely impossible – things changed often, depending on what Zach and Zorian did in any particular restart. However, certain things seemed very resistant to change, and virtually always happened on schedule if they didn't specifically try to disrupt them. He was sure he remembered something about... ah!

"Here," Zorian said triumphantly, pointing at one of the paragraphs. "At the beginning of the third week of the restart, Quatach-Ichl has a tendency

to return to Ulquaan Ibasa and stay there for three whole days. So long as we don't disrupt the invasion too badly until then, he's likely to do just that in this restart too. Then, if we managed to seize the Ibasan base at the very start of this period, we will have three whole days to study the gate without interruption."

"That's a big if," Zach pointed out. "You're talking about attacking the base while it's fully staffed and defended. Trust me, that's very different than taking out those bunch of incompetents that loiter around the base during the invasion itself. And you're talking about doing it without giving them enough time to raise the alarm and summon Quatach-Ichl back. Or get reinforcements from Sudomir's mansion, for that matter."

"Yeah," said Zorian thoughtfully. "Alanic's soldiers alone aren't going to cut it this time. We're going to need to hire aranean mercenaries if this is ever going to work. I'm pretty sure I can find a web that would be interested if we offer enough payment."

"And Sudomir?" Alanic asked.

"Oh, that one is easy," Zorian said. "He's still a mayor of Knyazov Dveri. We just create a big enough disturbance in the town and wait for him to show up, as he surely must. Then we kill his bodyguards and kidnap him in broad daylight."

There was a brief silence as everyone gave him strange looks.

"What?" Zorian said defensively. "You've got a better idea?"

"You've become a scary person, Zorian," Taiven remarked.

"Why kidnap?" Alanic asked. "Why not just assassinate him?"

"He cryptically hinted that he was very hard to kill when I spoke to him," Zorian said. "I don't know what magic he used for that, but it's possible that just killing him wouldn't work. So I figured it was safer to just put him to sleep and keep him that way for as long as necessary."

"Well, I at least approve of this course of action," Alanic said. "If nothing else, this will give me a chance to interrogate Sudomir once he has been captured. I note we've never really done that properly in any of the past restarts."

"Yeah, it was never really a priority, and the man's plans were all pretty crazy anyway," Zorian shrugged.

"Crazy or not, he clearly had plenty of talent in magic," Kael said. "You shouldn't just limit yourself to questioning him about his crimes and links to Ulquaan Ibasa. You should interrogate him for everything he knows about necromancy and other magic as well."

Unsurprisingly, this made him the new target of everyone's strange looks, much like Zorian had been earlier.

"Look," Kael said, trying to sound calm. "I probably hate this monster more than anyone in this room. Chances are that a portion of his knowledge comes from the very people I knew. People he killed and, in all probability, whose souls he interrogated for secrets. Magical and otherwise. But that's precisely why you should do the same to him! It's..."

He struggled for a moment to find the right word.

"Just," Alanic offered quietly.

"Appropriate," Kael corrected. "It's appropriate for him to suffer a similar fate. *Fitting.*"

It took another two hours for them to create a basic outline for a plan of attack on the Ibasan base. The biggest surprise to Zorian was that Taiven wanted to participate in the fighting. Specifically, she wanted to join the soldiers and battle mages that Alanic would be mustering for the operation. Alanic provisionally agreed to this, though he told her he would throw her out of the battlegroup immediately if she proved incapable of following the chain of command.

The tiny flinch she did after hearing that told Zorian that she'd likely had problems with that in the past... but she agreed with his condition anyway.

In the end, the meeting was dismissed and everyone went their own way... except for Zorian, who stayed behind to talk to Xvim about something.

"So," Xvim began. "We're alone, Mister Kazinski. What is it that you wanted to talk to me about that you didn't want the others to overhear?"

"First," Zorian said, taking out a notebook out of his jacket pocket, "take a look at this."

The notebook was, of course, the very list of people to interrogate for secrets that Xvim had given him in one of the previous restarts. The one that had caused him so much self-doubt and worrying. Xvim carefully started leafing through it, his frown deepening ever further as time went by. Zorian patiently waited for him to finish, not saying a word.

"I suppose I'm the one who gave you this," Xvim said, giving Zorian a questioning look. Zorian nodded. "I see. Then... should I assume you're here because you've already gone through the entire list and now need more names?"

"No," Zorian said, a little more forcefully than he intended. "No, I've done no such thing. I... I managed to get a couple of people there to willingly teach me what they knew, despite your assurances that they wouldn't do that under any circumstances. I tried to convince the others to do the same, but when they refused... I just moved on to other things. I haven't invaded the mind of anyone on that list. Well, aside from an occasional

surface scan..."

Xvim stared first at Zorian, and then at the notebook in his hands, staying silent for a while. Finally, he wordlessly handed the notebook back to Zorian.

"That," Xvim decided, "is relieving to hear."

Zorian blinked in surprise at the statement.

"I don't know whether my past self would agree with me. Probably not, if he gave you that list," Xvim continued. "And I can definitely see the logic in giving you that list, even though I don't like it. All that said, I don't understand what the purpose of this talk is. If you don't need more names, why did you show me that book?"

"I have decided I won't be going after these people," Zorian said. And what a load off his chest that was, too. "Not the way you... not the way your past iteration had urged me to do."

"Hm. I'm not sure whether to praise you for your ethics or berate you for being too soft to do what has to be done," Xvim grumbled, shaking his head slightly. "Then again, the way you phrased that makes me think you still have some sort of designs for the list. I'm guessing that's where I come in, yes?"

"See, the idea is this – I want *you* to talk to these people and try to get their secrets yourself," Zorian told him bluntly. He paused for a moment. "And then share these secrets with me, of course."

Xvim looked at him like he was stupid for a moment then let out a brief chuckle of amusement.

"Mister Kazinski," Xvim told him, "if I could get these people to share their secrets with me like that, don't you think I would have already done so?"

"Not for all of them," Zorian pointed out. "Some of them are clearly on the list because you thought *I* might be interested in what they had to offer, but you probably don't care for their specialties. I doubt you even tried to trade for what they have to offer."

"That much is true," Xvim admitted.

"As for the rest... how much did you really offer them for their life's work?" Zorian asked.

"I'm always fair in my dealings, mister Kazinski," Xvim said with a frown.

"Yes, but what if you gave them an *outrageous* offer?" Zorian smiled. "The collected secrets of dozens of mages. More money than they'd ever seen in their life. Rare materials that cannot be obtained on the open market. A chance to hire a group of archmages for a task. That sort of thing."

Xvim raised an eyebrow at him. "If you can offer all that, why do you need me?"

"See?" Zorian said, pointing straight at his face. "That reaction there. Disbelief and amusement. You know I'm a time traveler, and you *still* can't take me seriously when I say what I offer. How do you think other people would react? Those kind of claims, when they come from me or Zach, really are outrageous to people. And not in a good way. We're just teenagers with no known accomplishments. We only have borrowed fame from our families to fall back on, and that can only take you so far. *You*, on the other hand, are a highly respected archmage. They know you. You're friends and acquaintances with some of them. It won't be so ridiculous if *you* offer these things."

"It will still sound rather ridiculous," Xvim pointed out. "People will think I've gone mad. Well, more than they already do, anyway."

"Don't worry, your reputation will be restored at the end of every restart," Zorian told him.

"How very comforting," Xvim deadpanned.

They were both silent for a while as Xvim considered the idea.

"There is some merit to it," Xvim eventually admitted. "Some of these people... I don't think there is anything I could offer them to share their findings with me. Most, though, probably have their price, if one were willing to go high enough, and the offer looked credible. And on that note, are you sure you can really deliver what you offer? Take money, for example – I'm not sure you understand what kind of sums are exchanged between high-level mages on deals like these. What sounds like an outrageous sum to you might look like pocket change to them"

Zorian didn't try to explain. He simply reached into his pocket and handed Xvim a bank check he had made for the occasion. Xvim glanced at it and immediately raised his eyebrows at the sum written on the piece of paper.

"That's a lot of zeroes," Xvim said after a short pause.

"No, mister Chao," Zorian said with a toothy smile. "That is just pocket change."

The coming week was a relatively busy one, with many things happening. An invasion of the Ibasan base beneath Cyoria was being organized, the Silent Doorway Adepts were being convinced that time travel was real and that they should give them access to their Bakora gate and associated experts again, some changes were being planned for their tour of Altazia's various Black Rooms and the plot to convince various experts to part with their closely-guarded secrets was slowly going forward. Thankfully, it was no longer just Zorian working alone on all these things, as it once was, so this kind of workload was easy enough to maintain.

That said, all of this was mostly irrelevant to simulacrum number two, whose job was simply to go to school and then disappear at the end of the day. Strangely enough, number two didn't mind his task. He knew that his predecessors had been rather unenthusiastic about their task, but he personally found it just to his liking. Maybe it was because the original had created him right after he had finished another negotiation session with the Silent Doorway Adepts, but he felt this sort of relaxing task was just what he needed.

Still, actually paying attention to classes was out of the question, so he picked up a couple of advanced books to read during lectures and breaks.

It was during one of the breaks that he found Neolu watching over his shoulder curiously.

"What?" he asked. He was rather surprised, really – this wasn't like in the previous restart, where the earlier simulacrum ended up secretly befriending her during their short lives. He was sure of it. So why exactly was she taking interest in him and his reading choices?

"Why are you reading dictionaries of Xlotic languages?" she asked curiously.

Oh. Right. Of course she would be interested in that. She was from Xlotic herself, after all.

He had found out a fair amount about Neolu in the previous restart, partially because Neolu herself felt the need to tell him about herself and partially because he had needed to reconstruct what his simulacrum had done by subtly questioning people and reading their thoughts. Neoluma-Manu Iljatir (Neolu for short) was a daughter of a regular, but very wealthy house from Kontemar – one of the bigger Ikosian successor states on the Xlotic coast. The darker, bronze-colored skin of hers hinted at it, but that kind of complexion was also common in southern Altazia and the Shivan archipelago, and thus not a dead giveaway. The blue, tattoo-like markings on her cheeks and forehead were the signature trait of her house, and nobody knew if they were merely cosmetic or held some kind of secret Iljatir family magic.

For Neolu to travel all the way from Xlotic to Eldemar in order to study magic was rather unusual, to say the least. It wasn't like Xlotic didn't have plenty of prestigious academies of its own. It was once the heartland of the Ikosian empire after all, and though the Cataclysm hurt the region badly, that still counted for something. Nonetheless, Neolu's father decided to send her all the way to Eldemar for her magical education. Officially it was because Cyoria's academy was the world's most renowned magical academy and he wanted nothing but the very best for his daughter, but rumor had it she had been involved in some kind of scandal back home and he wanted her out of people's sight for a while. Sending her to a distant but prestigious magical academy was probably a good solution in his book.

That was just a rumor, though, and even if Neolu was here in unofficial exile, one certainly couldn't tell that by her behavior. She seemed quite happy to be in Cyoria, and never gave the slightest amount of indication that she was bitter about her family or home. It was possible that the rumors were just rubbish in this case and that she had just really wanted to go to a foreign country for her education and her father couldn't bear to refuse her request.

Well, no matter. Not his business anyway. As for him reading Xlotic dictionaries, well... he was actually trying to make himself somewhat useful by helping simulacrum number one, who was steadily making his way to Koth right now. He had been in mental contact with his fellow simulacrum for a while now, and while the dictionaries he was reading were kind of outdated, it was better than nothing.

Of course, he couldn't really tell that to Neolu.

"I was thinking of visiting Xlotic once I graduate from the academy," he told her instead.

"Really!?" she gasped. "Oh, that's wonderful! Trust me, it's a beautiful place. You should visit my place when you do – I can give you a tour of the city and tell you where to go if you want to see something interesting."

Hmm. Now that was an interesting idea. Didn't Zach say that it was easy to convince Neolu that time travel was real? Maybe they should recruit her as a guide when they went looking for the piece of the key that was supposedly lost in Xlotic. She probably wouldn't be able to help them too much, but she could at least make sure they didn't make any major social blunders and act as a translator for them while they gathered their bearings. And maybe put in a good word for them to her House, so they could hopefully tap into their contacts throughout the region.

"I'll keep that in mind," Zorian said. "Say, do you think you could help me translate a few things? I have this list of phrases that I got from my friend who has been to Xlotic, but I can't seem to find them in the books..."

- break -

Once Zorian's simulacrum had finally reached Koth again, actually tracking down Daimen proved to be quite easy. Admittedly, this was only because he had managed to get the identity of his fiancée out of Mother. Turns out, Daimen was not quite as driven as Mother imagined him to be – instead of ceaselessly pursuing whatever goal he came to Koth for, he was taking a bit of a break to spend time with his girl at the Taramatula family estate. Well, considering he had been doing that for several weeks now, 'a bit' was probably an understatement. Anyway. All Zorian had to do was talk to a high-ranking member of the House, ask him where Daimen was, lift the information straight from his mind when he claimed he didn't know anything regarding the matter, and then make his way to the place with Zach in tow.

Thus it was that the two of them found themselves waiting in front of the entrance to the Taramatula estate, stubbornly insisting that they wanted to talk to Daimen and ignoring the guards who were equally stubborn in claiming they'd never seen the man in their life.

In all honestly, Zorian was kind of amazed they hadn't tried to violently get rid of them yet. He knew that Houses back in Eldemar tended to be a bit trigger happy when faced with visitors who couldn't take the hint. Though if they did, Zach and Zorian were entirely capable and willing to take them down and then keep doing the same to any reinforcements the House sent their way. Maybe they could sense that somehow?

Eventually, a rather severe-looking middle aged woman in white-and-orange clothing arrived to see what the disturbance was. She said her name was Ulanna, but she made no mention of what her position in the House was and what sort of authority she was wielding.

"You say you are Daimen's younger brother?" she asked with an arched eyebrow. Ulanna actually spoke grammatically perfect Ikosian, unlike most people they found in Koth, though her accent was pretty thick.

"Yes, Zorian Kazinski. You can show him this as proof," said Zorian, handing her a rolled up painting that he had shamelessly stolen from Daimen's room back in Cirin. The painting depicted three female students from Daimen's year at the academy, scantily dressed and posing suggestively. He had supposedly gotten that painting as a gift from the girls in question, and always kept it displayed prominently in his room, ignoring Mother's objection that it was 'obscene'.

The woman slowly and dramatically unfurled the painting, stoically scrutinized the contents with a raised eyebrow, and then gave him a mildly amused look.

"I see," she said. "If nothing else, you seem to have a similar sense of humor as he does. I'll be sure to show this to him. I'm sure there is an interesting story behind it."

"Oh absolutely," Zorian said with a sunny grin. "I'm sure he'd love to tell you all about it."

About fifteen minutes later, Ulanna returned with Daimen in tow.

It had been a while since Zorian had last seen his brother, but he hadn't changed much in the meantime. He was still the same tall, handsome guy with a muscular, athletic build and a confident swagger. Zorian would recognize him just about anywhere.

Zorian had changed a lot since their last meeting, however. He had become good enough at magic to notice that Daimen had discreetly cast a divination spell at him to confirm he really was Zorian and not a disguised imposter. He had gotten good enough at his mental powers to immediately tell when he was in the presence of another psychic individual.

He closed his eyes momentarily. Daimen was psychic. Of course. The one thing that Zorian was somewhat special at, and Daimen had to have it too. To tell the truth, though, he had somewhat been expecting it. It would certainly explain where that incredible social sense and persuasiveness of his had come from – even as a child, Daimen could wade through social situations that even adult men would struggle at. How good was Daimen at controlling his gift, though? Zorian felt an urge to send a telepathic probe at him to check, but restrained himself. Maybe later. The situation was still a little tense right now, no sense in making himself even more suspicious.

Also, if Daimen was Open and had some measure of control over it, then he should have very much noticed that Zorian was like him. Why hadn't he said anything to him or his parents?

Yeah, he definitely needed to confront him about this at some point.

"Zorian?" Daimen said. "Is that really you?"

"Who else could I be?" Zorian shot back. "I know we haven't seen each other in a while, but have you really forgotten what your little brother looked like already?"

Daimen laughed awkwardly. "No, of course not. It's just that this is very unexpected. Shouldn't you be in school or something?"

"I should," Zorian admitted. "But I decided to take a trip to Koth instead. Then I remembered you're already here and thought it would only be polite to drop by and say hi."

"Uh huh," Daimen said. He gave him a measuring look. "Tell me honestly – are you here on our parents' behalf?"

"No," Zorian said, shaking his head.

"So you're not going to try and get in between me and Orissa?" he asked.

"No, why would I?" said Zorian. "I'm happy for you. You're on your own when it comes to dealing with Mother and Father, though."

"You little brat," Daimen growled. "Then why the hell did you pick *that* of all things as your proof of identity, hmm?"

"It was a lovely painting," Ulanna commented stoically beside him. "You must have been very popular in your school days, mister Kazinski."

Daimen ignored her comment in favor of focusing on Zorian.

“It sure seems like you’re trying to get me in trouble here, is what I’m saying,” he told Zorian.

“All I know about how to properly treat a brother I learned from you, brother dearest,” Zorian said with a sickly smile.

“Oh?” Ulanna asked. “It sounds like you have some fascinating stories.”

“Yeah, there are some nice ones,” Zorian said. “My personal favorite is when he thought it would be funny to constantly lock his little brother out of the house for hours on end.”

“Actually I just wanted the house all for myself, and you didn’t want to go out and play outside like a normal kid,” Daimen pointed out. “Besides, I actually paid a price for that one.”

“Yes, that’s why I said it was my personal favorite,” Zorian said.

“What exactly happened?” Zach asked, causing Daimen and Ulanna to truly focus on him for the first time since the conversation started. He had been uncharacteristically quiet up until this moment, just observing the interaction from the sidelines and not saying anything.

“Zorian learned how to pick locks just so he could enter the house again, that’s what,” Daimen explained with annoyance. “I mean, what kind of kid *does* that? And then some stupid police officer that had no idea he was trying to break into his own house sees him and arrests him for burglary. Man, was Mother *pissed* about that when she found out. At both of us, really, but especially me since I was older and was supposed to be watching him instead of chasing him out of the house to do my own thing.”

“Perfectly understandable,” Ulanna commented.

“Yeah, yeah, I was a bit of a brat as a kid,” Daimen said dismissively. “Who wasn’t? Anyway, come inside, you two. I must say, it’s pretty impressive that you were able to travel all the way here from Eldemar...”

“Pretty irresponsible too,” Ulanna added from beside him.

“Well yeah, but I’m the last person who can lecture people about that,” Daimen said. “Man, compared to some of the stuff I did when I was their age, this is nothing!”

Ulanna raised an eyebrow at him.

“Err,” fumbled Daimen, before rounding back at Zach and Zorian. “And what the hell are you two waiting for? A written invitation? Get inside already before I dig myself an even deeper hole! I swear, this just isn’t my day...”

With that, Daimen turned towards the actual building of the estate and marched towards it, trusting them to follow after him. With a careless shrug and a smile at a job well done, Zorian followed after him.

67. Convergence

Chapter 067

Convergence

Zorian had to admit he was somewhat surprised at the way the Taramatula family treated him and Zach. They clearly knew about Daimen's family not approving of his relationship with Orissa, and the two of them made a spectacle of themselves upon arrival too. Zorian fully expected them to be wary of them, even unfriendly. Instead, the moment Daimen had confirmed Zorian was really who he said he was, they treated them both like honored guests. They summoned what must have been half of the whole extended family to greet them, introduced them to many of these people personally, gave them a brief tour of the place and offered to get Zorian something to drink at least three times before they accepted that he wasn't thirsty.

That kind of reception made Zorian more than a little uncomfortable. He knew they were just being polite, and that all these smiles and pleasantries weren't very genuine, but he simply wasn't used to that kind of treatment. It didn't help that very few of the Taramatula spoke Ikosian, which made it hard for Zorian to make himself understood. He only knew a few words in the local language, most of which were colorful local curses that his simulacrum had felt the need to include in his report for some reason, but people around him insisted on trying to talk to him anyway.

Normally, this would be Zorian's clue to start peering into people's surface thoughts in order to decipher what they wanted from him. This wouldn't totally solve the problem of differing languages, since people's thoughts were in no way completely divorced from the language they spoke, but it would help. However, being too liberal with mind magic in a gathering of mages was a recipe for disaster. The risk of discovery was too high. This was especially true because the Taramatula were bee controllers, which probably meant they specialized in some form of mind magic to begin with.

Someone in the Taramatula family didn't feel the same way about him, though, because he just felt a telepathic probe smashing against his defenses.

Zorian, who was just in the middle of answering one of Ulanna's questions, immediately stopped talking and turned towards the source of the probe. The mind magic had been crude and unsubtle, allowing Zorian to zero in on the person responsible almost immediately. It was a young teenage girl, who was currently doing her best to look innocent and doing a terrible job of it.

"Is something wrong?" Ulanna asked with a frown, following Zorian's gaze and scrutinizing the girl with interest.

"No, nothing," said Zorian, shaking his head and turning back towards her. "I must have imagined things."

He didn't want to raise a fuss over this. It would be his word against hers, and it would probably be seen as petty and oversensitive to make a big deal over the whole thing, even if they believed him. Besides, the probe had been more amusing than threatening. The girl was terrible. He could fight off that level of attack in his sleep.

He did kind of wonder if this was something the Taramatula leadership instructed the girl to do, or if it was something she decided on her own initiative. On one hand, Zorian found it hard to believe that the Taramatula would entrust a task like this to someone this unqualified. On the other hand, this way they could escape consequences if they were caught much more easily. They could always claim it's just a kid being stupid and ask for leniency in light of that fact.

After a moment of consideration, he casually sent a telepathic probe of his own at the girl, wormed his way past her flimsy mental defenses and hit her with a weak mental shock as a friendly warning not to try that stuff again in the future. It was just a tiny little jolt, probably didn't even hurt, but she reeled back as if slapped and quickly found a way to excuse herself from the meeting.

Zorian sniffed disdainfully. What a baby.

Ulanna frowned at the scene but didn't say anything. He was pretty sure that she, at the very least, was ignorant of what the girl had tried to pull on him.

Eventually they were introduced to Orissa as well, the woman that Daimen was apparently so in love with. She was a tall, shapely woman, confident in her posture and movement. Very dark skinned, as was typical of all people of Koth. Beautiful, but so were all women that Daimen went for. She was one of the more reserved Taramatula they were introduced to, though Zorian couldn't tell if that was because she was usually like this or if she was simply leery about them in particular.

Overall, Zorian couldn't really see anything special about her. Nothing that would explain, at first glance, how she managed to capture Daimen's heart so firmly. Skill, maybe? According to Ulanna (who was, as it turned out, Orissa's aunt), Orissa was one of the more capable Taramatula members.

"Your brother has good taste," Zach whispered to him, tracing a vague hourglass figure in the air.

"You know nothing about her except that she's good looking and that she can behave herself in public," Zorian pointed out. "How is that 'good taste'?"

"With those looks, what more do you want?" Zach asked him, grinning.

"I can't believe I'm defending Daimen here, but I'm sure it's not that shallow," Zorian said. "Daimen had plenty of beautiful girls throwing themselves at him in the past and he never thought to marry them. I'm sure there is more to her than just looks."

"I'm sure the looks helped," Zach said.

"Oh, definitely," Zorian agreed to that. "I don't think I've ever seen Daimen go for a girl that wasn't beautiful. It's just that I don't think she could have won him over by beauty alone."

As if sensing that the two of them were talking about him, Daimen soon extricated himself from the main mass of people and sought them out.

"What are you two doing, whispering to each other on the sidelines?" he asked, approaching them. "Don't you know that's rude, especially when you're the guests of honor for the occasion?"

"We don't even speak their language," Zorian pointed out. "Kind of makes it hard to mingle."

"Well you certainly won't learn if you don't interact with people," Daimen said.

Zorian frowned, a flash of annoyance rippling through him.

"Did you come here just to lecture me?" Zorian asked him, an edge of warning in his voice.

"Still so prickly," Daimen sighed. "Look, since you're not really interacting with anyone, why don't we go somewhere private and have a nice friendly chat."

He looked at Zach with a speculative look. In response, Zach smiled broadly at him and gave him a stupid little wave, like this was the first time they saw each other.

"Right," Daimen said, looking mildly amused. "I guess you want your friend to join us, then?"

"That's right," Zorian said. "He followed me all the way to Koth, it would be a jerk move of me to simply sideline him now that I'm here."

"Sure, I guess," Daimen said with a shrug, motioning for them to follow him. "He's not your boyfriend, is he?"

Zorian scowled, resisting an urge to fire a lightning bolt at him.

Zach, on the other hand, was a little less restrained and launched a kick in Daimen's direction. A kick which Daimen easily dodged, Zorian was sad to note.

"Oh don't be so touchy, you two, it was just a little joke," Daimen said, waving his hands placatingly in front of him. "You two should know all about little jokes, what with the stupid prank you pulled on me when you arrived. Right?"

Zorian clacked his tongue unhappily. Okay, so he kind of got them there.

Daimen led them across the estate towards the little guest house near the northern edge of the complex, taking care to make a big arc around the building where Taramatula bee hives were housed.

"You don't want to go near there," Daimen warned. "The Taramatula keep multiple types of bees, and the combat ones tend to be pretty aggressive around strangers. Your scent is new, so you getting too close would probably send them into a frenzy. The keepers would calm them down, but still. Very scary, seeing a huge cloud of magical killer bees descending towards you."

"Speaking from experience, I take it?" Zach asked.

"Yeah, they didn't like me either, at first," Daimen confirmed. "I have no idea why the Taramatula didn't tell me to watch out for that when I first moved in, but I suspect it was some sort of hazing thing. They wanted to see how I would react to being put in that situation, I guess."

"Are you sure they weren't just bitter their daughter chose to marry some foreign commoner and wanted to scare you off?" Zorian asked curiously.

"Nah, I'm pretty sure they're pleased with her choice," Daimen said, sounding completely unconcerned. "The local politics still makes my head spin every time I try to understand it, but the Taramatula have thoroughly solidified their position in the local scene. What they want most right now is powerful mages on their side, and... well, I don't want to brag too much, but I'm kind of amazing."

"The only amazing thing about you is your ego," Zorian muttered under his breath.

Daimen either didn't hear him or chose to ignore the comment.

"Well, I'll be honest with you and admit they would have preferred if I married one of their... less prominent family members," Daimen said. "Someone who wasn't so close to the main branch of the family. But I made it clear to them right away that this wasn't going to happen. I wasn't after Orissa's hand because I coveted their status and influence, I was after her because I loved her. It was either Orissa or nothing."

Zorian considered asking Daimen what exactly was so amazing about Orissa, but decided he didn't actually care about the answer that much and stayed silent.

Eventually, they reached their destination – a humble little building that looked like somewhat disrespectful accommodations for a person who was soon to marry into the Taramatula family. However, Zorian knew from talking to Ulanna that this wasn't the actual housing the Taramatula assigned to Daimen. He had a spacious room in the central building, one much more fitting for someone like him, it was just that he mostly chose not to use it. He spent most of his time here, in this out-of-the-way guest building, which had been assigned to him as his own private workshop after he complained that his assigned room wasn't secure enough to do his work in.

Daimen ushered them inside the building, which was overflowing with maps, strange devices and what appeared to be old artifacts recovered from gods know where.

“Don't touch anything,” Daimen warned them. “I'll kill you if you break something.”

Zorian knew it was just a stupid expression, but he couldn't help but imagine Daimen actually trying to kill the two of them and eventually realizing what he had gotten himself into. It put a sunny smile on his face. Oh how glorious that would be...

“I don't like that smile,” Daimen noted. “Seriously Zorian, don't touch anything. This is work related.”

“I'm just messing with you,” Zorian said, shaking his head. “We'll leave your things alone, no need to worry. How is your expedition faring, anyway?”

Daimen collapsed on his chair with a long suffering sigh, snatching a clay figurine of a bearded man off the table and staring at it for a few seconds.

“It's... going,” he said, eventually. Very informative. “I'm close to finding it, I know I am, but I just can't seem to zero in on the actual location. I don't understand. We combed through the whole region – and I *know* it's the correct region – but everything is just...”

He shook his head and returned the figurine back to the table.

“Anyway, I'm taking a bit of a break right now,” Daimen said. “I figured it might clear my head a bit. Let me see things with a fresh perspective and all. But enough about me, let's talk about you. I've been wondering... how *did* the two of you get here so fast? I don't know about you Zach, but Zorian couldn't have possibly just disappeared from home until after our parents went on their own journey to Koth. That leaves... not a lot of time to actually get here.”

Zach and Zorian shared a look between each other. The two of them had debated what to tell Daimen about their goals and situation for a while, and the general conclusion was that they had no real option besides flat out telling him the truth. Zorian didn't have a very high opinion of his brother, but Daimen was anything but stupid, and he knew Zorian personally. Not very well, but still. There was little doubt in Zorian's mind that Daimen would immediately see through any stupid story they might concoct about their visit. And in Zorian's experience, Daimen wasn't the type to quietly accept that sort of thing.

They needed his full support and the only way to impress the gravity of the situation upon him was to tell him about the time loop and their need for the Key. Hopefully Daimen would be less aggravating to convince than, say, Silent Doorway Adepts.

“We opened a Gate and stepped through it,” Zorian eventually said.

Daimen gave him a weird look.

“A Gate? As in, a dimensional passage?” he asked.

“Yes,” Zorian confirmed. “We created a portal straight from Eldemar to here in Koth.”

“You're saying nonsense, but you look completely serious,” Daimen noted. “Either your acting has really gotten good or you're taking me for an idiot. Zorian, if you're going to lie to me, at least check things beforehand to make things at least slightly plausible. Do you have any idea how hard it is to cast the Gate spell?”

“Oh yes,” Zorian nodded seriously. “Took me a while to get the hang of it.”

“I'm sure,” Daimen rolled his eyes. “I mean, you mastered the spell so well you can apparently open the doorway all the way from Altazia to Southern Miasina. How does that even work, by the way?”

“Well, first I made a simulacrum and sent it to Koth...” Zorian began.

“Oh, so you can make simulacra too? Way to go brother, you sure are a prodigy,” Daimen praised mockingly.

“Then, when my copy arrived here, we coordinated with each other to open the passage between our two locations,” Zorian continued, ignoring his jab. “With two casters working on the spell at both ends of the passage, distance was not an issue.”

“That's...” started Daimen, and then stopped and hummed thoughtfully to himself for a few seconds. “Okay, I think that could actually work. Congratulations, I guess. At least one part of your story holds water. It's still silly though, because you cannot possibly cast either of those two spells. Hell, *I* can't cast either of them, so how could you?”

Zorian was just about to respond, but Zach was faster.

“What if we prove it to you?” he asked.

“Prove it to me?” Daimen asked incredulously. “And how do you propose to do *that*? Opening another Gate to Eldemar?”

“Of course,” Zorian nodded. “Seeing is believing. Nothing we could say would be as convincing as just showing you the truth. Fortunately, I left another simulacrum back home, so we can open a portal there whenever I want.”

“Zorian, there is taking a joke too far, you know...” Daimen sighed.

“It costs you nothing to humor us for a bit,” Zach pointed out. “At worst you get to watch Zorian make a fool out of himself for a bit.”

Daimen considered this for a second and then chuckled for a moment.

“Yeah, you have a point there,” Daimen said, grinning.

Jerks, the both of them.

“So should I open a portal right here, then?” Zorian asked innocently. “Since I obviously can’t do it, it shouldn’t be a problem, right?”

“No way,” Daimen told him. “I’m not risking my workshop just so you could prove your point.”

Zorian grinned at him.

“Annoying brat,” Daimen grumbled. “Alright, whatever. I have no idea of what you two are up to, but I’ll play along for now. In return, though, I want your promise that you’ll tell me why you’re here afterwards. Why you’re *really* here, that is, not another bullshit story.”

“Deal,” Zorian said, agreeing to the request with ease. He was going to do that anyway, so it cost him nothing to promise such. “When do you have the time?”

“I’m not doing anything right now,” Daimen said, shaking his head and rising to his feet. “Let’s go. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner I can get back to my work and Orissa.”

Zorian almost felt bad for his older brother. The demonstration Zorian planned to give was just a beginning. There would be no peaceful routine for Daimen in this restart, at least if Zorian was successful in convincing him he was telling the truth.

Almost. But not quite.

“I thought you said you were taking a break from work,” Zorian pointed out.

“Shut up,” Daimen responded. “You know what I mean.”

“He’s ‘working’ with his fiancée,” said Zach with a lecherous smile on his face. “I’m sure it’s hard, physical labor.”

Daimen muttered something about teenagers but otherwise didn’t comment on Zach’s assertion.

“Do we need to leave the Taramatula estate for this?” Daimen asked. “If you end up causing another scene by triggering the defensive wards or something, I’ll be pretty cross with you.”

Zorian hummed thoughtfully.

Most wards were not made with detecting gate creation in mind, but one could never know for sure what an unknown warding scheme would react to. Not without launching into an extensive analysis of the wards themselves, which could itself trigger something and raise the alarm. Without knowing how the local wards were laid out and what their sensitivity thresholds were, Zorian could only advocate caution. As such, the group left the estate, leaving a message with the guards that they’d be back ‘in a bit’.

Unsurprisingly, that would turn out to be a huge understatement. It was probably fine, though – Zorian had seen the look the Taramatula guards gave Daimen when he said he’d be back ‘before they know it’, and he had a feeling this wasn’t the first time Daimen pulled this sort of thing.

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Maybe asking himself what Daimen saw in Orissa was the wrong thing to ask. A better question was, what the hell did *she* see in *him*?

- break -

Zorian sat on one of the hills overlooking Cyoria, observing the city. Or at least pretending to do so – in reality, most of his attention was on Daimen, who was standing beside him and staring at the city in utter silence. Zach was lying on the grass next to them, whistling some annoyingly catchy tune and tracing outlines in the clouds with his finger, not even pretending that the city interested him. The whole situation was a strange sight to Zorian’s eyes, and not really how he had expected the situation to develop once they brought Daimen back to Eldemar.

When the group had been back in Koth, and Zorian proceeded to cast the Gate spell successfully, he had expected Daimen to... well, *do something*. Be shocked, or at least surprised. Maybe even become aggressive towards them, demanding an explanation or doubting their identity again. At the very least, he expected his brother to be visibly incredulous at the feat and have trouble deciding how to respond. Instead, Daimen just got very quiet and serious, not saying much and observing everything around him with uncommon intensity. He cast a number of spells that looked fairly exotic to Zorian's eyes, but which he suspected were meant to tell him whether or not he was stuck in an illusion, detect if his mind was being tampered with, and reveal any hidden presences lurking around them. That done, he cast the Mind Blank spell on himself, followed by three different privacy wards, and then threw some kind of metal sphere through the dimensional passage. Some kind of remote magical sensor, obviously. Only once the sphere told him there was no obvious trap around the Eldemar side of the gate did he agree to cross over.

Seeing Zorian's simulacrum upon arrival made him frown, but he did not comment upon it. In fact, he did not comment much on anything that happened since then, opting to just silently scrutinize everything. Zach and Zorian teleported him around Eldemar for a bit, just to drive home the point that yes, they really did open a passage straight back home, and then brought Daimen here to this hill when they realized the man was just passively following after them and not reacting to things.

Frankly, Zorian was getting a little concerned there. They had been on this hill for half an hour now, and Daimen was just standing there like a statue, staring at the city with this weird glassy expression. Did they... *break* Daimen or something?

"Talk to us," Zorian finally said, not able to restrain himself any longer. Zach stopped whistling for a moment and inclined his head towards them, waiting to see whether Daimen would react.

He did. As if woken from a dream by Zorian's statement, he took a deep breath and slowly turned in place until he faced Zorian.

"Who are you really?" Daimen asked curiously. His voice was calm and unhurried, but Zorian could detect an undercurrent of frustration and anger lurking there. He may have mind blanked himself, but Zorian had years of experience of reading people's emotions and matching them to their facial expressions and mannerisms.

"I'm Zorian, of course," he told Daimen, equally calm and unhurried. He had expected this might happen. If a person you know suddenly got impossibly good at something or developed mastery in brand new fields out of the blue, it was reasonable to decide they could be possessed or an impersonator.

"No, you're not," Daimen said lightly, shaking his head. "Zorian is... too young to be capable of all this. My brother works hard and is almost as smart as me, but he just didn't have enough time to get this good. So you can't be him. Who are you and why did you go to the trouble of setting this up?"

Zorian had half a mind to dispute this assertion that he was 'almost as smart' as Daimen... but he had to be honest and admit that Daimen was, if anything, being overly generous there. Things never came to Zorian as naturally as they did to Daimen.

"Why are you so calm if you think I'm someone other than your brother?" Zorian asked curiously. "If I thought Kirielle was replaced with an imposter while I wasn't looking, I sure as hell wouldn't be calm about it."

Daimen frowned at his mention of Kirielle. Maybe he didn't know that Zorian was supposed to watch over her while their parents went to Koth? It was rather unexpected of him to agree to that, so maybe Mother never notified him of that little fact.

"I'm calm because raging at you would solve nothing," Daimen said. "I need answers, and I doubt I could force them out of either of you two. You are a mage capable of creating simulacra, teleporting across the country at whim and opening Gates to another continent. Your friend here has been more low-key, but his relaxed manner makes me think he's actually the more dangerous of the two of you."

"Indeed," Zorian commented.

"I don't know, Zorian, I think a lot of people would be way more terrified of you than they would be me," said Zach, still lying around on the grass, completely ignoring the tense situation developing beside him.

"So I can do little except try and see what you want and hope that Zorian is still alive," Daimen concluded, ignoring the comment.

"I see," Zorian sighed. "I suppose it's not too surprising for you to reach this conclusion from where you're standing. However, you are wrong. I *am* Zorian. Your logic makes sense, but only if you make certain assumptions about the passage of time involved."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Daimen said, frowning. "Stop trying to sound mysterious and explain yourself."

"Very well," Zorian said. "The truth is that it has been a while since we last saw each other, brother. It might seem like I'm implausibly capable, but it took me almost six years, instruction from experts that most people don't have access to, and enough money to finance a small country for a year to get this good. I'm six years older than I should be, but I'm still Zorian."

"That's... ridiculous," Daimen said. But there was a sliver of doubt in his voice. Or was it hope? He probably didn't *want* to believe Zorian had been replaced by someone.

"So was our claim that we made a dimensional doorway across continental distances," pointed out Zach. "And yet we're here, aren't we?"

"That's different," Daimen protested. "At least that's theoretically possible. This... I can't think of a way this could work. You can't just add an

extra six years of life to a person without anyone noticing anything. Not even the best time dilation chambers could give him that. Besides, he implied he was interacting with the world at large while he lived out those six years, so time dilation couldn't be what he's talking about. Where does that leave us?"

"It leaves us with a world in which time repeats itself," Zorian told him. "On the eve of the Summer Festival, everything is reverted to the start of the month. All that you did in the previous month is undone, and you forget. Everyone forgets. You lived through this exact same month so many times, making the same motions, same decisions, oblivious to this... *time loop* that the world is bound in."

Well, at least Zorian assumed so. Any changes in a given restart could be somehow traced to actions of either him or Zach, and surely none of their actions thus far were big enough to propagate all the way to Koth, right?

"We remember, though," Zorian continued. "We can advance our skills across restarts and learn from our mistakes. Which is how I got as good as I did in such a seemingly short amount of time."

"You're telling me I've been essentially doing nothing for the past six years?" Daimen asked him incredulously.

"Try several decades," Zach said. "Six years ago is when Zorian ended up gaining the ability to retain skills and memories across restarts. The time loop has been going on for decades before that, though."

Daimen looked like he was going to say something but then started pacing around the grassy hill instead, mumbling something unintelligible to himself.

Seeing how they were back to waiting for Daimen to snap out of it again, Zach just shrugged and went back to tracing the shapes in the clouds again.

After about five minutes, Daimen suddenly stopped and approached Zorian again.

"I'm not saying I believe you..." he began hesitantly. "Because I don't. It's crazy. But I'm willing to hear you out in more detail."

"Fair enough," Zorian nodded solemnly. He cupped his hands in front of him and created an illusionary image of a slowly-spinning planet in front of him. Above the planet was a simple drawing of an upturned triangle connected to a single horizontal line through its tip. "In the beginning, there was just the world we all lived on and an ancient artifact called the Sovereign Gate..."

- break -

The pretty illusions and the detailed story did not convince Daimen that their story was true. Not fully, anyway. He was forced to admit that Zorian probably was who he said he was, if only because he knew too many random details about their childhood days, but he found the time loop to be quite a crazy idea. There were not a whole lot of other answers that would explain things, though, so Zorian was hoping it wouldn't be long before he fully accepted things. It helped that he had introduced Daimen to Xvim and Alanic, who were somehow more convincing to Daimen than his own brother. If Zorian was interpreting things correctly, Daimen found him pretty unnerving now, which was both kind of annoying and kind of flattering.

But no matter; while Daimen was busy coming to terms with the truth of the world, other preparations and operations continued unimpeded. The Silent Doorway adepts were finally convinced to give them a chance in this restart too, and Zorian threw himself into the task of helping the aranea understand their Bakora Gate better. There was also the vague plan of transporting some of their mages to distant Bakora gates in order to obtain their gate keys for future restarts, but that was still in the beginning stages.

The time to take advantage of the Black Room beneath Cyoria also came and went, and this time Zach and Zorian were no longer the only people inside. Kael and Xvim also joined them. Kael couldn't exactly practice his alchemy inside the Black Room, but he wanted time to rewrite and reorganize his research notes a little, since their size and the haphazard manner in which they were written were making the whole thing gradually unmanageable. He claimed it took him most of the restart thus far just to figure out what he did in the past and how to build up upon it. As for Xvim, he was switching his time between prodding Zach and Zorian whenever he felt they were slacking off and experimenting with various shaping regimens. Like Kael, he also had a mountain of notes, but he claimed there was no need for him to rewrite and organize anything. Perhaps it was because he was older and more experienced with note-taking, or maybe he just read fast and had an absurdly good memory, but he had no problem with quickly absorbing the notes that Zorian gave him at the start of each restart.

Alanic and Taiven declined to participate. Alanic claimed there was no point in him being there, while Taiven said she didn't want to be stuck in a tiny little room with four men for a month. Which was... fair enough. He really should have thought of that before he even brought the idea up for her consideration.

Zach commented, with a suggestive grin, that he wouldn't mind giving up his spot in one of the future restarts so Zorian and Taiven could have the Black Room all to themselves 'to experiment'. Thankfully, Taiven took it in good humor and just rolled her eyes at him.

It was not long after they returned from the Black Room that Zorian finally succeeded at something that had been bothering him for quite a while now.

"I did it!" he exclaimed, barging into Zach's room one day. "I finally succeeded!"

He was greeted with the sight of Zach sitting on the floor in front of one of the aranea that the Silent Doorway Adepts had sent to Cyoria to act as

their representative. Zorian had placed telepathic relays between Cyoria and their main colony, making such an arrangement less problematic than it would otherwise be. Normally, finding Zach talking to one of the aranea without Zorian being present would be quite an unusual sight. The aranea didn't have much respect for a non-psychic like Zach, and Zach didn't tolerate their condescension well. However, Zorian could identify the aranea in question at a glance, thanks to one of her main eyes being covered with a milky white membrane, having been ruined in some magical accident in her youth. Frozen Thoughts Spanning Across Bottomless Chasms was somewhat deviant by aranean standards, and held a deep fascination for non-psychic beings and how they perceive the world. Zorian suspected it had something to do with her sight being crippled at a relatively young age, and the wider aranean philosophy of considering non-psychic beings as fundamentally crippled. Regardless, Frozen Thoughts was one of the rare aranea Zorian met over the restarts who actively preferred interacting with Zach over him, and it wasn't unusual to see her seek him out, even when she had no official business to bring up.

Zorian wasn't entirely sure why Zach was so willing to indulge Frozen Thoughts' curiosity, when he clearly didn't think much of aranea in general. Perhaps he just found the situation novel enough to be interesting, or maybe he was just too polite to tell her off, but he treated Frozen Thoughts with a surprising amount of understanding and patience.

"Well," Zach said. "Congratulations, I guess. What exactly did you succeed at?"

"I found a way to open the secret research facility hidden in the ceiling of the Cyorian web," Zorian said. "Without destroying any of the contents, I mean."

"Oh?" Zach said, sitting up a little straighter. "Anything interesting?"

"I'm still going through it all, but at first glance most of it seems to revolve around their efforts to translate human magics into forms more compatible with the aranea," Zorian said.

"Makes sense," Frozen Thoughts said. "Isn't that the whole point of living beneath Cyoria? At least for us aranea."

"Right," Zorian said. "Well, that means that little of it will be useful to me directly... but I may have struck gold here regardless. I think the other aranean webs are going to be *very* interested in this. With the kind of knowledge in my arsenal, I might be able to arrange for heavier concessions from the aranean webs we meet. Maybe I can even talk them into teaching me some of their *really* good stuff, and then use that to get more really good stuff out of other webs and so on..."

"I'm amused that you feel comfortable discussing a plot like that right in front of me," Frozen Thoughts said. "But I can't really blame you. My web would have probably been even more ruthless about taking advantage of that kind of opportunity if they were in your situation."

"That's interesting to hear," Zach said speculatively. "Perhaps we might delegate some of our skill gathering to your web, then? Zorian is understandably a little skittish of going full raider on your people, but if we were to supply you with a bunch of secret aranean techniques and equipment and left it up to you how you use them to acquire more... well, I'm sure that Zorian wouldn't inquire too deeply about the methods you used in your dealings."

"I'm right here, Zach," Zorian complained.

"So was Frozen Thoughts when you explained your master plan, but that didn't stop you," Zach grinned. "Besides, I feel most of the araneas we met think a little too highly of themselves and could do with a little humbling."

"I'm... going to put this topic off for now," Zorian said. "Anyway, I did find one thing in the research facility that could be interesting. The web actually had a whole project dedicated to trying to adapt some of their mental techniques to human psychics. The idea, as far as I can tell, was to create a limited skillset for a sort of... human vassal. They didn't call them that, of course, but that's kind of what it amounts to. The psychic would get instruction from them, the sort they cannot really get anywhere else, and in return they would serve as the aranean spokesperson and, in their own words, a 'problem solver'. There would be no coercion or mind bending involved here – the documents were quite clear on that, as the web leadership wanted everything to be completely aboveboard if one of the psychics was subjected to mental examination and other scrutiny. The psychics would be kept in line through a simple threat of withdrawing support and teaching assistance to anyone who doesn't cooperate. And possibly legal persecution, since they intended to implement this only after they worked out some kind of formal deal with the Cyorian administration."

"So almost exactly like those mages and families that swear fealty to established Houses," Zach noted.

"Yes, that is probably where they got the idea," Zorian confirmed. "That's why I called them vassals. Anyway, most of these skills are too rudimentary for someone like me. I'm already too good at telepathy, mind reading, mental combat and the like to benefit from the bulk of the program. However, the web was also experimenting with providing the most loyal of these vassals mental techniques like those used by aranean elders to enhance their thinking. I'm still poring over the information, but the research notes seem pretty complete. The Cyorian web seems to have documented a lot of the obvious dangers and pitfalls involved in adapting these kinds of 'inner techniques' to human minds. With access to this, I might actually be able to start tinkering in this field without doing something irreversible to myself."

"They must have left quite a trail of insanity behind them with such experimentation," Frozen Thoughts speculated. "Tinkering with that kind of thing produces a lot of complications even in our own communities. Trying to adapt these techniques to human minds probably involved a lot of dramatic failures."

"The documents never say what happened to the humans involved with the experimentation, but I suspect you are right," Zorian nodded.

"If you want my advice, I suggest you start dabbling in this field by going to the Perfect Phantasm Crafters," Frozen Thoughts told him.

"Them?" Zorian asked, surprised. "I didn't know they were experts on these kind of techniques."

"They aren't," Frozen Thoughts said. "But pretty much all aranean webs have some measure of expertise in these, and the Perfect Phantasm Crafters are one of the webs with better understanding of the differences between human and aranean minds. Additionally, their brand of inner techniques is relatively safe and inoffensive. They focus on the so-called self-illusions. Techniques that leave most of your thoughts untouched, merely altering how you perceive the world – highlighting some things in your vision, blocking out sounds, and so on. On the face of it, the idea of deliberately deceiving yourself may seem kind of dubious, but it can be very useful and it's easily undone. If you want to get started on this without risking insanity, the Perfect Phantasm Crafters are probably your best bet."

After some more questions about the matter, Zorian left Zach and Frozen Thoughts to whatever discussion they had been having before he had barged in and left. He had too many things to worry about in the current restart to start an extensive new project like this, but it was something to think about in the future.

- break -

"So what do you think of the Taramatula?" Daimen asked.

Zorian glanced at his brother, trying to decipher why he had suddenly asked him that question. Like usual, Daimen always had a mind blank on when he knew Zorian was around – in the beginning he had dropped that thing once he had realized he was really his brother and not some imposter, but when he later found out that Zorian was a master mind mage he started zealously applying it on himself whenever they met.

Since Daimen was clearly so paranoid about mind magic, Zorian had held off on confronting him about his own psychic nature and how much he really knew about it. Besides, Daimen was still reeling from the realization that he was just a copy in an endlessly repeating pocket universe, so he felt it would be a little bit mean to dump too many things on him at once. He had time. That particular question wasn't very time critical.

Currently the two of them were taking a slow walk across the outer boundaries of the Taramatula estate, ostensibly to just enjoy the view but actually so they could have a conversation without fearing someone would eavesdrop on them. Zach was not present at the moment, since Daimen requested this to be a private meeting between the two of them. Instead, he stayed behind in the central building of the estate, exchanging stories with the tutor that the Taramatula had provided to both of them free of charge – after the relatively embarrassing showing he and Zach had during their initial reception, the Taramatula decided they really needed a lesson in the local language and customs. Especially since it soon became obvious that the two of them would be visiting their place quite often in the near future, due to their frequent meetings with Daimen.

The estate itself was quite large, with a massive central building ringed by a multitude of smaller ones. At least a quarter of the smaller buildings housed bees instead of people. All of the structures were sparkling white, not because they were painted such and kept clean, but because they were built using some kind of pearly white stone that didn't seem to get dirty. The central building had more color, though, being obviously intended as more ostentatious and eye-catching. Colorful, complicated braids and geometric shapes framed all of the doors and windows, and zig-zagged across open walls. They weren't painted on either, and instead seemed to be made out of semi-precious stones and magical crystals embedded straight into the structure of the walls. Zorian wasn't sure, but they may have doubled as reinforcement for the building's warding scheme, so there was a possibility they weren't just ornamental.

Taramatula were also very fond of statues, most of them depicting stern-looking people that were presumably prominent ancestors of the family, but there were also a fair number of ones depicting various magical creatures. And giant bees, of course. What would a bee-focused family of mages do without statues of giant bees? All of the statues were carved and painted to be as lifelike as possible. The people of Koth were very fond of realism in art, and Taramatula were no exception.

"They're surprisingly hospitable and friendly," said Zorian. "I expected them to be more arrogant and conceited, considering their status."

"This is actually pretty typical of how most minor nobles behave," Daimen told him. "I interacted with a lot of them over the years, and they're rarely overtly unpleasant. Even if they think you're beneath them, they will rarely let that show unless you go out of the way to annoy them in some fashion."

"I concede to your expertise in the matter, then," Zorian shrugged. "Anyway, I kind of like them."

"I'm glad," Daimen said. "I guess you'd have no issue with taking my side when Mother and Father come, then?"

Zorian gave him an incredulous look.

"What?" Daimen asked defensively.

"You think my opinion actually matters to them?" Zorian asked, raising his eyebrow at him. For that matter, he was surprised that Daimen cared about his opinion either. "But sure, throw my support of you right into their face if they ask. Not like their opinion of me could get much lower."

"Zorian, that's... a little too harsh towards your parents, don't you think?" Daimen tried.

"Nope," Zorian answered unrepentantly. "I never mattered to them. Not until you made it clear you have no intention of settling down and taking over their family business and Fortov showed them what a failure he really is. Then they expected me to drop all of my dreams and plans and remake myself into what they needed me to be."

Daimen was quiet for a while.

"I see," he eventually said. "You were so reasonable and calm during our meetings that I almost forgot what a perpetual ball of anger and resentment you tend to be."

"Screw you too, Daimen," Zorian told him simply. "What exactly did you bring me here for, anyway?"

"Well, first of all I wanted to say I'm very impressed with what you've achieved so far," Daimen began.

Zorian gave him a strange look. Daimen was praising him? What the hell was going on here?

"Don't look at me like that," Daimen protested. "I really am. Six years is not that long in the grand scheme of things. You're still effectively a year younger than me, yet you've accomplished so much. I think that most people, even if they were handed the same opportunity as you, wouldn't have gotten as far in such a short period of time."

Zorian stayed silent for a few seconds, unsure how to respond to that.

"Thanks, I guess," he finally said. "Does that mean you accept the time loop as real now, then?"

"Yes," Daimen nodded. "I guess I do."

"In that case, I'm going to be frank with you," said Zorian. "We originally sought you out because we need your help with something."

"Of course you do," Daimen said matter-of-factly. "A treasure hunt of some sort, I'm guessing?"

"Yes," Zorian confirmed. "Remember what I told you about the third time traveler and how he stranded us all here? Well, there is potentially a way for us to unlock the exit. However, to do that we need to gather five pieces of the Key that holds dominion over the Sovereign Gate. And one of these pieces is supposed to be lost here in Koth."

Daimen listened to his explanation very calmly at first, nodding slightly here and there to indicate agreement and that he was paying attention, but then he suddenly flinched and straightened his back, as if struck by some realization.

"Wait... the Sovereign Gate is an ancient imperial artifact!" Daimen exclaimed.

Zorian looked at him like he had gone mad.

"Well, yes," he said slowly.

"Which means these 'Keys' you're looking for are probably *also* ancient imperial artifacts," Daimen concluded.

"Yes," Zorian confirmed, still not understanding why Daimen seemed so animated about this. "The ring, the crown, the dagger, the orb and the staff of the First Emperor of Ikosia. Supposedly, the orb has been lost here in Koth. One of the emperors personally led an invasion force into the region to conquer it, but the army was scattered and driven deep into the jungles, where most of them perished. Including the emperor, whose body and possessions were never found. And he was reportedly carrying the orb with him at the time, so..."

Zorian stopped talking because Daimen began to laugh, first quietly and then progressing into a full-blown maniacal cackling. Seriously, what was wrong with him?

"Daimen?" he asked uncertainly.

"Of course. Of course!" Daimen said. As if that explained anything. "It all comes back to this in the end, doesn't it?"

"I don't suppose you're going to tell me why this is so funny to you?" Zorian asked him, voice laced with annoyance.

"Because, my dear little brother," Daimen told him, "that orb is what I'm after, too."

68. Green Hell

Chapter 068 Green Hell

Historically, Koth had been a frequent target for Ikosian expansionism. The jungles that covered the region were dangerous to traverse and hard to clear, but they held valuable resources that couldn't be found anywhere else. This made Kothic societies developed and wealthy enough that nobody would scoff at conquering them, yet left the region as a whole politically disunited and fragmented. Thus, Ikosian rulers often tried to bring the region under their thumb, reasoning that a bunch of bickering city-states and small kingdoms could not possibly unite together in time to repulse them.

But such initiatives were never successful. Koth was very far from Ikosian heartland, over rather inhospitable terrain, and fielding significant armies there was very hard. Additionally, the states of Koth proved quite willing to temporarily set aside their differences in order to resist Ikosian incursions into the region.

One of these unsuccessful campaigns, one that failed particularly dramatically, was the one launched by Awan-Temti Khumbastir. He was one of the more successful Ikosian emperors, but his success was built upon many small successes and the gradual prosperity of the empire under his reign. He had no grand feats to his name, and he feared his rule would be forgotten as soon as his corpse cooled. Thus, he set his sights on the one thing he felt would immortalize his rule for all time. By conquering Koth – something that his predecessors had repeatedly failed at – he would acquire the glory he craved and prove himself an emperor worth remembering.

It helped that Koth was being increasingly united by the rapidly growing League of Sawosi at the time, fueling fears that Koth might coalesce into a real competitor to the Empire if allowed to develop unchecked.

The campaign was a failure. Sure, the Ikosian armies had their successes in the beginning, and most historians agree that the war was a close one until the very end. But what does that matter when the last battle had been such a spectacular loss for the Ikosians? Frustrated by the slow progress of the campaign and by the very real possibility he would be returning home in failure, Awan-Temti assumed personal command of the army and led it straight into a trap the League of Sawosi had set up for him. The resulting battle was a total rout for the Ikosian army, which was then forced to retreat deep into the dangerous jungles that made up the interior of the continent. Most of the force perished there, picked off by diseases, wildlife or environmental hazards. This included Awan-Temti himself, who would vanish without a trace somewhere in the trackless jungles. His corpse and belongings were never found, and the uncertainty of whether he was really dead or just missing would cripple attempts of his successor to assume the throne for quite a few years, leading to a period of great instability and turmoil for the empire. In a strange way, Awan-Temti had actually achieved the fame he had sought when he went to Koth – the campaign of conquest would become a popular cautionary tale against arrogance and glory-seeking, his name never to be forgotten.

As for the League of Sawosi, they only had a short while to celebrate their victory. In order to fuel their war machine, they had taxed and arm-twisted their vassals and member states to such a massive extent that they revolted against the League the moment the Ikosians had left. Its armies devastated by the war and its treasury empty, the League was unable to respond to this challenge against its authority and quickly fell apart. No other power would ever come as close to unifying Koth as the League of Sawosi had come before the war.

Zorian was getting a little off-track in his musings, though – the important thing was that Awan-Temti had been carrying quite a few imperial treasures on him when he disappeared, and this possibly included the imperial orb. This was not actually stated anywhere in official Ikosian history, which was very quiet about the fate of the orb, but several historians had noted that imperial chroniclers mysteriously stopped mentioning the orb in the aftermath of the campaign. It was likely that Awan-Temti's successors had been unwilling to admit that one of the artifacts of the first emperor had been lost in that campaign and had done their best to quietly sweep the issue under the rug by ignoring the orb's existence from that moment onward. In any case, attempts to locate Awan-Temti's final resting place were not exactly a rare occurrence. The orb aside, the rest of the treasures he had been carrying were a tempting prize on their own. None of these attempts were successful, but Zorian was armed with something none of the previous treasure hunters had had in their possession – an infallible way to detect the presence of the orb when at a considerable distance from himself, regardless of any wards or other obstacles that may be foiling mundane divination.

"You have an in-built artifact detector," Daimen summarized, giving him a jealous glare.

"Only in regards to a certain type of artifact, but yes," confirmed Zorian smugly. "I still need someone to point me in the right direction, of course. I was originally going to ask you for help in that regard. I mean, you're supposed to be this famous treasure hunter and all..."

"I am a famous treasure hunter," Daimen pointed out.

"Right," Zorian nodded. "So I figured that you might be able to help me narrow down the search region faster. Give me a few tips, connect me to the right people, maybe even get personally involved. If you're already searching for the orb yourself, though, then everything just got a lot easier."

Zorian was also reassured that someone had independently come to the same conclusion he and Zach had regarding the orb's location. It meant they probably weren't pursuing a fake lead.

Daimen gave him an indecipherable look, staring at him in silence for a moment. Finally, he slowly shook his head and spoke.

"I don't know whether I love you or hate you right now," he told Zorian. "On one hand, I have been stuck with this thing for months now, and it's driving me crazy. My own team had begun to lose faith in me and had started complaining about wasting time on this. You swooping in with a

solution in hand is exciting, but a part of me is incensed that somebody else is going to hand me a solution to this search. It feels like you've just stolen some of my thunder, you know?"

Oh, Zorian knew that feeling very, very well. But no matter, the really interesting thing was that Daimen's own team was starting to mutiny. That explained a lot about what was happening, honestly. Such as why Daimen was currently inside the Taramatula estate instead of out there in the field, trying to find the orb as soon as he could.

"Is that why you decided to take a break from everything for a while?" Zorian asked. "To give your team a chance to calm down a little?"

"Ugh," Daimen said, grimacing. "Sometimes you're too perceptive for your own good, Zorian. Yeah, I wanted to keep going but they were being a big bunch of babies and complaining about sleeping in the jungle for several weeks and whatnot. Eventually we got into a bit of an argument and things got too heated for my liking, so I decided to give everyone some rest until I could rethink my approach."

Hmm. From what Daimen had told him and Zach earlier, Daimen had had his team focus on one specific area of the jungle for a while now, since he was sure he'd had the right spot identified. Meaning that he was probably telling them to comb through the exact same area over and over again with no results. Zorian wasn't surprised that they'd eventually lost their patience.

"Anyway," continued Daimen, "give me a few days to gear up and organize everyone again, and we can go see if that detector of yours is as good as you say."

"Wait, you're taking your entire team with you?" Zorian said, frowning. "Why? Can't we just pop over there quickly and check things out?"

"No, because it's a huge area covered in dense, monster-infested jungle," Daimen told him. "I can only teleport us to a few places there in a safe and reliable manner. The rest of the way we'll have to walk, and I don't feel safe doing that with only three people. I'm good, and I'm guessing you and Zach are too, but that's not enough. Even the best mage is vulnerable to surprise attacks, and there is plenty of opportunity for that here."

"I thought you said you had it narrowed down to one spot," Zorian pointed out curiously.

"Well, relative to the huge swathes of jungle that cover the entire region? Yeah, I did," Daimen said, a little defensively. "It's still a lot of ground to cover, though. Why do you think I've been stuck on this for this long?"

Zorian was about to try and argue that everything would still be so much faster if it was just the three of them, but Daimen cut him off with a warning stare.

"Look," Daimen said, "I know you're on a time limit here, but be reasonable. It's a dangerous land full of chameleon drakes, devourer mantises, howlers, thorn swallow flocks and gods know what else. Stumbling about in haste will see us all killed in a matter of hours. Besides... Orissa is going to kill me if I try to do this without her, and my team will be waiting for their turn right behind her. They were a part of this from the start. I would end up looking like a petty glory hound if I cut them out of the endeavor just before we claim the prize. I'm not wrecking my reputation like that. I'm sure you can spare a day or two on this."

And that was how Zach and Zorian found themselves searching for the orb of the first emperor with Daimen, Orissa and 15 other people.

- break -

When Zorian had conceded to Daimen's request to organize a full-fledged expedition for the orb, he'd known the whole endeavor was bound to turn into something of a spectacle. He had been absolutely right about that, but he had also completely misjudged what would cause it. He had thought the situation would gradually develop as he and Zach were forced to reveal their capabilities, piece by piece, during the course of the expedition. What actually happened was that Daimen outright told people that his little brother was secretly a master mage that rivaled him in skill, that Zach was similarly talented, and that the two of them had found some kind of imperial seal that let them detect other imperial artifacts nearby.

This wasn't really what Zorian had had in mind when Daimen had told him that he would handle explanations and that Zorian needn't worry about thinking up an excuse for his powers. He was tempted to ask Daimen why he didn't tell them all about the time loop too, but he was afraid that the madman might actually go for it. How the hell did Daimen think this was a good solution to the problem?

Daimen also decided, without even bothering to consult with Zorian, that field deployment would happen via gate usage. Daimen would teleport to the target area on his own and then coordinate with Zorian to open a dimensional passage between the Taramatula estate (where the rest of the team would be waiting) and their destination. This would admittedly speed things up considerably, since not everyone in the group could teleport and there were a lot of supplies to transport as well... but it meant revealing to the whole group that Zorian could open gates. Daimen saying that Zorian was a master mage is one thing, and might be passed off as Daimen being biased in favor of his family, but a mage that could open gates at Zorian's age naturally raised a *lot* of eyebrows.

Annoyingly, everyone seemed to quietly accept that *Daimen* could cast the gate spell, even though the only reason he had that capability was because Zorian had taken the time to teach it to him in this restart. He normally wouldn't have bothered with that, but entering a Black Room had severed him from his simulacrum outside of it, dispersing them in very short order. This meant that he would have to keep sending simulacra on a multi-day journey to Koth every time he emerged from one, which was annoying and quite impractical. As such, he decided to try and teach the gate spell to Daimen so he could open the gate to Koth with his help.

Fair is fair, though – it took only two days for Daimen to learn the spell, which was kind of amazing. He was already extremely good at dimensionalism, it turned out, having done the relevant shaping exercises and practiced with various types of teleportation. He had simply never

found anyone willing to teach him the actual spell. Experts that could cast the gate spell were very rare and they didn't share that kind of magic with others lightly. Not even if the person was a famous treasure hunter like Daimen.

In any case, Zorian was more than a little annoyed at how Daimen had handled the expedition preparations and thus decided to vent a little by showing off more than he had initially planned. He took four of his combat golems, which he had been mass producing in preparation for the assault on the Ibasan gate beneath Cyoria, and brought them with him to the expedition as his bodyguards. He probably didn't need them, but the look on Daimen's face when he stomped into the Taramatula estate with four golems in tow was priceless. It would also serve as a useful test of how his golems handled unfamiliar environments, he supposed.

Finally, the gate was opened and 19 people (plus four golems) entered the area that supposedly held the orb – a dense, shadowy patch of jungle known to the locals simply as 'Dai Hurna'. Green Hell.

"A simple, but apt description," one of Daimen's team members told him. He was an older, weathered-looking man that served as the group's main ward expert. Both in making and breaking them. "I've been in more dangerous places, but this one is near the top of the list. Try to stay near the center of the group. You and your buddy may be good, but some things can only be acquired with age."

Zorian had been rather dismissive of the man's words at the time, since the weathered old mage obviously did not know the full story about him and Zach, but he would soon learn there was some wisdom to be found in the old man's words. The vegetation alone was a huge obstacle to exploring the area – there were no jungle trails crisscrossing the place, and the lack of sunlight made the area shadowy and dim, making it hard to spot dangers and navigate through the foliage. Zorian's mind sense helped there, allowing him to sense the minds of predatory animals with relative ease, but not every danger had a thinking mind behind it. Some of the vegetation was mobile and predatory, for instance, but not especially intelligent. Zorian found that out the hard way when a tangle of jungle vines wrapped themselves around him and tried to drag him off into a pit when he got a little careless. Thankfully, his golem bodyguards managed to fight them off long enough for Zorian to clear his head and ignite the air around himself, forcing them to back off.

"You are lucky," the weathered mage told him afterwards. "That fisher vine was a young one. Older ones grow razor-sharp thorns along their length. I'm sure you can imagine what would have happened to you if one of *those* got ahold of you. Though admittedly, older fisher plants are easier to spot than young ones..."

How embarrassing. Still, at least he knew that he had made the bodyguard golems correctly – they had reacted quickly and precisely to the crisis and managed to keep the plant from dragging him off without breaking his bones in the process. Making golems that knew how to hold back their full strength like that was pretty hard, Zorian had found.

Zorian conceded the man's point after that and did not stray from the main group too much. Zach, on the other hand, did not let that incident scare him off. He wandered around the area freely, unconcerned with the various dangers crawling about the place. Zorian supposed that Zach had a good reason to be so fearless, considering he had literal decades of experience at adventuring in dangerous environments, unlike Zorian.

"Stop!" Zorian called out to the group. They all obeyed him. He knew that some of the people gathered here looked down on him because of his age and perceived nepotism, but nobody doubted his ability to detect danger anymore. He pointed at the area slightly to the right of the group. "Two chameleon drakes up ahead. Big ones."

Chameleon drakes were the primary danger of the area. They were tough, agile, fast, could change the color of their hide so rapidly they were virtually invisible to the human eye, and routinely reached about 3.5 meters in length. They also sometimes hunted in groups, and had no compunctions about preying on humans. Green Hell was absolutely crawling with them for some reason.

Fortunately for the group, they had Zorian and his mind sense. Chameleon drakes might be a huge danger to most travelers, but to Zorian, their highly developed minds stood out like glittering stars in the night sky. The chameleon drakes were equipped with more than just speed, size and virtual invisibility; they were also quite intelligent by animal standards. On the verge of sapience, in Zorian's estimation. Maybe even there, to an extent. This was no doubt a boon against most opponents, and did much to explain how they could give seasoned mages so much trouble, but it made their ambushes painfully obvious to a psychic of Zorian's level.

Upon hearing Zorian's warning, three people changed their stances and focused their attention on the area he indicated. One was Orissa, another was a young woman in bright blue clothes named Kirma and the third was a burly bearded man named Torun. These three were the scouts of the group, scanning their surroundings for dangers, obstacles and even the orb itself. A bit pointless, that last one, but being told that Zorian can simply detect the presence of the orb from a considerable distance seemed to have awoken some kind of competitive spirit in the three.

Each of the three had their own methods of gathering information. Orissa's was through her bees, which she had scattered throughout the jungle around them. She carried on her back a huge backpack-looking thing that was actually a portable beehive. A constant stream of bees was constantly leaving the backpack under Orissa's direction or returning to it to report their findings. It looked pretty heavy, but Orissa was carrying it with practiced ease. Zorian was unsure whether that was because Orissa was stronger than she looked, or if the hive was lightened in some way.

Orissa's bees looked fairly mundane to Zorian's amateur eyes. They didn't have any special mental signature either – Zorian had initially thought that maybe they were unified into some kind of collective, like the cephalic rats, but he found no evidence of that. He asked Orissa about them, and she admitted that the Taramatula couldn't actually access the senses of their bees directly – instead they had some method of 'talking' to the bees and getting usable information in the process.

Zorian could tell that whatever method the Taramatula used to direct and talk to their bees, it wasn't a structured spell. Orissa never did any chanting or gesturing, nor did she use any obvious spell aids. The process seemed to be almost like breathing to her, as evidenced by the fact she

could direct her bees and talk to Zorian at the same time without any visible strain.

Kirma, the blue-clothed woman, was probably the most mundane of the three scouting mages. She was clearly using classical scrying and other divinations for her work. What was noteworthy about her was the divination compass she was using. It was a large, heavy looking, multi-layered contraption of brass and silver, its shape vaguely reminiscent of a lotus flower. The 'petals' were densely inscribed with mysterious glyphs and shapes that Zorian found hard to puzzle out through casual inspection.

The lotus device seemed to be highly effective, because Kirma was cycling through some rather complicated divinations with a speed that even Zorian would struggle to match.

Finally, there was Torun. Torun was constantly surrounded by a swarm of eyes that floated around him, twitching to-and-fro as something caught their attention. Each one was different, differing in size and internal structure of the eye from the others, and they looked very lifelike. To be precise, they looked like they had been extracted from corpses of various magical beings famous for their visual powers and then preserved in some fashion. Which was probably exactly what happened.

Zorian was about 90 percent sure that Torun couldn't actually see through all of his eyes. In fact, he suspected that the man was limited to rapidly cycling between them instead of being able to process visual information from multiple eyes at once. There also seemed to be some severe distance limitations involved, because he never sent them too far into the jungle to scout things.

"You are once again correct," Orissa remarked after a while. "If I may ask, how are you detecting the drakes from such a distance? Is this *also* the work of this mysterious imperial inheritance you stumbled upon?"

"No, it's just mind magic," Zorian said. He could tell most people suspected as much by now, so there was no need to be all secretive. A bunch of them had already cast some kind of mental defense spell on themselves when they thought Zorian wasn't looking. "It's something of a specialty of mine."

"I see," Orissa said, nodding. "I did suspect this was the case."

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"Hey, little Kazinski," Torun called out to him. Zorian gave him an annoyed glare. That seemed to be the newest name Daimen's group had given him, and he hated it. "How good is that mind magic of yours? Do you think you could snare one of those drakes and bring him over?"

Hmm. An interesting question. Chameleon drakes had considerable magic resistance, but it was nothing absurd. He just might be able to subvert one and puppeteer it for a while. However, after he did some subtle probing of their minds...

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Not these ones, at least. They're a bonded pair, and would never abandon one another. I could dominate one of them perhaps, but the other would follow after them and defend them."

"Unnecessary fights will only slow us down," Daimen stated. "Leave the drakes alone, Zorian. Torun has enough eyes to play with, anyway."

"You can never have enough eyes," Torun said. "But actually, I was after the beast itself this time. Chameleon drakes, much like their more mundane cousins, have the curious ability to move each of their eyes independently of one another and thus focus on multiple things at once. And they have four of them I suspect I could learn... interesting things from them."

"There is no shortage of chameleon drakes around here," the withered old mage from earlier said. "The kid can get you one later. Preferably a young one, so it does less damage when it inevitably breaks out of its bindings and rampages throughout the camp."

"Don't even joke about that," Daimen told him. "Anyway, we'll just go around them, I g-"

"No need," said Zorian. "They're leaving. They've noticed that we've stopped walking for too long and found it suspicious, so they've called off the ambush."

"Even better," Daimen said, pleased. "Onward we go, then."

After a few minutes, Zach stopped his wandering and approached him.

"I've thought of something," he said. "What if you shapeshifted into a bird and simply flew around for a bit? I bet you could cover ground pretty fast that way."

"I'd be dead in a matter of minutes," Zorian said, shaking his head. He'd thought of that idea already and discarded it immediately afterwards. "The trees are pretty high here, and full of things that prey on birds. If I fly high enough to be safe, the ground would be beyond the marker's detection radius. If I fly low, I probably get eaten by something."

"Ah," Zach winced. "Yeah, I didn't think of that. And now that I think of it, the orb could easily end up being underground. Probably the best place to get some safety in a place like this."

"That's it!" Daimen shouted, hitting himself in the forehead. He had evidently been eavesdropping on their conversation, the jerk. "That's what I've

been missing all this time. Underground! We should have been looking for the damn orb underground instead of simply searching through the foliage! I'm such an idiot..."

After that, Daimen called for everyone to stop and make a base camp so they could discuss things for a while. With this done, the group quickly came up with a plan to perform some kind of geomantic ritual spell that would map out the basic shape of the underworld and narrow down their search on that basis. Honestly, Zorian was feeling a bit lost there – he had studied many things over the course of the time loop, but ritual spells involving more than one caster were not one of them. He mostly kept to himself while the rest of the group was setting up the ritual. He thought about striking up a conversation with his fellow time traveler, but Zach seemed to be trying to hit on Kirma, so Zorian left him alone for now.

Eventually, his solitude was broken when Daimen pulled him to the edge of the camp, where Orissa was already waiting, so that the three of them could have a conversation about something. Zorian already had a pretty good idea what this was about.

"You're interested in my mind magic, aren't you?" Zorian asked Orissa, giving her a shrewd look.

"Ah, well..." Orissa fumbled slightly. "Was I that obvious? Yes, I must admit the topic intrigues me."

"It's a personal secret," Zorian told her bluntly.

"Zorian!" Daimen protested, jumping to his fiancée's aid.

"But I *might* be willing to share some of it if Daimen agrees to honestly answer a few questions for me," Zorian said, turning towards Daimen with a cheery smile.

"What kind of questions?" Daimen asked hesitantly.

"Questions about your own mind magic," Zorian told him, his smile turning into a frown. "Questions like why you never told me I was a natural mind mage when I was a child. You had to have known, as a fellow natural mind mage, but you never said anything and left me to suffer alone."

"W-What?" Daimen said, erupting into a burst of outraged laughter. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I know you're like me, Daimen," Zorian told him. "I can sense it. And you can sense me as well."

"No, I can't," Daimen protested, shaking his head vigorously. "Maybe I have a potential for the sort of mental bullshit you're capable of, but I was never taught how to do that. They told me I was an empath and taught me how to turn the ability on and off, and that's it, okay? I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're saying you never noticed anything unusual about me?" Zorian asked, frowning.

"Well..." Daimen laughed nervously. "I noticed you were very easy to read... but hell, that could have meant anything!"

"You suspected the truth," Zorian accused.

"Okay, so I did!" Daimen admitted. "But I couldn't be sure, and why out myself for a mere suspicion? Especially to a brother that hated me and constantly got me into trouble! And really, what if it was true? What of it? If you really were an empath like me, that only made your actions more baffling and annoying."

"What good is empathy like that with no control?" Zorian snapped at him. "I couldn't even walk into a crowd without consequences! If you had taken a bit of time to teach me how to turn it off, or at least told me what to watch out for, I wouldn't have been nearly as 'baffling and annoying' as you thought I was!"

The 'discussion' then degenerated into several moments of incoherent shouting and accusations before Orissa decided to act and stopped the argument by interposing herself in between them.

"Why don't we all take a break for a moment and calm down," Orissa said. Her bees synchronized their buzzing into an ominous hum. "You two are just talking past each other at this point. You're making assumptions about each other that clearly aren't true."

Zorian scoffed, and almost snapped at her as well for trying to use such petty intimidation tactics on him. As if he were afraid of a bunch of bees. Still, she kind of had a point that he and Daimen would probably be better served to sit down and have a more... *sedate* discussion about the issue.

Daimen backed down even sooner, too smitten with Orissa to really stand up to her on the issue.

Having successfully defused the situation, Orissa then excused herself, claiming this was something they had to work out on their own and that she didn't want to intrude. Daimen tried to protest and keep her there, but Zorian was grateful for her action and gave her a small nod as she left.

After a while, they started talking. As it turns out, Daimen had been empathic for as long as he could remember. His empathy was nothing like Zorian's, however. Daimen's empathy was weaker than Zorian's had been, but far more controllable. He never suffered any headaches in crowds, and he could focus it on specific people at will. He realized early on that this ability was something unique to him, and that he could get far more out of it if nobody knew he had it. Thus, he kept it a secret from everyone. During his time in the academy, he had realized that he was an empath and secured himself instruction from an older empath who had taught him how to turn his ability on and off and some minor tricks to improve its

sensitivity and selectiveness.

Daimen had never developed a proper mind sense, and couldn't identify other Open people on sight like Zorian could. Even his empathy was crude and unsophisticated by Zorian's standards.

"I suspected you might be like me," Daimen said. "But then again, your actions were kind of strange for someone who could sense people's emotions like I could, and that gave me pause. It never even occurred to me that your empathy might not work exactly the same as mine did. I still don't understand what went wrong in your case when my empathy was such a boon to me. Why didn't you say anything?"

"I did," Zorian said. "Mother and Father said they would throw me in a madhouse if I didn't shut up about that topic."

"Ah ha ha..." Daimen laughed nervously. "I'm sure they were just joking around. You are way too sensitive about these things, Zorian."

Zorian did not attempt to argue with him. Since their parents had always fawned on Daimen so much, he had a very skewed image of them. There was probably no helping that.

"Look on the bright side, though," Daimen continued, trying to change the topic. "Since you had no preconceptions about your ability being empathy and thus limited to sensing emotions, you developed it into something far more amazing. I'm really jealous of that, to be honest. I didn't know there was more to my ability until I met Orissa and the Taramatula."

Hmm. If the Taramatula knew about Daimen's innate mind magic talent, it was no wonder they were so understanding about Orissa wanting to marry him. He was famous, good looking, a mage prodigy *and* a natural mind mage? Truthfully, if Zorian was in Daimen's place, he would be wondering if Orissa ever actually loved him or was simply going after him out of sheer opportunism.

"What did Orissa want to talk to me about, anyway?" Zorian asked.

"Oh. Well, I think you kind of already gave her an answer to that," Daimen said. "She wanted to see if the mental ability you were using is the same one I have."

"Ah, I see," Zorian nodded. "The Taramatula are hoping it's inheritable, I'm guessing."

"Is it?" Daimen asked.

"Probably," Zorian shrugged. "I've heard that abilities like that never just spring out of nowhere in a child, and it's a bit of a stretch that the two of us have the same ability through luck alone. There is clearly some kind of inheritance thing going on, but it's hard to say whether your children would be guaranteed to inherit it."

"A lot of bloodlines aren't guaranteed for children to inherit in their raw state," Daimen said. "There are often artificial methods of ensuring inheritance involved, such as specialized potions and rituals. I doubt the Taramatula will care much."

Any further discussion was interrupted when one of Daimen's teammates came up to them to notify them the ritual was ready, and that they were only waiting for Daimen.

"Alright, we'll continue with this topic some other time," Daimen said. "For now, let's focus on finally tracking down that damn orb."

- break -

Like many places, Green Hell had an extensive network of underground tunnels running beneath it. Indeed, the local underworld was unusually complex, which helped explain why the area was so rich in ambient mana and why it was so abundant in dangerous wildlife. Even if one limited themselves to surface layers of the Dungeon, reasoning that Awan-Temfi wouldn't have wanted to descend too far, that was a lot of tunnels to cover. Thus, when Daimen's team presented them all with a three-dimensional illusion of the local underground, Zorian could only stare at it in confusion. How the hell does this information help them narrow down their search? They would still have to walk through most of the area to cover all the tunnels reasonably close to the surface.

However, Daimen seemed to see something important in the floating image, because he soon pointed his finger at five places on the map.

"Here, here, here, here and here," he said, poking the illusion in five different places, causing it to waver for a second before correcting itself. The spots looked completely random to Zorian. "We should focus on these areas to start with."

"I don't understand," Zorian complained to Zach. "On what basis is he picking those five places?"

He had been hoping that Zach, having decades of experience in adventuring, would see something in Daimen's choices that he missed. His hopes turned out to have been misplaced, however.

"No idea," Zach told him. "That map is a total mess to me. He's probably just bullshitting to make himself look more knowledgeable and experienced. I used to do that a lot when I ended up in charge of something. Never let your peons know you actually have no idea what you're doing."

"I can hear you two just fine, you know," Daimen told them in an annoyed tone.

“I wasn’t trying to be quiet,” Zach pointed out.

Daimen didn’t reply. Instead he simply pointed them towards the nearest of the five places and motioned for everyone to start moving.

They were only halfway to the first spot when Zorian suddenly stopped. He had been spamming Key detection requests to his marker on a regular basis as they walked and now it actually reacted to something.

He found the orb.

“It’s here,” Zorian said excitedly.

“What? What’s here?” Daimen asked in confusion.

“The orb, of course,” Zorian said. Was he intentionally being stupid? “It’s here, I can sense it.”

“Do you mean it’s right below us, or...?” asked Zach, speculatively looking at the ground beneath his feet. Probably considering how best to excavate the huge amount of dirt between them and the nearest tunnel.

“No, but close,” Zorian said, pointing towards the north-east.

The group stared in the indicated direction for a while, as if that was going to help them see the orb through all the dirt and vegetation that was in the way.

“Is there anything notable in that direction?” Daimen asked Kirma. She was the one who kept detailed maps of the region, stored in her lotus device.

She quickly consulted her device for an answer.

“Actually... yes, there is,” she said hesitantly. “There is a chameleon drake nesting ground over in that direction. Because the place is so relatively prominent, it was one of the first places we checked.”

“I remember now,” Daimen said. “Chassanah insisted we check it out. Said that *of course* the orb is in the most dangerous place in the area, how could it be anywhere else?”

He pointed at the weathered old man who had advised Zorian caution earlier.

“And I was right, see?” Chassanah said. “We should have looked harder.”

“But I don’t understand,” Kirma protested. “We searched that place. There is nothing there.”

“We never actually set foot in the place, though,” Torun pointed out. “We just checked it out remotely.”

“We were thorough,” Kirma insisted. “There was nothing there. Awan-Temti was traveling with his entire entourage when he disappeared and was carrying a hefty supply train. We saw no evidence that a group of that size perished there.”

“It’s been a long time since Awan-Temti walked the earth,” Torun said, shrugging. “And it’s possible the fool got separated from his entourage and perished there alone. Maybe the orb is buried under some rock in one of the caves, and is protected against divinations.”

“I... suppose,” Kirma reluctantly conceded. She seemed unwilling to admit she may have missed the orb in her earlier search. She probably saw it as a blow against her personal pride.

A decision was made to make another attempt at searching the place. The group approached the nesting ground as close as possible without provoking the chameleon drakes into swarming them and then systematically scried the place.

The place was actually not that big. Neither the cenote itself nor the caves dug into its walls were connected to the Dungeon, so there was only so much ground that their spells had to cover. Despite that, no amount of divinations, remote scouts and other information gathering methods could find the orb. There was no evidence of any kind of treasure there.

“It’s definitely there,” Zorian insisted stubbornly. He knew what his marker was telling him. “It’s right there in that biggest cave near the bottom of the cenote – the one that looks natural instead of being artificially dug up by the chameleon drakes.”

“We already searched that one a million times with everything we could think of,” Kirma said, sounding very annoyed with him. “Torun even risked sending one of his rarer eyes in there, the one that can see through solid objects. There is nothing *there*, okay!? Your legacy is malfunctioning.”

Zorian sighed. There was no point in arguing about this, anymore.

“I need to get physical access to that cave,” he told Zach. “I’m sure I can find it, but I need to be actually there, not watching things through a divination screen or a remote sensor.”

“Got it,” Zach said, rising to his feet and dusting himself off. “I’ll deal with the lizards, you just stay behind me and keep them from flanking me or

something.”

“Not so fast, you two,” Daimen told them. “Do you honestly think we would just stay on the sidelines and watch you either get horribly killed or claim the orb for yourselves? That’s a lose-lose proposition. We came here together, and we’ll execute this assault together as well.”

“This is stupid,” Kirma complained.

“We’re doing it anyway,” Daimen said. “If Zorian says the orb is there, it’s there. However, let’s not charge into the cenote like idiots. I’d rather induce them to swarm out and blunder into a trap. Here’s what we’re going to do...”

- break -

In the depths of the Kothic jungle, a fierce battle was raging. On one side there were nearly a hundred chameleon drakes charging in defense of their homes and young, and on the other side was a group of 19 people that had brazenly thrown irritating gas into the cenote to flush them out. Though the chameleon drakes looked brutish, they were not dumb. They knew they were being provoked, but they also knew they had to answer this challenge. This wasn’t the first time someone had tried to take their cenote habitat away from them, and it wouldn’t be the last.

Daimen’s group had set up a minefield between themselves and the cenote when they had provoked the chameleon drakes, but they had underestimated their opponents. Rather than launch a frontal charge at Daimen’s group, the chameleon drakes split their group into two halves and charged at them in two wide arcs, aiming to hit their flanks from both directions.

One might think the drakes had spotted the trap and reacted accordingly, but Zorian could peer into their minds and knew they hadn’t. Cold, hard experience had taught this particular group not to face their enemies head on if they could avoid it, especially if they were human.

The two groups crashed into each other and the chameleon drakes came out for the worse in the process. They were impressive beasts, fast and strong, but their strengths were most pronounced when attacking from an ambush. Their virtual invisibility did not work well if they were constantly on the move and the lightning-fast tongue attack they liked to use as an opening strike was less effective on a creature that expected it.

It didn’t help that Daimen’s group had several powerful mages, including Zach.

With a practiced movement, Zorian fired a glittering orange star at the chameleon drake in front of him. The large reptile reacted with impressive agility, throwing itself to the side to avoid the projectile and folding its front claws over its face to protect its eyes from the imminent explosion. And the explosion did come, just like the chameleon drake predicted, singeing its scales but not doing any truly critical damage.

It landed right on its feet with the nimbleness of a housecat, its four conical eyes whirring around, each in its own direction, in an attempt to reorient itself. Finally, it fixed its front two eyes on Zorian, the other two eyes twitching about for any hint of an attack from behind and it opened its large, toothy mouth wide open.

It was the mistake that Zorian had been waiting for. He launched a force lance at the chameleon drake and then immediately followed it with a double-layered shield around himself, casting them so quickly that it almost appeared as if he cast two spells simultaneously. The chameleon drake shot its spear-like tongue at Zorian, punching through one layer of his shield but failing to penetrate the second. Before it could retract its tongue for another go, however, the force lance hit it straight in the throat through its open mouth, bypassing the tough scales that protected its body.

The drake dropped on the ground immediately, kicking and thrashing about like it was having a seizure, kicking up plumes of dust in its death throes. Zorian spent a second to make sure it was down for good and then turned his attention to the rest of the targets.

He was just in time to see Chassanah stumble over an ill-placed rock and fall to the ground some distance away from him. His opponent, one of the slightly smaller chameleon drakes that only barely reached 3 meters in length, immediately took advantage of this to try and pounce at him.

Fortunately, Zorian had his golems scattered through the entire group, and one was nearby. The golem, devoid of self-preservation and acting under Zorian’s telepathic orders, launched itself at the chameleon drake with a full-body tackle. It crashed into the chameleon drake’s flank, causing it to veer off-course and giving Chassanah enough time to recover and get back to his feet.

“You okay, old man?” Zorian asked him, running up to him to make sure he didn’t hit his head in the fall or something. The chameleon drake seemed to be busy slamming his golem repeatedly into the ground, outraged that its interference had costed it its kill.

“I’m fine,” he said, shaking his head. “How embarrassing. Here I am, lecturing the younger generation about the need for modesty and caution and whatnot, and then I make a stupid mistake like this. Bah! It’s true as they say, you learn things all your life and still die a fool.”

Looking around the battlefield, Zorian realized that the chameleon drakes were getting beaten back at every front. On one side, Orissa was using her bees to attack the sensitive eyes of the drakes, making them flail around in panic as they attempted to dislodge such tiny opponents from themselves. Daimen and other members of his team then finished off the blinded drakes by focusing their fire on them one at a time. On the other, Zach disdained any sort of fancy tactics and simply used a pair of floating black swords to slice any chameleon drake that came close to pieces. The swords seemed to pass through the beasts’ tough hide without resistance, killing them instantly. The drakes eventually grew fearful to even approach him, choosing instead to pursue other targets.

Soon, the chameleon drakes seemed to collectively realize that the confrontation wasn’t going well for them and started to retreat. Amusingly, some of them chose to retreat directly through the minefield that they had missed in the initial charge, which resulted in another couple of fatalities among their number without Daimen’s group needing to do anything to make it happen. Only a few died before the rest learned to stay clear of that

area, however.

Taking stock of the situation after the battle, Zorian noted that no one in Daimen's group died in the fighting, so this could be safely described as a resounding victory. Even though things could have gone a lot smoother than this, in his opinion.

However, there was a problem. While the chameleon drakes retreated, they did not flee entirely. They simply withdrew towards the cenote and then stopped. They seemed unwilling to give up their home, even if they knew they were beaten.

They started hissing loudly in their direction, puffing themselves up to look bigger and making threatening movement towards them.

"Are... are they trying to intimidate us or something?" Daimen asked incredulously.

"I think so, yeah," Zorian said.

"They lost a fight and now they're resorting to threats instead? That's amusingly outrageous," Torun said. "I guess there is no harm in trying, from their perspective. If it works, great. If it doesn't, eh... it was worth a try."

The threatening display didn't dissuade them from advancing, of course. The orb was down there, so getting access to the cenote was a must. However, when they started moving towards the cenote again, the chameleon drakes changed their behavior. They stopped trying to intimidate them and instead threw their heads into the air and started to... wail.

Zorian did not know how to describe it. It wasn't really a wail in the human sense, but the sound was loud, repetitive and pitiful. And all the chameleon drakes were doing it in unison. It was like the entire group in front of them was cursing the heavens for abandoning them.

"Damn, these things are actually making me feel sorry for them a little," Daimen complained. "I kind of feel like a villain here."

"They're not crying," Zorian said, a terrible realization growing in the back of his head. "They're calling for help. Summoning assistance."

"They're what?" Daimen frowned. "Kirma, can you check—"

The entire group stumbled as a tremor shook the earth beneath them, centered on the cenote.

"What the hell was that!?" Daimen demanded. It wasn't clear who he was talking to, but it was Kirma who eventually answered, after consulting her lotus device.

"The water in the cenote," she said. "It's churning..."

Then Zorian felt it. Before, the cenote felt mostly dead to his senses, and even scrying from the group failed to locate anything of interest. Now, however, Zorian could feel a mind dwelling there. Something big, mean...

...and hungry.

"Okay, tactical retreat, tactical retreat," Zorian said gesturing everyone to start retreating from the cenote. He noticed that the chameleon drakes had stopped wailing and instead looked rather expectant and... almost *gleeful*. "We have something seriously big and hostile coming up from there. I think—"

He didn't have time to think. Something huge and dark blue unfolded itself out of the cenote. At first Zorian thought he was looking at some kind of animated tree or a giant sea anemone, but then the 'branches' stilled for a second and it became obvious what he was looking at.

It was a hydra. A really, really big one. Eight draconic-looking heads observed the world around it with interest, eventually zeroing in on the group of humans in the distance. Its eight mouths opened up slightly, exposing rows and rows of dagger-like teeth, and began to salivate.

"Oh," said Zach happily in the resulting silence, his eyes shining with a fire that Zorian rarely saw in him. "Looks like I might have some actual fun here after all!"

As if reacting to his statement, the hydra opened all eight of its mouths and let loose a deafening roar.

69. Ruin

Chapter 069

Ruin

Zorian could tell right away that the hydra in front of them was not normal. First of all, it was too big. He was no expert on hydras, but he knew that even the largest ones didn't grow more than 10 meters in length. This one seemed to be at least twice that size, if the size of its heads was of any indication. Then there was the matter of how suddenly it had appeared on his senses. There was no way he could miss something like that with even casual inspection, nevermind the detailed sweep he had done on the cenote. The mind he was currently sensing was one of the most distinctive things he had ever witnessed through his mind sense, and it should have drawn his attention immediately. The hydra seemed to have nine minds – one for each head, and a ninth one that served as a kind of... overmind, for the lack of a better term. The individual heads seemed to be somehow suborned to the main mind of the hydra, which was probably in charge of coordinating the heads towards an overarching goal. It was kind of fascinating.

Then the hydra pointed all eight of its heads at them and roared. If they were dealing with a normal hydra, this would just be a cheap intimidation tactic. Instead, the roar was infused with potent wind magic, battering the whole group with a powerful gust of wind. Zach and Zorian simply glued their feet to the ground with non-structured magic, and Daimen protected most of his team with an impressively quick force wall spell. Sadly, that still left four people at the mercy of the incoming wind attack. Of those four, one was Chassanah, who simply stabbed his staff into the ground and held on to it with pure physical strength. Zorian was impressed – the old man looked kind of gaunt, but there seemed to be surprising strength hidden under his wiry frame. As for the other three, they were not as quick on their feet and merely released a chorus of short cries and screams as they were blown off their feet and sent tumbling into the distance. They didn't die, but they wouldn't be getting up any time soon.

Zach was the one who handled the surprise attack the best. While everyone else, even Zorian, was scrambling to withstand the roar somehow, Zach was already casting some kind of complex spell in retaliation. He transformed the entire area in front of him into a field of roughly-hewn stone blades before the windstorm even had time to die down, all of them wreathed in ominous red light. Then he slammed both of his hands into the earth before him, sending them all hurtling towards the hydra.

The monster took one look at the approaching cloud of stony death, its many eyes widening in surprise and fear, then immediately cut its roar short and withdrew all of its heads back into the cenote. The chameleon drakes, still arranged around the cenote, were not as quick. The rain of blades slammed into the area around the cenote, burying themselves deep into the jungle soil and impaling through any chameleon drakes that were unfortunate enough to be in the way. The lucky ones were slain on the spot by the stone shards. The less fortunate ones wailed like wounded pigs as the red light that infused the blades spread throughout their bodies and started liquefying their insides.

The surviving chameleon drakes lost any semblance of group cohesion and simply scattered in all directions, abandoning their former home, the pained cries of their dying brethren motivating them to keep going until they had left the range of Zorian's mind sense entirely.

Zach wasn't really paying attention to the chameleon drakes, though. They were just collateral damage. The moment he had launched the rain of flesh-dissolving blades at the hydra, before he had even known whether it would hit its target or not, he was already casting another spell. Thus, the moment the hydra withdrew back into the cenote, Zach sent a pair of pale blue balls of magical energy after it.

Zorian would later find out that the projectiles were meant to freeze the water at the bottom of the cenote, hopefully imprisoning the hydra in a block of ice. Unfortunately for that idea, the hydra didn't retreat back into the water. It simply ducked out of the path of Zach's attack and then decided to jump out of the cenote and charge at the group.

Seeing the giant hydra jump out of the cenote with the same ease a housecat jumps onto the kitchen table really drove in the point that they were dealing with something entirely out of the ordinary. Normal hydras were 'just' highly venomous and capable of impressive tissue regeneration, especially in regards to their heads. They were not known to be especially fast or agile out of the water.

The charge of the hydra was unstoppable. Daimen and his team launched a constant stream of different attack spells at the hydra, all in vain. Every projectile they launched was intercepted by the hydra's many heads before it could hit its main body, inflicting damage that was soon undone by the hydra's natural regeneration ability. A hydra's regeneration was most potent in regards to its heads, even capable of overcoming fire damage and other things that usually foiled regenerators, but its main body was a lot more vulnerable. Daimen's group clearly knew this, and thus aimed for the main body with every attack they made, but the hydra was too quick and canny for this to work.

Zorian refrained from joining in on the attack. If Daimen's whole group couldn't break through, his addition would likely be a meaningless waste of mana. He simply focused on figuring out how its mind works, conserved his mana and repositioned his golems so he could respond in time upon spotting an appropriate opening. Fortunately, the hydra seemed focused primarily on Zach, having identified him as its biggest threat.

Well, perhaps it was a bit callous of Zorian to say that... but in his defense, Zach looked quite happy at the fact that he had attracted the hydra's ire with his earlier spell. Seemingly ignoring the massive hydra thundering towards him, Zach cast two lengthy spells. The first created a large ball of soft white light that just hung there above his head, seemingly doing nothing at all. The other produced no visible effects, but Zorian's magic perception was pretty good by now and he could sense eight magical constructs suddenly springing into existence around Zach.

Soon, the hydra was close enough to Zach to attack. At that moment, all eight heads struck, surging towards Zach like coiled springs. Somewhere behind him, Zorian could hear some member of Daimen's team scream out a warning to Zach, as if that was going to do him any good now. At the same time, though, the eight concealed spell constructs surrounding Zach also sprang into motion, surging forward to meet the hydra's heads. Eight

spectral shark jaws faded into existence, already in the process of biting down towards the attacking heads. The hydra, suddenly realizing it had blundered into a trap, tried to abort its attack.

It was too late. It was too big and had too much momentum. Whatever magic gave it such abnormal speed and agility had its limits. The spectral jaws slammed shut, slicing through hydra scale and muscle alike with ridiculous ease. Panicked, the hydra seemed to dip into some secret reserves of strength that allowed it to quickly extricate most of its heads before they were bitten off.

Most, but not all. One of the spectral jaws caught its target particularly well and then kept biting down. With a loud crunch, the jaws bit right through the hydra head's spine, separating it from the main body.

The hydra's remaining seven heads roared in pain and anger, the headless neck of its eighth head flailing around madly and spraying blood everywhere around it. This wasn't a wound its regeneration could fix – the head wasn't damaged, it was just plain *gone*. It would regrow in time, but this process would happen too slowly to have any influence on the outcome of this battle.

Zorian expected that Zach would now use the mysterious ball of white light floating above his head, but the spell remained inert. Instead, he once again created a field of stone blades in front of him. Before he could launch it at the hydra, however, it suddenly retracted its heads closer to its main body and wrapped itself into something resembling a scaly, fleshy sphere. Then it disappeared into thin air.

When it appeared again, it was suddenly next to Daimen and his group.

"Of course it can teleport as well," Zorian mumbled to himself.

It should have been more surprising. Teleportation magic was usually very impractical for large creatures, because the costs increased explosively with the volume of the thing being teleported. Instead, it almost seemed appropriate. Zorian by now strongly suspected that they were dealing with some kind of ancient guardian from Awan-Temti's time, back when gods still meddled in mortal affairs and granted potent powers to those that caught their fancy. It was to be expected that something like this would be equipped with strange and potent abilities.

He pointed at the air in front of him and a large, semi-transparent disc of force materialized in the air before him. Zorian hopped onto it and flew off in the direction of the hydra. He was fine with letting Zach face the hydra on his own, but Daimen and the people around him would probably need his help to stay alive.

Chassanah, who was still near Zorian by this point, copied his trick and followed after him on a force disc of his own.

The sudden teleportation, while very impressive from a creature that big, seemed to take a lot out of the hydra. Instead of striking immediately, it took a few seconds to uncoil and catch its breath before attacking again. This blunted some of the shock among Daimen's group and allowed them to organize themselves somewhat before it struck.

When it did strike, however, it was devastating. A layer of shields was erected in front of the group, but it was smashed into rapidly fading smoke and motes of light in under a second. Desperate to keep the hydra away from himself and his men, Daimen conjured a giant ectoplasmic version of himself, which then physically tackled the hydra. The giant ghostly Daimen snatched two of the hydra's heads with its ghostly hands and tried to wrestle it to the ground. This didn't quite work, but it did keep three of the hydra's heads too busy to attack anyone else and stopped it from moving freely on the battlefield, so it wasn't really a failure either.

Kirma fired a swarm of drill-like projectiles at the hydra, each of them unerringly homing in on the hydra's sensitive points – eyes, mouth, ears, nostrils. This was rather remarkable, as most homing spells were not nearly that precise in their aiming. Especially since the miniature drills were moving with incredible speeds, which would further complicate homing functions of most spells. Zorian could only imagine the lotus machine she carried was somehow responsible for that feat.

Zorian would have thought Orissa would be entirely useless in this kind of fight, since the hydra was unlikely to even notice bee stings. However, she surprised him. Her bees suddenly became encased in an orange aura that caused the air around them to ripple from the intense heat emanating off them. From that point on, they flew faster and burned all that they touched, like a thousand tiny flying furnaces. Occasionally she would make a quick gesture, causing some of the bees to detonate, creating tiny but intense explosions that charred the hydra's tough, scaly skin wherever they touched it. And because the bees were so tiny, they could simply fly past the more durable, regenerating heads and strike at the hydra's main body.

Zorian also added some pressure on the hydra himself, launching a force lance, an incinerating beam and two severing discs at the hydra as he flew towards the battle site. He didn't really think he would inflict real damage with that, but every second the hydra spent on dealing with those attacks was a second it couldn't spare on dealing with Daimen and the others.

Despite all of these efforts, the hydra still had seven heads left, and it was hard to keep them all constantly busy. Zorian had to sacrifice one of his golems to save Orissa from having her head bitten off when the hydra finally figured out where the annoying burning, exploding bees were coming from. Torun also sacrificed one of his larger eyes to survive an attack, causing the eye in question to burst into a copious amount of translucent slime that formed a thin, rubbery dome around him. The head that was targeting him bit down on the dome and, despite its apparent flimsiness, failed to punch through. The dome bent and stretched, but did not break.

Unfortunately, not everyone targeted by the hydra had such a life-saving method prepared. One of the mages was bitten nearly in half before anyone could do anything about it, dying on the spot. The other had his arm pumped full of venom when the hydra grazed it with its jaws. Daimen immediately cut off the limb in question and then directed one of the mages to teleport him and all the other wounded away from the battlefield.

Additionally, one of the men tried to circle the hydra and attack it from behind, only to have his legs shattered in response when the hydra revealed that its tail was also a potent weapon, able to strike at things with great force and speed. Zorian didn't begrudge the man his agonized screaming – he still remembered how much it had hurt when the grey hunter had done the same to him.

Finally, Daimen found a good moment to spring his trap. The hydra managed to get through some of the defensive spells and sent one of its heads towards Daimen, who threw a mundane-looking red projectile at it. Sensing no great danger, the hydra simply bit down on the projectile to make it go away... shattering the potion bottle hidden inside the projectile right inside its mouth.

The hydra as a whole flinched back as it sensed the alchemical mixture pour down its throat, stopping all of its attacks. The affected head released an agonizing scream as it rapidly began to transform into glittering white crystal. Its natural regeneration was unable to halt the process and it seemed inevitable that the entire hydra would rapidly crystalize and turn into a lifeless, glittering statue.

Without hesitation, one of the hydra's other heads bit down on the neck of the rapidly crystalizing head and tore it off in a shower of blood and gore. Now down to six heads, but safe from the crystallization poison, the hydra gave Daimen a murderous look and prepared for another charge.

Unfortunately for the hydra, this was when Zach, Zorian and Chassanah reached the battlefield and the tide shifted. Chassanah circled the battlefield, casting barrier after barrier and preventing anyone else from being killed or seriously wounded by the hydra's multitude of attacks. Zorian had figured out enough of its mind to start messing with its aim and timing, and occasionally launched combat spells at it as well when he spotted a good opening.

Then there was Zach. Unlike Zorian and Chassanah, he didn't bother with a force disc – when the hydra teleported away from him, he simply jumped into the air and flew off towards the new battlefield like it was the most normal thing in the world, his eight spectral jaws in tow. The mysterious white orb was still floating over his head, too. As he traveled, another three identical orbs joined the one he made earlier, equally passive for now. When he finally reached the hydra, the spectral jaws that trailed behind him surged forward, biting towards it, and it was instantly put on the defensive.

Naturally, this was when the hydra pulled another one of its surprise abilities. It roared again, breathing clouds of bright green gas in every direction. Everyone was forced to temporarily retreat from what was likely some kind of poison mist, giving the hydra some much needed respite.

The battle continued. The hydra lost another head, then two. The hydra managed to rob Zach of all of his spectral jaws and wounded another one of Daimen's men. Zorian managed to hit the hydra's main body with a shredder sphere, inflicting a lasting wound on it. All of his golems ended up being reduced to scrap, however. Daimen's ectoplasmic giant was dispersed, but Daimen managed to slice off its tail in response. At first glance, it seemed like they were winning and that victory was only a matter of time... but the truth was that they were steadily running out of mana. The hydra might be on the verge of collapse, but so were they. Even Zach's seemingly inexhaustible mana reserves were starting to run out.

They didn't want to retreat. At least one person was dead, many had suffered serious injuries, and they had used a lot of expensive resources during the course of the battle. On top of that, while the hydra was grievously wounded, it would recover quickly if it was left alone. Far faster than their group would. If they fled and came back later, it would probably be back in top health, with all of its heads back.

The hydra didn't want to retreat either. It had only three of its heads left, but it knew it could recover from this setback very quickly. Its enemies were visibly weakening, it just had to keep going and outlast them. Besides, turning its back to such dangerous enemies was lunacy – all of its instincts were telling it that doing so would be a mistake. Better to risk fighting to the bitter end than be cut down from the back as it fled.

In the end, though, they had all underestimated Zach again. Sometime during the fighting, Zach had created another white ball to join the four he had prepared earlier. He then spent the rest of the battle arranging the five balls around the battlefield and trying to maneuver the hydra into the center of their formation. Although no one except Zach knew what they were supposed to do, his performance was impressive enough that everyone did their best to help him with this. The hydra was wary of the balls in the beginning, but as time passed and they remained little more than glowing ornaments, it began to mostly ignore them.

Eventually, Daimen instructed his men to feign a panicked rout and the hydra recklessly followed after them, stepping right in the middle of the resulting formation. In that very moment, Zach made a strange hand sign and the balls activated. A web of brightly shining threads unfolded out of them, reaching across empty space to intertwine with each other and trap the hydra under a dome of delicate-looking threads.

The hydra experimentally brushed against the dome of threads and hissed in pain as they lacerated its flesh like a thousand interlocking razors.

And then the dome began to shrink.

Everyone watched, exhausted, as the giant hydra futilely fought to break out of the dome of razor threads closing in on it. It bellowed in rage again and again, defiant to the very end. Finally, with its entire body mangled and only one head left intact, it once again curled into a ball and teleported out of the sphere.

Unlike the first teleport, this one did not take it very far. In fact, the hydra appeared right next to the rapidly shrinking sphere, having transported itself just far enough to escape immediate death. It swayed on its feet as it unrolled, looking as if it was going to keel over dead at any moment. However, before that could happen, it lifted its head one last time and gave Daimen a bitter, murderous look. Though it was actually Zach that was responsible for its current predicament, it had been chasing after Daimen and his men when it blundered into the trap, and it viewed him as the primary culprit of its current predicament.

Through his magic perception, Zorian suddenly detected a massive buildup of magic in the hydra. In fact, virtually everyone seemed to have

detected it, considering how they flinched in surprise. Before anyone could do anything, the hydra opened its last remaining mouth and fired a beam of pitch black energy straight at Daimen.

Eyes widening, Daimen reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, unassuming mirror, thrusting it in front of himself as some kind of shield.

The beam hit. The mirror shattered as if hit by a bomb, the sound of its destruction reverberating throughout the surroundings with unnatural loudness. Daimen himself was blown back like a rag doll, the arm that held the mirror clearly broken. The black beam was gone, however, as if it had never existed in the first place.

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For a full second, the hydra seemed to stare at the scene. Then, it shuddered for a moment and collapsed to the side, dead.

The battle was over.

- break -

The immediate aftermath of the fight was, in many ways, more nerve-wracking for Zorian than the actual fight had been. After checking up on everyone, it turned out that only one person had actually died in the fighting – Goliri Ardat, the guy that got bitten in half by the hydra near the start of the fighting. However, Goliri was best friends with one of the other men in the group, Alachi Gotrum. Alachi was devastated and furious that his friend had died, and he felt the primary person responsible for his death was Zorian. It had been Zorian who had insisted that they had to gain access to the deepest cave in the cenote, after all. The man had kept hurling insults at Zorian for over five minutes, and even tried to attack him physically before Zach intervened.

Unfortunately, that's when two more members of Daimen's team spoke up in support of Alachi. The guy who had lost his arm due to the hydra's poison and the man who'd had his legs shattered by its tail were also very unhappy. They were essentially crippled, and they likewise blamed Zorian for it. Likely Zach as well, but they were too intimidated by his combat prowess to piss him off. Zorian, on the other hand, looked like an easier target.

During all of that, Daimen tried to play peacemaker and calm his men down, but he never expressed any support for Zorian. This pissed off Zorian more than it probably should have. He knew that this was his team and that he couldn't just categorically side with Zorian just because he was his brother, but it left a bitter taste in his mouth that Daimen hadn't said so much as a single word in his defense. Instead, it was Chassanah who eventually sided with him. The old man seemed to have taken a liking to Zorian.

This started another round of accusations concerning Zorian's obvious proficiency in mind magic, with Alachi claiming Zorian was clearly mind controlling people and that police should get involved.

The moment police involvement was mentioned, Daimen seemed to shift tracks in his methods of resolving the conflict. He stopped the discussion, dragged Alachi to the side and erected a privacy ward around the two of them. Zorian had no idea what was said between them, but Alachi no longer bothered him after this.

As for the two crippled mages, Daimen told them that their wounds weren't necessarily unrecoverable with the right treatments and promised to pay as much as he had to in order to get them back in top shape. This seemed to mellow them out a lot, and they no longer made any fuss either.

With that particular crisis somewhat resolved, they could finally inspect their gains. They dropped off most of the wounded at the nearest hospital (Daimen decided to just put his broken arm in a cast and return to the field) and gated back to the site of the battle.

The first gain was actually the dead hydra. Daimen and his team were quite excited about its potential worth. The sums involved weren't much to Zorian, but that was just the time loop messing with his sense of proportion when it came to money. If they could really find an appropriate buyer for this thing, the hydra could get Daimen and his team enough money to turn a lot of heads.

The dead chameleon drakes would also be gathered and sold, although their value was far less than that of a hydra. Especially since Zach's spells had really made a mess out of a lot of them, making many of the corpses borderline useless.

As they walked around, inspecting chameleon drake corpses, Zorian heard Daimen complaining to Orissa about his broken mirror. Apparently it was a divine artifact that Daimen had found on one of his expeditions and decided to keep. It was supposed to be utterly indestructible, and had saved Daimen's life many times in the past, and now it was gone. He was thoroughly heartbroken over that, and Orissa pointing out that at least he was alive thanks to its sacrifice didn't seem to cheer him up much.

"Ready, little Kazinski?" Torun said, slapping Zorian on the back a little harder than was necessary. "Let's go get that orb that you're so sure is down there, eh?"

Zorian said nothing. Before descending into the depths of the cenote, the group carefully checked the place again in order to see if there were any more giant magical hydras or worse things lurking nearby. They found no evidence of such, but they also failed to figure out how they had missed the hydra in the first place, which was worrying. The water at the bottom was frozen as a result of the two projectiles that Zach had sent down here at the start of the fight, but there was no evidence of any kind of underwater cave the hydra could have hidden itself in. It was like the hydra simply popped into existence out of nowhere when the chameleon drakes called for it.

When they finally entered the cave Zorian had pointed out, the orb was nowhere to be found. Zorian expected as much, though, and wasn't really worried.

"Can you still sense it?" Daimen asked anxiously. He was probably a bit desperate to get some tangible results from gaining access to this place, so that he could justify the losses he suffered to get here... both to himself and to others.

"I can," Zorian confirmed. He walked towards the far end of the cave and jabbed his finger at the empty air in front of him. "It's here. It's at this exact spot, even."

He waved his hand through the air where he sensed the orb and it passed through it without resistance.

"Yet I can't actually see it, or even touch it," Zorian added. "How curious."

Everyone who had even the slightest amount of expertise in divinations, or detection magic in general, immediately gathered around the spot, poking, staring and casting magic at it. After ten minutes of that, Daimen finally got a result.

"I can't believe this," Daimen said, running his hand through his hair in annoyance.

"You have something?" Kirma asked hopefully.

"It's a hidden world," Daimen said.

"A what?" Zorian asked, having never encountered that term before.

"A pocket dimension, like the one you think Silverlake is hiding in," Zach told him. "They are normally almost impossible to find unless you know exactly what to look for. Thus, some people call them hidden worlds."

"So this spot that little Kazinski has pointed out...?" Torun asked hesitantly.

"An entrance to the... pocket dimension where the orb resides," Daimen said, giving Zorian a complex look. "Damnit. All of Awan-Temti's other belongings are probably there too. No wonder we hadn't found any trace of his group in all this time. We would have never found this without Zorian, even if we had spent years combing this place."

"But we did have him, and thus the expedition is saved," Torun said with a careless shrug. "What are you being so gloomy about?"

"What indeed," Daimen mumbled.

"Anyway, now we just have to figure out how to break through this invisible door thing and we'll be free to loot Awan-Temti's tomb to our hearts' content, yes?" Torun asked.

"Yes, but I'd like to point out that this is probably where the giant magical hydra had come from," Chassanah butted in. "What if there are more of them inside? What if there are worse things waiting for us there? We shouldn't be reckless."

"Yes, Chassanah is right," Daimen nodded. "We lost too much here as it is. I want to hire more fighters before we try to set foot there."

"I'd like to stay here for a while and study the entrance point for a bit," Zorian said, frowning. "Something doesn't feel right about this."

"Fine," Daimen sighed. "But don't do anything before consulting me! Look, but don't touch."

Zorian nodded. Over the next two hours he scrutinized the pocket dimension entrance point while paying attention to the way his marker reacted to it. He also asked Daimen to teach him whatever spells he had used to confirm the presence of a pocket dimension. Daimen mumbled something about how he would normally charge an arm and a leg for a confidential magic like that, but taught him the spells anyway.

After two hours had passed, he was finally certain of his conclusions. He called Daimen over and asked him for permission to 'do something'.

"Something?" Daimen said warily.

"Something," Zorian nodded.

"And if I refuse, you and Zach are going to come back here when my back is turned and do it anyway," he surmised.

"Well..." Zorian hesitated.

"Absolutely, yeah," Zach immediately confirmed.

Zorian gave him an annoyed glance. Not that he disagreed with his fellow time traveler, far from it, but he could have been more diplomatic about it.

Daimen cupped his face in his hand for a moment. Perhaps he was imagining things, but Zorian thought he heard a brief prayer for patience directed to one of the silent divinities.

“Just tell me what you want to do, okay?” Daimen finally said.

“I want to think we’ve misread the situation,” Zorian said. “It’s not that the orb of the first emperor is hidden away in a pocket dimension. The pocket dimension *is* the orb of the first emperor.”

Daimen gave him a blank look. Zorian took this as an indication he should keep going.

“I agree with you that we’re dealing with a pocket dimension,” Zorian said. “But my marker is quite insistent that the dimensional anchor we’re looking at is not just an entrance to a pocket dimension. It is the very orb we’re looking for. This may sound a little crazy but—”

“You think the orb is a portable hidden realm,” Daimen surmised.

“Yes,” Zorian nodded. “I think this entrance we’re looking at is simply how the orb looks when it is... deployed.”

“I see,” Daimen said speculatively. “And you think you can collapse it back into an actual orb?”

“I’m willing to try, at least,” Zorian said. “Though you should probably get yourself and your team out of the cenote before I make the attempt. Just in case.”

After a few seconds, Daimen turned towards his team, who had been silently listening to the conversation, and told them to establish a defensive perimeter around the pocket dimension entrance and a fallback point outside the cave. It seemed he had no intention of letting him and Zach try this on their own.

Zorian clacked his tongue unhappily. If things went south again, he had no doubt that most of these people would blame him for everything again. Well to hell with them, he was still doing this.

The moment Daimen announced that everything was prepared and that he could begin, he cupped his hand below the invisible dimensional anchor and tried to connect to the orb with his marker. It took some tries, but he eventually succeeded – the surrounding space rippled like hot summer air for a moment after which something resembling a glass globe materialized in the air and plopped down onto Zorian’s waiting palm.

Orb of the first emperors: obtained.

After a second of shocked silence, everyone rushed forward, uncomfortably crowding Zorian’s personal space in order to take a look at the artifact.

The orb in Zorian’s hand looked... interesting. The orb was a perfect sphere of crystal-clear glass, completely unmarred by the passage of time. Running his fingers over it, Zorian could not feel even the slightest scratch on its surface. Seemingly encased inside the glass was a ruined palace, partially destroyed and overgrown with trees, vines and other vegetation. The palace and the trees were extremely detailed and lifelike, to the point that Zorian could count the individual leaves on the trees if he focused on them long enough. It reminded Zorian of one of those novelty snow globes that Cyorian merchants liked to sell, the ones that had high-quality models of famous buildings encased in the glass.

Eventually Zorian handed the orb to Zach, if only so people would crowd around him instead of Zorian in order to get a good look at the orb.

“That palace... it’s not just a model, is it?” Zach said, sounding fascinated. “It’s a real thing, contained inside the orb.”

“Obviously,” Orissa said. “Why would it be a ruin otherwise?”

“So Shutur-Tarana made himself a portable palace to carry around with him at all times?” Zach asked rhetorically. “I like it.”

“Yes, now imagine just how much stuff could be stored there,” Torun said happily. “Ah, little Kazinski, I forgive you for everything. You’re the best thing to have happened to this team.”

Although Zorian was dying to study the orb in more detail, he had reluctantly decided to leave the orb in Daimen’s hands for now. Trying to take it away would probably spark another fight and it wasn’t like he had enough time to truly devote himself to its study right now. The attack on the Ibasan base beneath Cyoria was fast approaching, which meant that both Zach and Zorian would be forced to devote the majority of their energies into that for the next couple of days.

“I have to say this whole thing makes me feel very conflicted,” Zach said as they left the group.

“Why?” Zorian asked curiously.

“Well, on one hand, we only found the orb so quickly because Daimen pointed us at the right spot to start at,” Zach said. “So if we ever get out of the time loop, the right thing to do would probably be tell him how to get it as a thanks for his help.”

“But?” Zorian prompted.

“I really like the idea of having my own portable palace,” Zach said with a dreamy grin.

Zorian snorted derisively. “You shouldn’t get excited just yet. For all we know the ruins really are full of slumbering giant hydras or something.”

"That just makes me more excited," Zach said. "That thing was a great opponent. Clearing a whole nest of them would be amazing."

Oh, right. For a moment he had forgotten who he was talking with.

They spent the rest of the way home arguing about what the best setup for a modern portable palace would look like. The main point of contention was that Zach wanted to make an arena full of actual monsters to fight with, whereas Zorian argued that sophisticated training dummies were better because they were less likely to break out of their containment and rampage throughout the entire place.

"It's just not the same," Zach complained, shaking his head sadly.

In the end they had to agree to disagree on the issue.

- break -

All the preparations were complete. Soldiers were recruited, human mercenaries and aranea hired, golems made, wild monsters dominated into serving as combat support, additional equipment bought and several limited combat exercises performed. The scale of the operation was sufficiently big that the authorities had sent a team to investigate what was happening, requiring some quick mind magic and forged documents to avert disaster. It helped that many Houses had small (or not so small, in some cases) private armies to protect their interests, and that many of these Houses had estates in or around Cyoria, which made their group stand out a lot less than it might otherwise.

All that was left to do now was to wait for Quatach-Ichl to leave for Ulquaan Ibasa so they could make their move. There was some worry about that, as Quatach-Ichl didn't seem to be getting ready to leave. Xvim had raised the issue that they might have tipped Quatach-Ichl off somehow, and a fierce discussion sprung up about whether to go ahead with the assault anyway if that was the case. Thankfully, the question turned out to be irrelevant in the end – Quatach-Ichl still left on schedule, and the mission could proceed.

The first task was simple: kidnap Sudomir, hopefully neutralizing the entire Iasku Mansion in the process. In order to do that, though, they had to lure the man out of his nigh-unassailable home.

Thus, Zach and Zorian stole a pair of fancy red robes from the Cult of the World Dragon and teleported to Knyazov Dveri, where they proceeded to smash up store fronts, set several warehouses on fire and used alteration to call out Sudomir as a 'traitor to the Esoteric Order of the Celestial Dragon'. Zorian also used his mind magic to guide a herd of wild boars directly into the town square, after which he released his control over them and let them run amok as they pleased.

The city guard tried to stop them, of course. They were actually pretty brutal about it, going so far as to have snipers try to pick them off from the rooftops, despite the fact that Zach and Zorian clearly avoided killing anyone themselves. Still, they were barely a challenge. Zach and Zorian simply knocked them out or otherwise incapacitated them, and then continued with their extended provocation.

After a while they stopped with the attack and left. This was partially because they were afraid Sudomir might opt not to show up if he thought the danger had not yet passed, but it was also because there was a chance the city authorities would call in Eldemar's military if things went on long enough.

It took nearly five hours for Sudomir to show up in the city, upon which he was greeted by irate shop owners and city officials, demanding an explanation and some kind of compensation. Not even the twelve dangerous-looking, grim-faced body guards that followed after him everywhere could make them pause.

Zach and Zorian observed for a while and then struck like a lightning bolt. Sudomir himself got incapacitated early in the fight and the twelve bodyguards he had brought with him turned out to be decidedly average and unable to deal with them. Especially since they weren't trying not to kill anyone this time.

"I'm glad the kidnapping went off without a problem," Alanic told them when they dragged Sudomir back to their base, "but did you really have to cut off his arms?"

"Don't look at me," Zach protested. "It was Zorian's idea."

"He's a dangerous necromancer," Zorian defended himself. "I couldn't risk him hitting us with some nasty piece of soul magic in the middle of the battle and this was the quickest way I knew of stopping that from happening. He said he was hard to kill so I figured that he wouldn't die from blood loss."

"I can't believe my previous selves thought you weren't brutal enough," Alanic mumbled under his breath. "And why is he not unconscious? I thought we agreed you'd knock him out before bringing him here?"

"We couldn't knock him out," Zach admitted. "We tried five different drugs on him, and none of them worked."

"Though he did pretend to be unconscious after we hit him with the fifth one," Zorian pointed out. "Zach wanted to try knocking him out 'the old fashioned way' by hitting him in the head with a rock, but I vetoed that. So we just glued his mouth shut, tied his legs together, put a bag over his head and brought him over."

"I see," Alanic said, looking in the direction of Sudomir's brand new prison cell with a frown. "I wonder what he did to himself to get such resilience."

"Well, you'll have plenty of time to find out," Zach shrugged. "Later, though. We should be starting the assault on the gate now, yes?"

"Not yet, no," Alanic said, shaking his head. "Let's ask Sudomir a few questions concerning the Ibasan base. He might know some crucial detail about its defenses or some such."

Both Zach and Zorian were anxious to launch the assault as soon as possible, both because that would give the researchers more time to study the gate if they succeeded and because the longer they waited, the bigger the chance the Ibasans would realize what was coming and raise the alarm. However, Alanic's suggestion made a lot of sense and he knew more about these sort of mass engagements than they did. If he thought a few more hours spent interrogating Sudomir wouldn't doom the operation, he was probably right.

- break -

The interrogation turned out to be fairly mundane and unexciting. Sudomir was surprisingly calm and polite for someone who had been brutally attacked in broad daylight, de-armed and then carried off for mind magic assisted interrogation. It didn't even take all that much mind magic to make him tell the truth. However, he also did not seem to know anything terribly useful about the layout and defenses of the Ibasan base. Sudomir and the Ibasans may have been cooperating closely with each other, but neither side fully trusted the other, and a lot of things were kept secret between them.

Eventually the three of them ran out of questions to ask, much sooner than they expected they would. Well, they ran out of questions related to the Ibasan base, anyway. Rather than stop, Alanic simply decided to expand the scope of the questioning beyond that topic. This wasn't exactly what they agreed on, but Zorian said nothing for now. He could sense that Alanic's questions were all building up to something. Some question that Alanic desperately wanted answered.

"Why are you gathering so many souls in your mansion?" Alanic eventually asked Sudomir. "What on earth do you need half a million souls for?"

Ah, so that was what was bothering him...

"W-What?" asked Sudomir, sounding shocked for the first time since the questioning began. "How do you know that?"

Alanic gestured towards Zorian, who immediately launched a mental assault on Sudomir's mind, forcing him to answer the question.

"Ghhhk!" Sudomir grunted, grinding his teeth as he fought against the compulsion. "Damn it, that's not... It's... I need it..."

"For what?" Alanic pushed.

"For the wraith bombs," Sudomir ground out eventually.

"Wraith bombs?" Zach asked curiously. "As in, you pack a wraith into a bomb and throw it at people?"

"Ha ha, yes! Yes!" Sudomir said, suddenly breaking into hysterical laughter. He was no longer fighting against Zorian's mental compulsion for some reason, as if he realized there was no way he could win there and decided to just give them exactly what they want. "Not just one wraith though! Hundreds! Thousands even! And you don't throw them at people. No, no... you throw them at *cities*."

"What?" Zach asked, frowning.

"Wraiths can multiply," Alanic said quietly. "Give a wraith some time and lots of victims, and it will make another wraith out of every human whose soul it consumes."

"Yes, exactly!" Sudomir said, nodding furiously. "Just think of what would happen if you dumped thousands of these things in the middle of a major city. Unless the outbreak is contained immediately, the whole city would be overwhelmed in a matter of hours! Only the Triumvirate Church has enough experts in ghost fighting to counter a wraith outbreak after it gathers some steam, and they were *decimated* in the Weeping. If I had enough wraith bombs in my possession, Eldemar would *have to* appease me. They'd have to..."

There was a brief silence during which Sudomir seemed to get lost in his own world and everyone else was processing what he just said.

"You'd have to use this wraith bomb of yours on at least one city before anyone took your threat seriously," Zorian eventually pointed out.

"Yes, of course," Sudomir said, giving him a patient look, as if he was asked something obvious by a small child. "That goes without saying. I was thinking of targeting Sulammon first. That would immediately spark another round of Splinter Wars. Sulammon wouldn't care about any excuses from Eldemar's government. Not if it was obvious that the wraith bomb came from Eldemar. With another continental conflict under way, Eldemar would have no forces to spare on suppressing me. In fact, they would surely be tempted to make use of my... *assets* to help them win the war. I..."

For a moment, Sudomir looked like he was about to continue with his explanation, but then he suddenly froze up and some of the mania that had taken over him seemed to drain out of him.

Only for a moment, though. Almost immediately, the spark of madness returned to his eyes once again, except this time it was slightly different. There was violence and aggression lurking there now, and his face twisted into an outraged snarl.

Sudomir's flesh suddenly turned green and his body started to swell in size. He grew a tail and horns, his eyes became slitted and his teeth

sharpened to dagger-like points. Zorian, who had actually seen Sudomir transformed into a giant monster once before, realized what he was looking at and started to shout out a warning to Zach and Alanic.

Alanic was already reacting, though. The moment Sudomir started to transform, he rushed up to him and slammed his palm against his chest. A multitude of yellow ribbons covered in some sort of religious writing sprang into existence around Sudomir. They circled around the captured necromancer once before sinking into his flesh, causing the transformation to stop and Sudomir to be instantly wrenched back to his human form.

Sudomir stared at Alanic in shock for a full second, at a loss for words.

“Oh...” he finally said. “Well. That didn’t work out as well as I hoped.”

Alanic made a slashing motion with his left hand and then lightly poked Sudomir on the forehead with his index finger. This caused Sudomir to suddenly become wreathed in dark red light and then collapse into unconsciousness.

“Let’s go,” Alanic said, motioned for Zach and Zorian to follow him out of the cell. “We’ll continue this interrogation later. For now, we have an Ibasan base to capture.”

70. Carried Away

Chapter 070 Carried Away

Deep beneath Cyoria, in a recently excavated cavern separated from the main tunnel network, an army was being assembled. It consisted of about 200 people, about 120 of which had been gathered by Alanic through various means while the rest were mercenaries Zorian had hired for considerable amounts of money. Of course, this number did not include the many non-combat experts that would be responsible for figuring out how the Ibasan gate functioned. Nor did it take into account the many golems that Zorian had made for the occasion, about 80 of which were scattered through the area, or the 40 aranean mercenaries that were hired from the three different webs recommended by the Silent Doorway Adepts.

As far as armies went, this wasn't much. But it was still a sizeable group, and getting it past Ibasan patrols without them noticing their passage was... difficult.

For ordinary mages, that is. Zorian could just send his simulacrum to sneak past these patrols and then just open a Gate to let the assembled forces through unmolested and unnoticed.

There was something very amusing about using dimensional gates to bypass Ibasan patrols, establishing a temporary staging ground deep in their territory, and then launching a surprise attack at their base.

Zorian was just in the process of attaching small metal cylinders to his belt, each one filled with potent alchemical mixtures, when he sensed Zach approaching him.

"You look worried," Zach told him.

Zorian frowned. He didn't notice it before Zach pointed it out, but yeah. He kind of was.

"A little," Zorian admitted, continuing his preparations. "I mean, we're risking another confrontation with Quatach-Ichl here. He's one of the few people who has the ability to do us lasting harm. Every time we tangle with him, we're taking a big risk."

"Eh, it'll be fine," Zach said dismissively, giving him a strong pat on the back that had Zorian swaying in place for a second. He gave Zach a glare for that, but his fellow time traveler just grinned at him in response. "Besides, the annoying pile of bones isn't nearly as dangerous as you think. I've fought him plenty of times, and I'm still standing. He doesn't like to use necromancy in battle for some reason."

Alanic, who was staring at the map of the Ibasan base along with Xvim, decided this merited a response from him.

"Most necromantic spells aren't well suited for battle," Alanic said, not taking his eyes off the map. "They take too much concentration and they need to overcome the target's magic resistance to work. It's faster and cheaper to just burn people to a crisp or cut them to pieces. The terrible necromantic spells that are sometimes bandied about in textbooks are torture spells meant to be inflicted on a subdued victim, not something you use in an even fight."

There was a long pause as Zach and Zorian digested this. One of these days, Zorian decided, he really had to ask Alanic about his past. The old battle priest would likely refuse to talk about it at first, but maybe if he picked a right moment and was really persistent?

Well, whatever. It was a thought for some other time. He considered pointing out that a fight between them and Quatach-Ichl wasn't exactly an even one, since the difference in power and skill between the ancient lich and any one of them was still a yawning chasm rather than anything resembling a close match-up, but he figured that would be missing the point. Alanic's point was that Quatach-Ichl likely didn't go for necromantic magic in a fight because it was suboptimal, and that was probably true – getting into a habit of toying with your opponents was quite stupid, and the ancient lich had been shrewd enough to survive for more than a thousand years now.

Truth be told, Zorian found those jagged disintegration beams that Quatach-Ichl liked to use to be plenty terrifying in their own way.

"You know," Zorian suddenly said. "My past self would be horrified if he saw me right now."

"Why?" Zach asked, arching his eyebrow in askance.

"This attack is pretty... *audacious*," said Zorian. "There is no way my past self would ever consider this a reasonable risk to take. A part of me scoffs at this, dismissing it as simple cowardice, but there is another part of me that can't help but wonder whether the time loop had eroded away my ability to recognize what is and is not appropriately cautious behavior. What if we manage to leave the time loop and deal with Red Robe, only to die two months later because we did something completely stupid out of sheer habit?"

To Zorian's surprise, Zach actually seemed to give the question some serious thought. Zorian expected him to either dismiss his concerns or question how Zorian could possibly know what his past self would have thought of their current situation. Instead, Zach seemed to consider the issue in his head for well over a minute before responding.

"I doubt that's going to happen," he eventually said, his tone and mannerisms somewhat subdued. "I have... things I need to do after we get out. Social things. It will be at least a year or two before I can start picking fights with dragons or whatnot, and I don't think you'll start looking for

trouble without me prodding you. A couple of years should be enough to let us adjust to a world without restarts, right?"

Zorian simply gave Zach a non-committal hum in response. Zach had a pretty rosy picture of Zorian in his head if he thought there was no way he could get himself into trouble on his own. Zorian still wasn't sure what he wanted to do with his life if... *when* they got out of the time loop, but he would probably need a lot of money and rare resources. He could easily imagine getting into trouble in the process of acquiring these, or once he amassed enough that people start to take notice or once he told people what he was actually doing with all these acquisitions.

Zach's inordinate fondness for picking fights with giant monsters was definitely dangerous, but Zorian suspected his personal ambitions could be even more dangerous than that. A mage of Zach's caliber can usually flee from giant monsters if they find themselves overmatched against it. Make a human organization interested enough in you, though, and they will hound you till the day you die.

He shook his head and steeled himself. Now was not the time to contemplate those topics too deeply. The opening moves of this attack were about to begin and Zorian had a crucial role to play in them. If they wanted to stop Quatach-Ichl from being alerted and summoned back to the base, someone had to sneak into the base and either assassinate or disable as many Ibasan leaders as possible before the main force of the attack hit. That someone was, of course, Zorian. Him and the aranean mercenaries he had hired for the occasion, that is.

Cloaking one's presence thoroughly enough to avoid dedicated scrutiny was quite hard. In a contest between two equally skilled mages, one of which was trying to hide and one of which was seeking for the hidden one, the seeker would almost always come out on top. If your opponent could manipulate your very mind, however, dictating what you see, hear and remember... then even the most sophisticated detection spell could not help you find them.

Well, that was the theory, at least. Zorian was quite sure the Ibasans would catch on to their presence relatively soon. Mind magic was not exactly unknown among mages, even if few of them could manifest it as stealthily and flexibly as Zorian and his new aranean minions could. Still. They didn't have to stay undetected forever – just long enough to track down and remove anyone who knew how to contact Quatach-Ichl.

"I'm going," Zorian said out loud, speaking to himself as much as he was to the people around him.

"Leave a simulacrum with us," warned Alanic.

Zorian hesitated for a moment. He had dismissed all his simulacra before the operation began so that they wouldn't be a drain on his mana reserves. It was annoying, because it meant he would have to rely on Daimen again to re-establish a link with Koth, but he felt this operation deserved his full focus. That said, Zorian shouldn't be doing anything too mana intensive during the initial infiltration, so maybe leaving a simulacrum behind in the command room wouldn't be a bad idea.

He executed a complex series of chants and gestures and then cupped his hands in front of him, causing a milky white sphere of ectoplasm to materialize in front of him. He felt the spell reach towards his soul, connecting it to the ball of ectoplasm in front of him. The moment he felt the connection snap into place, he plunged his right arm straight into the ball of ectoplasm and imposed upon it an image of himself, causing it to squirm and writhe like a living thing.

"That always looks so freaky," Zach commented off to the side.

Zorian ignored him. This was the most sensitive part of the spell, since the caster had to keep their image firmly in mind as they manipulated the ectoplasm. If they faltered even for a second, the spell would either fail or produce a hopelessly false copy. This was because, although the spell was tapping into the caster's soul to create the copy, it was tapping into something that described a creature of flesh and blood and trying to translate it into a form made out of magical fields and ectoplasm. A multitude of little and not-so-little sacrifices and compromises had to be made during this process, and a non-sapient spell couldn't be trusted to prioritize things properly. The first time Zorian succeeded in producing a simulacrum, for example, he got a nearly-mindless wreck that nonetheless contained a vividly detailed internal bone structure. The spell sacrificed nearly everything else to get that one thing just right.

Of course, Zorian was now too well versed with the spell to fail like that, even with Zach distracting him with inane comments. The writhing sphere swelled in size and erupted into thin, rope-like pseudopods that formed a rough outline of a human being...

Two minutes later, a flawless-looking replica of Zorian opened its eyes and looked around. One would think that simulacra would come into existence already aware of everything and ready to spring into action on a moment's notice, but in practice they always seemed a little confused after being created and took about 30 seconds to gather their bearings and calm down.

"There," Zorian said. "Anything else?"

"No," Alanic said, shaking his head. "Go. Try not to get yourself killed, I guess."

"I guess?" Zorian mumbled under his breath. "Thank you, Alanic, you really know how to make a motivational speech."

And then he left. The attack on the Ibasan base beneath Cyoria had begun.

- break -

The initial stages of the infiltration went very well. Zorian used a combination of a floating invisibility sphere and clouding the minds of the Ibasan guards to smuggle himself and the aranea into the base, after which they split up into small groups to cover more ground in as little time as possible.

There were some complications. For one thing, there were some pretty insidious and powerful wards scattered around the base, arranged in no pattern that Zorian could decipher. These hadn't been there when Zorian invaded the base in the previous restarts, which implied that Ibasans normally took those down before executing the invasion of Cyoria. Zorian was kind of baffled as to why they would tear down their own wards like that, though, even if they did intend to abandon the base after the invasion. For a moment he actually worried that they had been betrayed by some of their mercenaries, despite their precautions, and that the base security had been upgraded in response. However, the wards in question were arranged so haphazardly, the entire warding layout so full of holes, that Zorian eventually ruled out that idea. If the Ibasans had been expecting them, they would have done a better job of warding the place than this. As it was, the warding setup looked almost like a collection of individual wards, each of which had been erected by a different person without bothering to consult anyone else about what they were doing. In at least two places the wards clashed with each other so severely that they created 'dead zones' in the areas where they overlapped, canceling each other out.

Zorian had a rather silly urge to write a letter to Quatach-Ichl, criticizing him for not teaching his minions how to make a proper warding scheme. This sort of thing reflected badly on him too, you know, he ought to think of his reputation...

Anyway. Another problem was the Ibasans had these brown dogs that could smell the aranea coming, no matter how well cloaked, and wouldn't stop barking. And they were either naturally mind blanked or had been made so artificially, because Zorian couldn't detect or connect to their minds at all. He had been forced to kill and replace them with motionless ectoplasmic replicas, which took an annoying amount of time and mana on his part.

After that, everything went perfectly for a while. Numerous Ibasan leaders were eliminated, and though the base was starting to wake up to the fact something funny was going on in their base, they were still not aware of the extent of the problem on their hands. However, there was something that Zorian had not taken into account...

The Ibasans had fought against aranea before. Before the time loop – and even during the time loop, before Red Robe erased them from the time loop – the Cyorian web had been a huge obstacle to their operations. As such, they had a multitude of countermeasures and defenses aimed specifically against the aranea. Many of these were abandoned when the local aranea mysteriously disappeared, experts in charge of manning them re-assigned to other, more productive duties... but some of them remained intact. Just in case.

When the aranea moved near the center of the base they seemed to cross some invisible line that immediately triggered a base-wide alarm. It was loud, shrill, and everyone in the base seemed to immediately realize what it meant because they immediately started layering mental protection spells on themselves and grabbing their weapons.

[Oops?] the aranea closest to Zorian said hesitantly.

[I don't even understand what got us.] another complained. [Human magic is such bullshit...]

Zorian snorted derisively. Well, it wasn't like this was completely unexpected. He reached out with his mind, connecting himself with the network of telepathic relays that had been densely distributed across this entire section of the underworld, and ordered the miniature monster horde he had gathered to attack the base from all directions.

From one of the tunnels, a huge red centipede surged forwards, hordes of hook goblins and cave drakes following after it. The Ibasans concentrated their fire at the centipede first, trying to bring down the biggest threat, only to see most of their spells fizzle out due to the many wards Zorian had attached to it. From another tunnel, a swarm of floating, jellyfish-like monsters came pouring in. They looked slow and weak, but when Ibasans tried to bring them down they discovered that the jellyfish had an innate shielding magic that blocked their projectiles. Worse, the jellyfish could somehow interface with one another and merge their shields into a stronger, unified barrier. From the third tunnel, a horde of phalanx toads came rushing into the base. The Ibasans killed many of them, but there were five more for each they killed and they acted with unusual organization and discipline, spontaneously forming into coherent groups and sweeping everything before them with their spear-like tongues.

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Finally, the fourth group of monsters didn't bother moving through any of the existing tunnels – the rock worms Zorian subverted simply burst into the base from down below, having dug out their own entrance into the base.

The whole plan had a high chance of falling apart at this moment, Zorian knew. Although he and the aranea had gutted a lot of their leadership, they hadn't gotten everyone that could summon Quatach-Ichl. If the Ibasans wanted to call the ancient lich for help, they could. However, Zorian had noticed in the past that Ibasans were generally reluctant to call upon their leader. Quatach-Ichl hated getting called to deal with 'trivial things'. He didn't usually kill people for disappointing him in such a manner, but he was rather prone of relieving them of their positions or reducing their salary – which were horrifying enough consequences for most people.

Zorian was hoping that the Ibasans, faced with what appeared to be an aranean attack, would decide to try and tackle things on their own, rather than immediately call Quatach-Ichl to help them.

Well, he seemed to have been right about that. The Ibasans chose to fight the monster invasion on their own. The trouble is, they were *winning*. The centipede was intercepted by trolls and bludgeoned to death with sheer force of numbers, the jellyfish shield was visibly weakening and the phalanx toads were being pushed back with a liberal application of fire. As for the rock worms, well... the Ibasans had rock worms of their own. Zorian had counted on the monster horde getting defeated, but not this fast. He wasn't done killing the leadership yet, dammit!

He suddenly got a message from his simulacrum that Zach wanted to help out with the assassination.

Well. The plan was already failing, so he supposed there was no harm in letting Zach wreck things for a bit before they abort the whole thing.

As quickly as possible, he synchronized with his simulacrum and opened a gate between the command room and the Ibasan base, letting Zach pass through.

Zach took a rather long look at the battlefield, taking in how the battles were progressing first-hand, and then turned to Zorian.

“Do you know where those leaders are at the moment?”

“Err, sort of?” Zorian said. “I mostly had the aranea pinpointing their location for me, but they’re kind of busy directing the monster horde at the moment.”

“But you know the general area they’re in, right?” Zach prodded.

“Oh yeah,” Zorian nodded. He pointed at a big, solidly-constructed building not far from them. “Most of the surviving ones are in that building over there. The wards are pretty tricky so it will take me some time to—”

Before Zorian could finish speaking, Zach had already fired some kind of projectile at the building. It was seemingly tiny, more of a faint red pinprick of light than a proper-looking offensive spell, but its flight path was followed with a piercing scream so loud it made Zorian’s ears hurt.

The projectile slammed into the wall of the building and then burst into crescent spatial distortions that sliced through everything in the vicinity with no visible resistance. The whole heavily warded building fell apart like an apple thrown into an industrial blender machine, burying everyone in it under several tons of rubble.

“One problem solved,” said Zach, lowering his hand. “What about the others?”

“Well,” said Zorian, a little sourly. Only a little, though – truthfully, he had been expecting something like this when he agreed to involve Zach into this. “If the Ibasans didn’t already know they’re under attack by more than just aranea, they certainly do now. Let’s see if we can kill them before they realize just how disgustingly powerful you are and call Quatach-Ichl in panic.”

“Let’s,” Zach agreed.

Deciding there was no point in pretending this attack was just a minor aranean offensive anymore, Zorian sent a telepathic message to Xvim and Alanic to start the assault in earnest.

He received a confirmation almost immediately. It seemed Zach wasn’t the only one who was spoiling for a fight.

Zorian understood. They had all spent so much time and resources into organizing this attack, it would be almost a crime to call it off now.

It was time for Ibasans to see what it’s like to be suddenly invaded.

- break -

Beneath the city of Cyoria, a vicious battle was underway. The small army that Alanic had assembled, bolstered by the various mercenaries, Zorian’s golems and what was left of the dominated monster horde, advanced deep into the disorganized Ibasan ranks. However, the Ibasans weren’t just passive victims. Despite having their entire high-ranking leadership gutted by Zach and Zorian, despite the huge losses they suffered in the initial attack from the monster horde, despite the shock they must have felt at the appearance of another human army, the Ibasans still resisted the attack with considerable might. Their top leadership may have fallen, but local commanders quickly assumed control of the remaining forces and did their best to link up and coordinate their movements. Huge war golems charged into rapidly-forming defense groups, aiming to break them up, only to be met with screaming hordes of war trolls barring their way. The aranea led the remaining monsters into suicidal offensives, only to be countered with equally suicidal delaying actions from the Ibasans’ own war beasts. Zach and Zorian converged on any local commander that seemed to be especially good at their job, aided by a couple of Alanic’s men that seemed to be really accurate with a rifle and fond of head-shots, but there was always someone willing and capable of replacing them once they moved on to other targets.

Currently, Zorian’s simulacrum was standing in the vicinity of the dimensional gate at the center of the Ibasan settlement, where Xvim and Alanic had moved shortly after the attack began. Unfortunately, the gate had been shut down by the Ibasans when they realized they were going to lose it – another thing that didn’t go according to plan. Even if they managed to win this, a powered down gate stabilization frame was much less useful as an object of study than a working dimensional gate.

“We should have brought more monsters,” Alanic said suddenly, standing not far from the simulacrum and observing the battlefield. “We should have brought more everything, really, but I don’t think we could have realistically recruited more people. We’re doing very well compared to the numbers arrayed against us, but it’s not enough. There are simply too few of us compared to the number of Ibasans gathered here.”

“We were afraid that if we sent too many monsters, it would spook them into calling Quatach-Ichl immediately,” the simulacrum pointed out. “Though considering how successful they were against the horde, I agree we were probably too conservative with them.”

“Speaking of which, did Zach and Zorian manage to eliminate the Ibasan leaders before they contacted Quatach-Ichl for help or not?” Xvim

asked.

The simulacrum quickly contacted the original and asked him that same question. Ten seconds later he turned back to Xvim.

“It’s doubtful,” he said, shaking his head. “They had trouble locating the last two leaders. They’re dead now, but they had plenty of time to realize how dire the situation is and call for help.”

Xvim said nothing for a second, looking thoughtfully at the powered-down gate next to them.

“We shouldn’t have taken the gate from them so quickly,” Xvim said. “We should have left it in their hands for a while to give them an avenue of retreat. I think they would have tried to fall back into that undead mansion instead of fighting a lost battle if they had a choice.”

“Or they might have found a way to commandeer some of Sudomir’s undead minions if given enough time, making our current issue even worse,” the simulacrum said with a shrug.

“We’ll analyze what we did wrong later,” said Alanic firmly. “What we need now is solutions. How do we salvage this situation?”

“Shouldn’t we just retreat?” asked Xvim curiously. “Even if we take the base in the end, it will take us many hours to do so and cost many lives. On top of that, there is a high chance that Quatach-Ichl will come back before we are done and tip the balance in Ibasan favor.”

Alanic said nothing for a few seconds, clearly discontent with that idea.

“I have an idea,” the simulacrum eventually said. “Why don’t we just rip the gate stabilization frame out of the ground, pedestal and all, and carry it off to the surface for study. I mean, the original reason why we wanted to secure the base and do our research here was because moving an active dimensional gate was impossible. But we don’t have an active gate. We have an inert stabilization frame, so what stops us from simply carrying it off somewhere else before trying to figure it out?”

Xvim and Alanic gave him surprised looks.

“What?” the simulacrum asked defensively. “The idea has merit!”

“It does,” Alanic agreed. “I was just surprised to see *you* make such a suggestion. Sometimes I forget simulacra like you are more than just extensions of Zorian and can have ideas of your own.”

“Same,” Xvim agreed.

The simulacrum scowled. Stupid flesh-and-blood people and their prejudices.

Soon, Xvim and Alanic ordered their forces to fall back a little and threw themselves into the task of cutting the gate stabilization frame free of the ground without damaging something crucial. The pedestal the frame was affixed to had some kind of root-like structure that extended into the rock beneath it, meaning that a surprisingly large chunk of the ground had to be taken along with the gate itself.

None of the problems were in any way insurmountable, though, and the whole thing was soon floated into the air and slowly pushed towards one of the base exits.

The movement did not go unnoticed, however, and when the Ibasans saw what they were doing they went completely berserk. Apparently they really hated the idea of the gate stabilization frame being carried away like that. From that moment on, the whole battle shifted in tone – instead of trying to minimize their losses and stalling for time, the Ibasans suddenly surged forward and tried to recover the stolen gate at all costs. Alanic’s forces shifted from trying to put pressure on the Ibasans to a strictly defensive posture, trying to keep the Ibasans away from the retreating gate with equal zeal.

The situation only grew more dire soon after that, as Ibasans realized that recovering the gate was a lost cause and started trying to destroy it instead.

“Why are they so upset about us taking the gate!?” Zach shouted while creating a thick prismatic wall in between the floating gate stabilization frame and the approaching Ibasan war party.

He was just in time. The moment the barrier snapped into place, three different projectiles slammed into it – a thin blue javelin of force that crackled with some kind of magical energy, an animated serpent made out of green fire and a large white sphere that had smaller red spheres orbiting around it. The wall flickered, cycling through different colors, and for a moment it seemed it would hold... but then the three projectiles combined together to release some kind of combined pulse that disrupted the barrier and it fell apart into multi-colored smoke.

The fire serpent, the only survivor of this clash of spells, surged madly towards the floating gate, seeking to detonate itself against its surface. It never reached it. A milky white sphere soon hit it in the flank, courtesy of Zorian, causing it to fall apart into rapidly fading clusters of green fire.

“They’re afraid of what Quatach-Ichl will do to them when he finds out they let someone acquire a sample of his work,” Zorian said. The simulacrum suspected the original had taken said information straight from the minds of nearby Ibasans. “He doesn’t even let his allies examine it. How do you think he would feel about this?”

The battle raged on. The simulacrum watched, rather discontent, as people fought all around him to either destroy or preserve the floating gate. He

couldn't do much himself, as any significant mana use would cripple the original's ability to fight, so he was reduced to a role of observer for the most part. He watched the battle carefully, scrutinizing every detail in hopes of spotting something that required his attention.

The Ibasans charged forward again and again, supported by long-range spells from their allies in the back ranks, only to be repulsed. Zorian's golems slowly dwindled in number, the volume of spell fire too much even for their heavy wards to handle. When they grew too damaged to be of much use, Zorian strapped alchemical bombs all over them and sent them into suicide charges to halt particularly troublesome offensives. Zach's spells reaped a bloody toll on Ibasan forces, but not even his mana reserves were endless and the time he spent in recovery gradually increased as the battle grew more heated. One of the Ibasan mages decided to sacrifice his life for the cause – as he finished casting his last spell, he removed a ritual dagger from his belt and slit his own throat, using some blood magic to pour every shred of his life-force into it. The resulting spell produced an incandescent meteor that punched through every single obstacle in front of it, and would have no doubt reduced the floating gate into molten rubble if Xvim hadn't used a series of dimensional gates to redirect it back at the Ibasans.

Finally, the simulacrum noticed something he felt merited his attention. On the edges of the main battlefield, a small group of friendly soldiers was being overwhelmed. Of the original fifteen, most were already dead. Only six still lived, and only three of those six could walk and fight properly. The simulacrum telepathically alerted the original to the situation, but was told everyone was currently busy and that sacrifices have to be made in situations like these.

The simulacrum then pointed out to him that one of the survivors was Taiven. The original immediately changed his mind and told the simulacrum to go and help them.

The simulacrum wouldn't have actually obeyed an order to leave Taiven to her fate, but it was nice that he and the original were still on the same page in this regard. He teleported next to the group and immediately intercepted an incoming fireball with a well-placed dispelling wave. Taiven's shocked face was kind of priceless.

"What are you waiting for?" the simulacrum asked the group. One of the Ibasans tried to sneak up on them by kicking up a cloud of dust with a 'misaimed' spell and using it as a cover for his approach. He received a force lance to the face for his trouble. "This position is lost. Why haven't you regrouped elsewhere?"

"We can't leave them!" Taiven protested, pointing at the three wounded soldiers next to her.

"I told you to leave us here," one of the wounded soldiers said. "Just go. We'll stall them to buy you some time."

"We're not leaving anyone behind!" Taiven insisted.

The other two healthy soldiers said nothing, but the simulacrum could see on their faces that they didn't want to leave the wounded soldiers behind either. They were probably friends.

"How about this – you go and take these people to safety, and *I'll* hold the Ibasans at bay?" the simulacrum offered.

"Zorian..." Taiven started, sounding both a little annoyed and a little worried.

The simulacrum wasn't listening to her anymore, though. He could feel the Ibasans moving towards the group again so he conjured two large severing discs above his palms and launched them forward in front of him. The first wave of Ibasans literally fell apart before the discs, screaming horribly as they were effortlessly sliced apart by the two buzzing spell constructs. The commander of the Ibasan group tried to restore order to his unit, shouting orders and threats so loudly the entire base must have heard him. He fell silent when his own bodyguard slammed a knife in his eye socket, killing him instantly. The apparent betrayal (which was actually the result of Zorian puppeteering the man's body, not genuine betrayal) further sowed chaos in the Ibasan group, stalling the attack.

The simulacrum then shifted his attention back to Taiven and her group, only to find the soldiers gone but Taiven still present.

"Let me guess," the simulacrum sighed. "You sent the rest of them to safety but decided to stay behind with me?"

"I told you," she said. "We're not leaving anyone behind."

In retrospect, he really should have made it clear he was a simulacrum right from the start.

"Listen," he started. "I'm actually..."

[Stupid simulacrum!] the original's voice thundered in his mind. [What the hell are you doing down there!? The rest of the soldiers are back but you and Taiven aren't? Stop fooling around and spending all our mana, dammit! I need that to defend the gate!]

The simulacrum winced at the angry tirade in his head. The interruption left him confused for a second, unable to remember what he was doing right before the original contacted him.

He was further distracted when another volley of spells erupted towards the two of them, roughly half of it directed at him and the other half at Taiven. Taiven blocked her share of projectiles easily enough, and the simulacrum was just about to do the same for himself when he felt his mana reserves rapidly drain away. Apparently the original had decided to blow his entire mana reserves on something, leaving them both defenseless for a while.

“Damn it, original,” the simulacrum quietly grumbled.

Then the spell volley hit him, tearing straight into him and blowing his ectoplasmic form into rapidly fading pieces.

As his tattered remains started to unravel, he spared one last look at Taiven, who was looking at him with an absolutely horrified look on her face.

Only then did he remember what he had been trying to tell her before the original contacted him.

His last fading thought was that he really, *really* should have made it clear that he was just a simulacrum right from the start...

- break -

In the end, they managed to extract the gate stabilization frame out of the Ibasan base safe and intact. The frenzied attempts of the Ibasan forces to stop them had petered out after a while, the surviving soldiers retreating back to their base and allowing them to withdraw in peace. The forces assembled by Alanic and Zorian had paid a heavy price for this success, however, being cut nearly in half by the end.

Only time would tell if the researchers Xvim gathered would find out anything useful about the recovered gate stabilization frame.

As they suspected, Quatach-Ichl showed up not long after they finished their retreat, having received a call for help at some point in the fight. Zach and Zorian had been on edge for a few days after this, expecting the Ibasans to launch a premature invasion of Cyoria, much like they had in that one restart where Zorian prodded Eldemar into attacking Iasku Mansion... but what happened instead is that the remaining Ibasans started to withdraw from Cyoria entirely.

The invasion, it seemed, was being canceled.

71. Shadows of the Past

Chapter 071 Shadows of the Past

After the attack on the Ibasan base had been concluded and it became obvious that no immediate invasion would result from it, Zorian proceeded to re-establish his link to Koth. Since he had dismissed his simulacrum in Koth before the attack, he had to rely on Daimen's help for the second time in the restart. Although it kind of bothered him that he was forced to rely on Daimen so much, he had to admit his help made things a lot easier than they would have otherwise been.

He didn't expect any problems to crop up and, in a way, there really hadn't been any. The dimensional gate opened just fine, after all. The problem was that it opened directly inside the Taramatula estate. Instead of finding some out-of-the-way location in the jungle, like they had agreed on beforehand, Daimen had decided to simply open the gate inside a heavily warded room meant for receiving teleporting visitors. While a dozen or so Taramatula family members stood around the edges of the room and watched.

Zorian, who had stepped through the gate first, was so shocked at the sight that he immediately halted in his tracks. This caused Zach, who was coming right behind him, to crash into him. Thankfully, they managed to keep their balance instead of falling to the floor in a tangle of limbs. That would have been awkward.

"Hey, why did you sto— Oh. That's a lot bigger reception that I was expecting," Zach said, looking around.

Zorian didn't bother responding to Zach's feeble attempt at humor. Instead, he zeroed in on his older brother and gave him an outraged glare. "Daimen, what the hell were you thinking!?"

To his credit, Daimen actually winced at the question, looking properly guilty.

"I'm sorry," he said, waving his hands in front of him in a placating gesture. "I didn't have a choice, okay? I can't leave the Taramatula estate anymore and I couldn't just open a dimensional gate in their home without their knowledge or consent. It was either this or aborting the whole thing entirely."

Zach and Zorian were quiet for a second, processing that statement.

"Why can't you leave the Taramatula estate?" Zach finally asked. "Are you a prisoner or something?"

"It's complicated," Daimen said with a heavy sigh. "Let's go find somewhere quiet to talk."

Before either Zach or Zorian could say anything, one of the gathered Taramatula decided to cut in and make a suggestion. It was Ulanna, the woman who had greeted them the first time they had visited the estate.

"I know just the place," Ulanna said. "For a family of our stature, not having an appropriate meeting room for occasions such as these would be quite an embarrassment. Please wait a minute while I make some arrangements and then we can go."

Zorian gave Ulanna a thoughtful look. Though her words made it seem she was just trying to be a good host, he could understand the underlying message easily enough: the Taramatula were an involved party in all this, and they wanted to be present during the talk.

Ulanna raised an eyebrow at his look, as if daring him to object. He didn't.

"That's quite all right," he simply said. "Me and Zach will go collapse the gate while you deal with things on your end."

Zorian had no idea what Daimen had told the Taramatula about the gate. Hopefully he hadn't been foolish enough to reveal that he and Zorian were opening passages between two different continents, in which case it was imperative that they close the gate quickly, before they could puzzle out the truth for themselves.

As he and Zach worked to collapse the gate, he could hear Ulanna conversing with some of the other Taramatula in the room. His grasp on the local language was still very poor, so the only thing he understood was that she ordered food and drink to be made and brought to them. Zorian was in no mood for either, but he figured out it would be impolite to try and stop her.

A little while later, they were all ushered into a relatively small but luxurious room. There were five of them present: Ulanna, Daimen, Orissa, Zach and Zorian. Despite the presence of Ulanna and Orissa, though, it was Daimen that provided most of the explanation for what was happening. Apparently, one or more members of Daimen's team had talked to outsiders about the orb they had found, and the story had blown up *very* quickly. Within hours, everyone and their mother wanted to speak to Daimen to find out what he intended to do with the orb and to try and influence him to sell it to whatever group they represented.

Caught off guard by the sudden flood of interested buyers and aware that not everyone was willing to take their refusal to sell the orb in good grace, Daimen and his team retreated to the Taramatula estate and barricaded themselves there until further notice.

"The people after us can't afford to be too brazen with the Taramatula, so we're safe while we remain inside the estate," Daimen concluded. "But the moment we step out we'll be ambushed by dozens of different groups. They know we're in here. They have the estate heavily monitored."

Everyone and everything going in or out of the estate is closely tracked. I couldn't possibly leave the estate to open the gate elsewhere."

"Maybe I'm just stupid, but why don't the Taramatula simply tell all these people to back off? They're supposed to be the main political force here, no?" Zach asked.

"I'm afraid it's not that simple," Ulanna said. "There are too many powerful groups making their moves here, quite a few of them from outside our sphere of influence. Though they cannot afford to take us lightly, the same is true for us as well. This is a sensitive situation and we have to move carefully. Rest assured, though, that we are taking note of every slight against us for when the time is right."

"Another issue is that some elements of the local government are discussing the possibility of simply confiscating the orb from us by force," Daimen said. "The Taramatula have to spend a lot of their influence on making sure that the initiative doesn't get anywhere. Damn it, I knew it was important to keep this find a secret but I had no idea it would inspire *this* sort of greed..."

"It's a portable pocket dimension of massive size," Orissa pointed out. "On top of that, it contains ruins from the Age of Gods, and probably the remains of Awan-Temti's wealth. There could be divine artifacts in there, plants and animals that have gone extinct in the rest of the world, anything. Of course it inspires so much greed. You're fortunate you have the Taramatula family to shield you from all this while we figure out what to do."

"Yes, yes, I get it," Daimen said patiently. "I'm lucky to have you, dear."

"Have you made any trips to the pocket dimension yet?" Zach asked curiously.

"We haven't even discovered how to deploy the orb," Daimen said, shaking his head. "We don't have a command marker like Zorian does, so we have to do things the hard way."

"Meaning?" Zach prodded for details.

"We have to reverse-engineer the control spells that are used for operating the orb," Daimen said. "A generational treasure like this one would definitely have a method of controlling the orb without a command marker, as a safety measure if nothing else. We just have to find it. Unfortunately, that could take a while."

Daimen gave Zorian a meaningful look. Though Zorian didn't know for sure what he was trying to tell him, he could guess. While finding a way to operate the orb without a marker was not a priority for him and Zach, it would mean a lot for Daimen. He was probably well aware that Zorian had no intention whatsoever of revealing his abilities to Daimen outside the time loop, which would make those control spells absolutely crucial to his mission. Without them, even removing the orb from its resting place would be impossible, greatly complicating everything.

"Even if we had the means of operating the orb, we would still refrain from sending an expedition to its interior at this time," Orissa noted. "The possibility of further guardian beasts, like that god-touched hydra, is too high. Months of preparation would be required to mount a proper expedition, and the current political situation makes such preparations impossible."

"Yes, exactly," Daimen quickly agreed. He turned to Zach and Zorian. "And because I'm stuck here all the time, I can't really hire the experts I need to figure out how to operate the orb, either. The truth is that I have very little to do here. I was thinking it might be a good idea for me to disappear for a few days. Get the orb away from covetous eyes and talk to some old friends about my options."

"This again," Orissa said with an unhappy frown.

This sparked a brief argument between Orissa and Daimen, since Daimen didn't want to explain what exactly he was up to and Orissa insisted that she had every right to know the details. In all honesty, Zorian thought Orissa's position was quite reasonable and empathized with her frustration at Daimen's evasiveness. However, he also couldn't fault Daimen for this, since it wasn't like he could just openly say that-

"If you want us to take you back to Cyoria with us when we reopen the gate, you should just say so," Zach said.

Everyone sent him a shocked look. Well, everyone except Zorian – he just buried his face in his hands and tried to take deep breaths.

"Damn it, Zach..." he mumbled into his hands.

"What?" Zach protested, giving Zorian an exasperated look. "Any story you and Daimen cook up wouldn't last a day and you know it. They're not *stupid*. They'd figure it out soon enough."

"Thank you, mister Noveda," Ulanna told him. "I'm glad that at least one man here respects our reasoning skills."

Zach gave her a thumbs-up and a sunny grin.

"You're saying you opened a dimensional passage here all the way from Eldemar?" Orissa asked, sounding just a little bit incredulous.

"We do a lot of crazy stuff," Zach said with a careless shrug.

It turned out that neither Ulanna nor Orissa were very familiar with the details of how the gate spell works. This wasn't very surprising, as the spell was extremely rare, but somehow Zorian kept forgetting little details like that.

After Zorian gave them a brief explanation of how the gate spell functioned, Orissa gave him a strange look.

“What?” Zorian asked, feeling somewhat self-conscious.

“This method you use to ignore distance limitations requires another person helping you on the other side, yes?” she asked. Zorian nodded wordlessly. “Then how can you open a gate back to Eldemar? Can the third Kazinski brother cast the gate spell, too?”

“What, Fortov? Please,” Zorian scoffed. “He’ll be lucky not to flunk out of the academy.”

“Zorian!” Daimen protested. He never liked it when Zorian badmouthed the rest of the family.

“No, we’ll be using the simulacrum I left back in Cyoria,” Zorian said, completely ignoring Daimen’s outburst. “Since I can cast the gate spell, my simulacrum can obviously do the same.”

“Oh, so you can create a simulacrum too?” Ulanna asked casually, not sounding particularly surprised. Zorian had to hand it to her, she was *very* good at projecting an aura of serene confidence. Orissa seemed to be trying to mimic that attitude, but she was nowhere near good enough to pull it off. One could see that these kind of reveals bothered her and put her somewhat off-balance.

“We do a lot of crazy stuff,” Zorian said. He thought about mimicking Zach completely and giving her a thumbs-up and a cheeky smile, but quickly dropped the idea. That sort of thing was something only Zach could pull off without looking like a total idiot.

In the end, they managed to hammer out an agreement. Daimen would return to Cyoria with Zach and Zorian and would take the orb of the first emperor along with him. Zorian would leave a simulacrum in the Taramatula estate so that they could return via gate spell in exactly four days.

Zorian thought this would be the end of it, but his hopes were ruthlessly squashed when Daimen told him he still had to explain to his team that he would be away for a while.

For a moment, Zorian felt the urge to make an overdramatic gesture to the uncaring heavens. And here he’d thought this would just be a short visit to Koth, consisting of little more than replacing his lost simulacrum and asking Daimen if he had found out anything new about the orb.

Sometimes he just couldn’t win.

- break -

It was a massive relief to Zorian when the three of them finally stepped through the gate and returned to Cyoria. Both the Taramatula and Daimen’s team were on edge right now, and thus rather exasperating to deal with. He kind of felt bad for his simulacrum, who would be stuck with them for the next several days. Oh well, at least he had Kirma and Torun to talk to – those two were fairly interesting and he suspected he might be able to broker some kind of trade with at least one of them.

Regardless, he was back and could devote himself to other matters. Xvim’s efforts to convince various experts to trade their secrets with him had been reasonably successful, Sudomir had to be properly interrogated, the efforts of the researchers to understand the Ibasan gate stabilization frame were starting to bear fruit and the Silent Doorway Adepts were hinting that they were willing to send a group over to Koth to acquire a gate key. Sadly, recent events concerning Daimen and the orb had probably made that last idea a dead end in this restart. His simulacrum couldn’t possibly leave the Taramatula estate without a hundred pairs of eyes following his every move. Unfortunate. He could really use an alternate entrance to Koth that didn’t rely on Daimen right now. He would have to assign a high priority to this idea in future restarts.

Daimen had agreed to hand over the orb to him and Zach while he was in Cyoria. Partially because he figured they could find out far more about it than he could, due to possessing a marker that could actually operate it, and partially because he wasn’t entirely sure the orb would be safe in his possession. News traveled faster than people. By all rights, his little trip to Cyoria should have gone undetected by his pursuers, but he couldn’t be completely sure. Thus, he felt it was for the best if he didn’t have the orb on him unless absolutely necessary.

Zorian expected that he would be the only one that could tinker with the orb to discover its secrets, since Zach didn’t have the necessary personal soul awareness to control his marker. He was very much wrong. Apparently, Zach didn’t *need* to have conscious control over his marker to take command of the orb. After an hour or so of tinkering with the orb, Zach managed to connect to it instinctively.

And after that one success, he no longer needed an hour of tinkering to connect to again. Simply touching the orb would be enough to re-establish contact. Zach didn’t even have to concentrate on it to pull it off – a touch and a stray thought were enough.

Zorian was a little sour about that. The orb certainly never reacted that way to him, no matter how many hours he spent interacting with it. No, he had to spend months going through that hellish soul awareness training and then more time painstakingly studying the way the marker worked to get as far as he did. This sort of stuff really made it obvious that his marker was some kind of inferior version of the one on Zach.

It had been only a day since they were back in Cyoria when Daimen surprised him again. He wanted to talk to Kirielle and Fortov.

This was a bit of a problem. Both of their siblings knew for a fact that Daimen shouldn’t be in Cyoria. Mother and Father had gone to Koth to meet with him. How on earth did he intend to explain his presence here? But Daimen insisted that he needed to do this, and Zorian didn’t feel like arguing with him. There was probably no great harm in it, and he was pretty sure that Daimen would go and have those conversations behind his back if he was too stubborn.

Amusingly, Daimen wanted to talk to Kirielle and Fortov alone, without anyone else being present. Zorian was almost certain that meant he wanted to ask them specifically about Zorian. Hah! Fortov didn't know anything about Zorian, and Kirielle was a little tattletale and would no doubt tell Zorian everything that she and Daimen talked about. But he told Daimen none of that and simply wished him luck before sending him on his way.

The next day, Daimen came back to talk to him, looking lost and confused.

"They didn't even want to talk to me..." he complained, sounding quite dejected. It actually made Zorian feel bad for him somewhat.

"Come on, it's not that bad," Zorian comforted him. "I don't know about Fortov, but I'm pretty sure Kirielle wouldn't have snubbed you like that. Imaya tells me you spent an entire hour with her."

"Yeah, but that's all I did with her," Daimen complained. "She spent the entire hour fidgeting and looking uncomfortable. She barely spoke, and only when I specifically prodded her. I'm not entirely sure, but I think she was actually a little scared of me. That's..."

Damien waved his hands in the air, as if trying to convey some kind of unpronounceable concept through silent gesticulation.

"Sad?" Zorian offered.

"Sure, let's go with that," Daimen said. "Also worrying. And upsetting. And a whole host of other things. Especially when coupled with what happened with Fortov. Do you know what happened when I knocked on his door?"

"Not really, no," Zorian told him. He had actually known about Daimen's 'talk' with Kirielle, since she had told him all about it when he had come to Imaya's place in the evening, but he honestly had no idea how Daimen's talk with Fortov had gone. Not well, obviously, but it would be interesting to hear *why*. "What did he do?"

Stolen from its original source, this story is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

"He was just really abrasive to me right from the start," Daimen said. "He refused to even let me in, eventually started shouting at me and then slammed the door in my face and ignored me."

Huh. Interesting.

Daimen looked at Zorian, silently asking him for an explanation. Zorian said nothing, though, and Daimen grew visibly frustrated as seconds ticked by. He ran both of his hands through his hair and clutched it tightly in his fists, as if wanting to tear it off.

"You're going to go prematurely bald if you keep doing that," Zorian commented lightly.

Daimen gave him an unamused glare.

But he did remove his hands from his head.

"I don't understand!" Daimen protested loudly. "Am I... Am I such a horrible older brother? I knew *you* didn't like me, but even Fortov? Even little Kirielle?! Why?! What did I *do*!?"

Zorian clacked his tongue and considered things for a second. On one hand, he felt that Daimen was getting exactly what he deserved. On the other hand, the fact that Daimen was so upset over this meant that his mental image of him was a little... unfair. He decided to be a little nice to his older brother for a change.

"In regards to Kirielle, the answer is simple, my dear eldest brother," Zorian told him. "You're practically a stranger to her. By the time she was old enough to interact with people, you were almost never at home. When was the last time you talked with her? Disregarding yesterday's meeting, of course."

"Uhh..." Daimen fumbled.

"You can't even remember," Zorian stated, shaking his head. "Anyway, all she had of you were stories she heard of you. Most of which came either from Mother... or from me. After all, I'm one of the people who interacted with her the most over the years."

"Oh, heavens help me," Daimen lamented. "What exactly did you tell her about me?"

"The truth," Zorian shrugged.

"You mean *your* truth," Daimen accused.

"Of course," Zorian responded, completely unmoved by the accusation. "But don't worry, I kept quiet about your worst excesses. Truth be told, I never liked talking about you to *anyone*, and that included Kirielle. And besides, Mother never failed to take your side in everything. If it were just the matter of stories, Kirielle would be more ambivalent to you. The thing is, she needs help... and she knows she'll never get it from you. She just *might* get it from me, though, which is why she doesn't want to sabotage her relations with me by getting cozy with you. She knows you kind of piss me off."

“What do you mean ‘she needs help’?” Daimen frowned. “And why are you so sure she’d never get it from me?”

“Because it would require standing up to Mother,” Zorian said.

Over the next hour or so, Zorian tried to familiarize Daimen with Kirielle’s situation. The arranged marriage their parents had prepared for her. Her desire to learn magic like the rest of them. He tried to keep the explanations brief, worried that telling this to Daimen constituted some kind of betrayal towards Kirielle, who had told him these things in confidence. He said enough for Daimen to form a rudimentary picture of what was happening with Kirielle behind the scenes, though.

“I can’t believe I never heard of this,” Daimen said, his eyes somewhat unfocused as he seemed to recall something in his head. “I speak to Mother and Father often and they never mentioned this.”

“Did you ever actually ask them about Kirielle?” Zorian asked.

Daimen was quiet for a few moments.

“...no,” he eventually admitted.

“Well, there you go,” Zorian shrugged.

Daimen exhaled heavily and then corrected his posture, sitting a little straighter in his chair.

“Okay, I admit I haven’t been very fair to our little sister. I guess I kind of deserved such a chilly reception from her,” Daimen said. “What about Fortov, then? What’s his deal?”

“How would I know?” Zorian protested. “Do you honestly think I speak to Fortov about you?”

Daimen gave him an annoyed huff. “Yes, I get it, I get it – you never talk about me to anyone if you can help it. But surely you have some inkling about how Fortov thinks and what bothers him. You’ve been interacting with him for six years now.”

Zorian made a weird face, momentarily struck speechless by this statement.

“What?” Zorian laughed. “Whatever gave you *that* idea? Why would I be interacting with Fortov?”

“Are... Are you serious?” Daimen asked incredulously. Zorian stared at him. “He’s your brother. You live in the same city. You can visit him anytime you want.”

“So?” Zorian asked, inclining his head incomprehendingly.

“Are you honestly telling me that in all these years, you haven’t seriously talked to our brother even once?” Daimen asked. His tone was pleading, as if begging Zorian to tell him he’s wrong.

“That’s what I’m saying, yes,” Zorian nodded. Why would Daimen expect anything else from him?

“Doesn’t the restart end in a massive invasion?” Daimen frowned. Zorian nodded again. “What does Fortov do during the invasion?”

“Presumably he reaches the academy shelters and spends the night there, along with the other students,” Zorian shrugged.

Admittedly, the shelters hadn’t been very safe during the one occasion he had actually experienced them, but that was when Red Robe had actively been helping the invaders by feeding them information. Without his help, the shelters were actually pretty safe.

“Presumably? You never checked?” Daimen asked. Zorian shook his head in denial. “Zorian, for heaven’s sake...”

“I don’t see why you’re so surprised by this,” Zorian told him honestly. “Fortov is my second least-favorite person in the whole family, right after Father. Of course I never bothered to check up on him”

Daimen opened his mouth, as if he wanted to continue that argument, but then just shook his head and gave up.

“Nevermind,” Daimen sighed. “Did you have *any* interactions with him during all this time?”

“Actually, yes,” Zorian said. “He pushes this one girl into a purple creeper patch near the end of every restart and then comes to me to beg for a healing salve. I used to just avoid being home whenever he comes, but these days it’s not even necessary. He never comes to find me if I stay at Imaya’s place.”

“He pushes this girl into a purple creeper patch regardless of what you change in a restart?” Daimen said, frowning.

“As far as I can tell, yes,” Zorian confirmed. “The girl has a huge crush on him, if that means anything to you.”

Daimen made a thoughtful hum. “It’s better than nothing, I guess. But really, Zorian, must you be so petty and callous? I know you and Fortov didn’t get along as kids, but this sort of attitude is a little too much. You nurse your grudges way too deeply.”

“It’s easy for you to call for peace and understanding,” Zorian said, folding his arms over his chest defiantly. “It’s not you who had to deal with Fortov’s crappy attitude over the years.”

“All I’m saying is that maybe you should give him a chance,” Daimen said. “Like you did with Kirielle when you decided to take her with you to Cyoria. If you were wrong about her, who’s to say you weren’t wrong about Fortov as well?”

“But I wasn’t really wrong about her,” Zorian pointed out. “I didn’t want her around because I felt she was a selfish little blabbermouth that would distract me from my studies and tattle on me when she returns to Mother. That’s all still true, it’s just that I no longer care about that. Provided I actually manage to find a way out of this time loop, my future is set. I can afford a distraction or two, and Kirielle running off and revealing my plans and activities to Mother is irrelevant because our parents can’t stop me anymore. I’m so skilled and powerful that I can do whatever I want, Mother and Father be damned.”

Somewhat surprisingly, Daimen didn’t grow even more frustrated at this response, like Zorian thought he would. Instead he just gave him a sad smile and shook his head ruefully.

“Mother and Father are so concerned about me making a mistake that they’re rushing over to Koth even as we speak to talk me out of my marriage to Orissa, but they fail to notice a crisis developing right in front of them,” he said. “We really are one messed up family, aren’t we? And the terrifying thing in all this is that I will forget all about this very soon, won’t I? After the summer festival, it will be as if none of this ever happened. That’s so unfair. How the hell can I fix a problem if I have no memory of its existence?”

“I don’t think you could fix our family, even if you had all the time in the world,” Zorian told him. “But yes, the reality of the time loop is rather soul crushing if one really thinks about it. You’re dealing with this pretty well, all things considered.”

“It’s mostly because I have avoided thinking about it too deeply, I think,” Daimen said. “Now that we’re getting closer to the time limit, I find my thoughts wandering towards it more and more. Especially since I’ve done so much in these last few weeks. I’ve realized so many things. Important things. It’s frightening and infuriating to realize I must lose it all.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ve heard about the notebooks I’m transferring between restarts for various people,” Zorian noted. “If it’s really so important, you can just write it down and hand it to me for safekeeping.”

“Oh?” Daimen smiled. “So I actually qualify for that prestigious service? I must say, the way you’ve been talking about our family, I was starting to get a little worried. What if you intended to just forget about me in all future restarts? You already know how to find the orb, after all, and I know you aren’t exactly a big fan of me...”

Zorian gave him a mildly uncomfortable look. He *had* been thinking of something like that. Though his eldest brother would surely be useful in tracking down and recovering the rest of the pieces of the Key, it bothered Zorian a great deal to rely on Daimen for anything. It just... *felt* wrong. Convincing Daimen to help them was a time consuming task, too, so was it really worth the time to include him in their efforts?

In the end he realized he was just looking for excuses. They needed the help that Daimen could provide. If nothing else, it wasn’t very fair to Zach to sabotage their chances of getting out of the time loop just because he had a problem with Daimen.

Plus, the truth was...

“I was wrong about you, okay?” Zorian said with a heavy sigh. “I still think you’re very annoying, but... you’re not as bad as the Daimen that lived inside my head.”

It hurt him to say it, but it was the truth. Maybe Daimen had changed after he had moved out of the house and stopped interacting with Zorian or maybe Zorian’s image of him had never been all that reliable to begin with. Whatever the truth, this Daimen was more helpful and reasonable than the dark giant that had loomed over him in the past.

“I’m not sure if I’d call it wrong, exactly. Regardless of their reasons, the other two siblings don’t like me much either. I’m clearly an abject failure as an older brother. It’s a sobering realization,” Daimen mused. After a second of silence, he shook his head as if to clear it up. “But enough of depressing topics like that. You mentioned the notebooks you’re carrying across restarts for Xvim and the others. As it happens, I’ve taken the time to talk with Xvim yesterday. He told me about the trade deals you two are trying to set up with various experts.”

“Yes, it’s honestly one of my better ideas,” Zorian nodded. “It’s already showing results and there is every indication we can do even better in future restarts. I don’t think every single one of those experts will agree to a trade in the end, but quite a few are clearly open to the idea if approached by someone they actually respect. Are you thinking of helping Xvim convince people?”

“No,” Daimen shook his head. “I’ll be pleased to help if Xvim asks for it, but my involvement could easily turn the initiative into an unmitigated disaster. You probably think of my fame as purely beneficial, but the truth is it causes many mages to view me as a threat. A lot of them would never trade anything with me. Why do you think I never learned how to cast the Gate spell before you came along?”

“I see,” Zorian said thoughtfully. “If not that, though, why *did* you mention Xvim’s efforts?”

“Well...” began Daimen. “Gathering secret knowledge from Altazia’s many experts is a commendable initiative, but it is hard work and it will likely only provide incremental improvement to your capabilities.”

“True,” Zorian said. “But what’s the alternative? All the low-hanging fruit has already been plucked.”

"Not necessarily," Daimen said with a grin. "What is and is not low-hanging fruit depends on a person's abilities, and you have something that few other people do – an ability to traverse between continents with ease."

Zorian thought about it for a second and then motioned for Daimen to continue. He didn't quite see what he was getting at.

"What I'm saying is that Koth would be a good place to extend your magic gathering initiative," Daimen continued. "Unlike Xlotic, which is relatively well-connected to Altazia due to the existence of the teleport network, Koth is quite remote. Despite that, they use the same basic magic system that we do, unlike Hsan. This makes them a great place to find unexpected spell combinations and novel alchemy. Who knows what kind of... low-hanging fruit can be obtained by combining our magical traditions with those of Koth?"

Zorian raised his eyebrow at his eldest brother. Daimen looked quite animated as he spoke of the idea.

"And I suppose you're volunteering to run this sort of initiative?" Zorian asked.

"Ha ha..." Daimen laughed nervously. "To be perfectly honest, doing this was one of my objectives in coming to Koth. I was in the process of laying the groundwork for it even before the time loop started."

"Well... that's great then," Zorian told him honestly. "I don't see an issue with the idea, then."

"Great!" Daimen said, giving him a sunny smile reminiscent of Zach. "It's just that this time loop came too soon and not all of the preparations were complete. I may need a tiny, tiny loan from my dearest brother to start things up..."

- break -

A few days later, Daimen was returned to Koth. The orb was left in Cyoria, since Daimen figured it was safer that way and because Zach had really taken a liking to it. Busy as he was with other things, Zorian decided to delegate all orb-related tinkering to Zach. Considering how much more strongly the orb reacted to him, Zach may be in a better position to uncover its secrets anyway.

Today, though, Zorian had received a somewhat unusual request: Taiven wanted to talk to him. In private.

Normally such a request wouldn't be particularly notable, but Zorian had actually not seen or heard from Taiven at all since their attack on the Ibasan base. If it were not for Alanic's assurances that she had survived the battle in perfect health, Zorian would have been honestly worried for her. As it was, it was obvious she had been avoiding him for some reason. He had actually thought about tracking her down to ask what was happening, but the end of the restart was approaching and so many things were vying for his time and attention...

No matter. Since she'd reached out to him all of a sudden, he would presumably find out what was bothering her quite soon.

When they met he offered to teleport them to some empty, quiet place, but she would have none of that. Apparently when she said she wanted to talk in private, she meant she would bring him to her family training hall – the same one where they sometimes sparred against one another in previous restarts. She seemed to find the place calming and reassuring.

"So what's this about?" he asked her.

"I'm worried," she said. She sounded worried, too.

Zorian waited for a few seconds for a clarification of what exactly she was worried about, but Taiven seemed to have trouble finding the words. She paced around the training hall like a caged tiger, scowling and shaking her head.

"No, seriously, what is this about?" Zorian asked.

She still didn't say anything.

"Is it time loop related?" he added after a bit of thought.

"Of course it's time loop related!" she burst out at him. She looked like she was going to snap at him but quickly managed to reign herself in. She shook her head sadly. "And, in a way, it isn't. I don't even know why I called you here. It's stupid. I should just—"

"Don't even dare try to send me away now," Zorian warned her.

"I won't, I won't," she assured him. "I'm just... I just realized I probably lost you as a friend."

Zorian gave her an incredulous look.

"And why would you think *that*?" Zorian asked her curiously.

"Because this time loop has changed you," she told him. "You already feel like a stranger to me. You're so hard to read these days, and so very capable. Everything I can do, you can do better. And that's only going to get worse as you spend time in here. By the time you get out, why would you need me anymore? By the time this is all resolved, I will probably no longer have a friend."

"Eh, you're being overdramatic," Zorian told her. He knew he was probably sounding a little dismissive, but he honestly didn't know what else to

tell her. "I know you don't remember this, but I spend a lot of time interacting with you in various restarts. There is zero chance that I'm just going to forget you."

"Well yes, I'm sure that you won't just *forget me*," she huffed. "But any concern you have for me will be of the... well, patronizing kind. You'll be so above me it isn't even funny. We won't be equals, you know? It'll be you, a secret archmage, keeping an eye on his old friend for old-time's sake. It's very depressing."

"Ah," said Zorian slowly.

There was a lot of truth in what she was saying. There was really no way their friendship would be the same as it had been before the time loop. However, that was not necessarily a bad thing. His past self was... somewhat bitter with Taiven. He had not considered them to be close friends, something that Taiven seemed rather oblivious to. Much like she was oblivious to his past crush on her, really.

So yes, their relationship would never be the same. But was that a bad thing? While Taiven might lament the loss of their earlier friendship, Zorian couldn't help but wonder whether there would have even *been* a friendship if he hadn't got stuck in this time loop. Would he have eventually overcome the hurt of having his love confession laughed at and reestablished close bonds with her? Probably. But it would have taken quite some time and he wasn't sure Taiven would have stuck around him for long enough to see that happen.

"Why did you ever decide to become friends with me, anyway?" Zorian asked her curiously. "This will sound a little self-deprecating, but I don't think I was that good of a friend."

"Ha ha!" she laughed, her mood brightening a little. "Well, it's good that you're so honest. That's the one change I like about the new you."

She picked up a practice doll from a nearby bench and started making minute corrections to it. Zorian couldn't see what they were meant to do, so he assumed she was just stalling for time and giving herself something to do.

"Since you were willing to be a little self-deprecating, I will follow your example," Taiven eventually said. "I wasn't a very good friend either. Either to you or to anyone else. I'm too blunt and impulsive and I can't judge the situation and people very well. Most people actually find me pretty insulting and aggravating."

Zorian was going to say something to cheer her up, but then he remembered that her nickname for him was 'Roach'. He still remembered the argument he'd had with her when she had tried to convince him that being compared to cockroaches was a compliment because they were amazing animals, famed for their adaptability and resilience. Eventually he caved in and (reluctantly) let her call him that, but he could see why some people would be deathly insulted if she were to pull that kind of stunt on them.

"I actually have very few friends aside from you," she continued. "Aside from you, only my two teammates seem to like me. But Urik and Oran... they're old friends. I'll never be anything other than the third wheel if I hang out around them."

"But I didn't have any other friends," Zorian surmised.

"Yeah," Taiven told him. "You annoyed me, I annoyed you, but we got along with each other anyway. Maybe you weren't a good friend, but I wasn't much better, so it didn't matter. But now you're getting better, and I... I can't."

She hugged the practice doll like a little girl trying to comfort herself with a favorite toy. It was a somewhat weird sight, since the practice doll was the size of an adult human and creepily featureless.

Zorian stared at her, wondering how to handle this. He didn't see how he could convince Taiven that the nature of their friendship wouldn't change once he got out of the time loop. It would be an obvious lie. Of course, Zorian did not consider this change to be a bad thing, but to explain why he felt that way he would have to...

...eh, why not. If he was really honest with himself, he always had wanted to do this. He just hadn't had the courage to go through with it.

"I had a crush on you once," he told her.

"Eh!?" she exclaimed, jerking in surprise and dropping the practice doll. It clattered to the floor, leaving deafening silence in its wake. For a moment, anyway. "What do you mean, you had a crush on me!? When!? How!?"

"Do you remember that time I asked you out on a date?" he asked her.

"What? Are we... are we talking about that time..." she fumbled. Zorian nodded anyway. He had only ever asked her to a date once in the time they knew each other, so she couldn't be thinking of anything else. "But, uh, isn't that when I... laughed at you?"

Zorian gave her a long-suffering look.

"Yes," he confirmed. "Yes, it is. It wasn't a joke, Taiven. I was dead serious about it."

"Ah ha ha..." she laughed nervously. "Wow, that's... really something."

She buried her face into her hands for a moment.

“Gods above, I’m so stupid sometimes,” she mumbled into her hands.

Then she punched him in the shoulder.

“Hey!” he protested in mild outrage. He’d normally be more bothered about the sudden physical violence, but eh. It was Taiven. He expected that sort of thing from her. “What the hell!?”

“And you’re stupid too!” she told him. “Why the hell would you just accept me laughing at you like that if you were being serious!?”

“Well what the hell was I supposed to do!?” Zorian protested.

“Tell me I was wrong! Ask me out again! Get angry before storming off!” Taiven shouted. “Anything! Not just pretend everything was fine and retreat with a tail between your legs like a wounded puppy. I mean... I kept joking about that long afterwards and you *still* didn’t say anything. At least if I knew I wouldn’t have been rubbing salt into your wounds like that!”

“It doesn’t matter,” Zorian grunted. “In the end I still got an answer to my question. You clearly weren’t interested in me that way. You found the very idea laughable, even.”

“Oh come on!” she whined. “That’s not fair. I wasn’t laughing because the idea of me dating you was so ridiculous. I was laughing because I gave you love advice urging you to ask people out and you followed it by immediately asking *me* out. It just... seemed to me like you were making a joke. In retrospect, I was being stupid, but... You should have said something, damn it!”

There was a long, uncomfortable silence as the two of them refused to look at each other and sat there in silence.

“We’re going out on a date,” Taiven suddenly declared.

Zorian gave her a weird look.

“But I’m over you,” he pointed out. “That’s why I said I ‘had’ a crush on you. It’s all in the past for me.”

“Yeah, I figured,” she said. “It doesn’t matter. We’re still having a date.”

“Don’t I get any say in this?” Zorian asked, an amused smile on his face.

“What are you talking about,” Taiven sniffed disdainfully. “You’re the one who asked me to a date. I’m just accepting your invitation... with a bit of a delay.”

Zorian laughed at the uniquely Taiven logic.

“A bit of a delay, she says... You really are something,” he said, shaking his head. “Fine. Have it your way.”

“Good,” she said simply, then looked away, as if too shy to meet his eyes.

Zorian smiled. He had been telling the truth, and he really didn’t have a crush for her any longer. Any romantic feeling he’d had for her had petered out during his long stay in the time loop.

But he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t kind of glad about this.

72. Crossroads

Chapter 072 Crossroads

He never really realized how beautiful Cyoria could be in the evening.

That was Zorian's thought as he and Taiven wandered around Cyoria, checking up street stands and discussing casual topics. Most settlements grew dark and quiet as evening approached, giving off a dangerous and sinister atmosphere, but Cyoria was a major metropolis and this was the week before the summer festival. The streets were lively and well-illuminated, with lots of people wandering around and lots of street vendors setting up stands and trying to convince these people to part with their money for sweets, trinkets and so on.

Zorian would never have guessed that he would enjoy this kind of atmosphere. In the past, he had found occasions like this to be rather aggravating and avoided them whenever possible. Of course, in the past, Zorian would get headaches just from being in a crowd and he didn't have a pretty girl to keep him company.

He gave a sideways glance to Taiven, who was walking beside him. Even though this was just a 'friendly' date and not anything romantic, he couldn't help but treat it fairly seriously. He had chosen to wear a fairly formal outfit for the evening, took her to an expensive restaurant and even invited her for a round of dance. He was initially worried he was taking things too far, but considering Taiven came to the date wearing a very expensive-looking dress and had kept her usual cheery disposition throughout the entire evening, he seemed to have made a good choice.

"I've got to say, this went a lot better than I thought it would," Taiven suddenly said. Zorian raised an eyebrow at her. "Wait, that came out kind of wrong. What I mean is... considering how bad both of us are at the social side of things... umm..."

Zorian gave her a faint smile and decided to save her from further awkwardness.

"It's fine," he said. "I get your point. I'm also pleasantly surprised at how well this turned out. I guess we're better at this than we thought."

"Well, in my case it's mostly trial and error, so I can't feel *too* proud about myself," Taiven laughed lightly. "I went to quite a few dates in the past. Plenty of guys get attracted to me for my looks and don't quite comprehend what they're getting into until they experience it firsthand. Trust me, my first date was a real disaster."

"Oh? You'll have to tell me that story sometime," Zorian teased.

"No way," she said, giving him a playful shove and causing him to stumble to the side a little. He nearly crashed into an elderly couple walking past them, but managed to correct himself in time. "The less people know that story, the better. Hell, sometimes I wish I could forget that memory myself. But then I'd probably make the same mistakes all over again, so I guess it's a good thing I can't forget."

She frowned suddenly, staring at the night sky for a moment before giving him a curious look.

"What?" he prodded.

"What about you? Do you do this often?" she asked him.

"Do what often? Go on a date with you?" Zorian asked, amused.

"Well not with me," she said, rolling her eyes. "I mean in general. You've been in this time loop for years. Surely you've gone on a few dates in all that time."

"A few," Zorian admitted.

"Ha!" she said, pointing her finger at him triumphantly. "I knew it!"

Zorian opened his mouth to respond but Taiven immediately stopped him.

"Don't you try and bewitch me with your honeyed words," she said in mock outrage. "I bet you tell them to every girl you pursue."

"But I haven't even said anything yet," Zorian pointed out. "Really, I have no intention of justifying myself to you. Based on what you just told me about your dating experiences, you went to a lot more dates than I have. You heartbreaker."

They kept talking and meandering through the streets for a while longer, until eventually the conversation wound down and they both seemed to reach an unspoken agreement that it was getting late and that it was time for the date to end. Zorian couldn't help but get progressively quieter and more contemplative as the date grew to a close.

They had been walking in silence for several minutes when Taiven decided to speak up again.

"What's wrong?" Taiven asked. "Why did you get so depressed all of a sudden? Was it something I said?"

"Hm?" Zorian said, broken out of his reverie. "No, no. It's not you. I'm just thinking. It's... well, it's probably for the best if I don't tell you."

“Zorian, don’t make me hit you,” she said warily.

“Fine, if you insist...” Zorian said, giving her an awkward chuckle. “I was just thinking how utterly depressing it is that you will not remember anything that happened tonight in future restarts. We cleared the air between us, enjoyed a wonderful evening... and none of that will matter when the loop resets again. You will revert to the same suspicious, borderline hostile Taiven that I get at the start of every restart. It takes half of each restart just to convince you the time loop is real and that I haven’t been lying to you since I met you or been replaced by an imposter, nevermind anything else.”

Taiven winced, looking away guiltily.

“No, don’t feel guilty,” Zorian told her, shaking his head. “It’s a perfectly reasonable reaction. It’s one thing for old, experienced mages like Xvim, Alanic and Daimen to believe in the time loop. They’ve dealt with many complicated situations in their life and experienced plenty of strange magic. People like you and me? Well... did you know I spent the first six restarts going to classes like everything was just fine, hoping everything would return to normal if I just kept my head down and behaved like usual?”

Taiven gave him a surprised look.

“Yes, I know,” Zorian nodded. “It’s kind of stupid, but that’s what I did. Your reaction is pretty good, all things considered. It’s just that I really like how this turned out, and yet... I realize this will probably forever remain an empty memory in my head. I can’t replicate the chain of events that led to this in the real world. I’m not even sure I can replicate it in future restarts. So I guess I’m just trying to figure out what I should do about this in the future.”

A short, awkward silence descended on the scene, causing Zorian to wince a little inside at his own poor timing. *Why did he insist on telling her this now? He just couldn’t let things end on a positive note, could he?*

“Sorry,” he said quietly.

He suddenly felt like he could understand some of Zach’s attitude towards people around them. Was this why Zach no longer bothered to actively befriend any of their classmates or friendly strangers, even though he clearly used to do so extensively in the past? The way Zorian was feeling this evening... perhaps this was how Zach felt all the time during his earlier years? Making friends and experiencing life changing moments with them over and over again, only for the other party to forget all about it in the next restart...

“Don’t be sorry,” Taiven said. “What are friends for if they can’t even listen to you whine from time to time? Besides, it was a fun evening. One moment of depressing seriousness isn’t going to ruin it.”

Eventually they reached a crossroads where their paths separated and stopped. Zorian wracked his head for a moment, trying to figure out what was the appropriate way to end the date. They weren’t actually romantically involved, after all.

“So... I guess this is it,” he eventually said lamely.

“I guess it is,” Taiven agreed, equally lamely.

After a second of hesitation, with neither of them making a move to leave, Taiven spoke up again.

“Hey,” she suddenly said. “So, I know you said you were totally over me... and I totally respect that! But just in case you ever change your mind about that, you should really work on your body a little.”

“What?” Zorian asked, surprised.

“You know. Start running and exercising. Pick up some kind of physically intensive outdoor hobby. Put on some muscle,” she said. “I’m not saying you stand no chance otherwise, but...”

Zorian huffed at her, torn between amusement and exasperation. “But it would do wonders to make you see me as relationship material, right?” he surmised. Taiven nodded. “Fair enough. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Well. Taiven’s preferences in men aside, he *had* been rather annoyed with his lack of endurance lately. It made things more difficult than they needed to be and forced him to constantly drink potions just to keep up with Zach and others. It wasn’t a huge issue in the time loop, but such an extensive use of potions was inadvisable in the long term. Once he was out of the time loop, he’d probably end up working on his physique on his own initiative, just so he could maintain the sort of pace he was used to by now...

In any case, this was the end of their evening together. After saying their goodbyes, both of them went their separate ways.

Zorian deliberately took the scenic route back to Imaya’s place, consumed in his own thoughts and in no hurry to get back to sleep.

- break -

Simulacrum number two, stationed in Koth, was pretty pleased with how things were going.

Being stationed in Koth was usually a rather boring task, since it meant being stranded in an alien land whose language and writing he did not understand. He couldn’t read any of the local books, he couldn’t engage in casual conversations with people and he couldn’t cast any spells

without good reason.

This time, however, he was living in the Taramatula estate. The Taramatula knew very well he was just a simulacrum, but this didn't seem to bother them much. They treated him just as well as they did the real Zorian – they gave him a room to sleep in, a teacher to help him master the local language, and access to things like paper and building materials for his research.

Plus, there was Torun and Kirma, Daimen's two teammates who were currently trapped in the Taramatula estate. Perhaps because they currently had nothing better to do and were bored out of their minds, or maybe because the original really left an impression on them, but both of them proved very receptive to the simulacrum's offer of magic exchange.

Kirma was the more conventional of the two. Although Zorian had never seen divinations being used in such a way before he'd met her, she claimed she was using pretty standard magic that could be acquired from 'practically anywhere'. Even her flower-shaped divination aid was simply something she had commissioned from a professional artificer, not something she had made herself. Thus, she didn't feel much need to keep her methods secret. In exchange for the many rare and exotic spells that Zorian had acquired in the time loop, she was entirely willing to show him some tricks of her trade and give him guidance on how best to develop his divination skills.

In addition, she gave him a list of people to talk to in case he wanted to pursue a career in the field, completely unprompted by the simulacrum. He suspected she had some kind of deal with these people to send young talents their way, but he decided to give them a visit in one of the future restarts anyway.

As for Torun, he was pursuing a very rare and exotic field of magic that involved extracting and preserving organs of magical creatures and then using specialized control spells to turn them into something of an extension of the caster. It was not a popular field of study, both due to having been created relatively recently and because it existed in something of a legal limbo in most places, so Torun was actually ecstatic when the simulacrum showed an interest in it. Most people considered his magic to be somewhat creepy and off-putting.

The simulacrum very much doubted the original would dive particularly deeply into the field. It would take a lot of time to get anywhere with it and it didn't provide anything they desperately needed. However, some of the spells and techniques Torun used to control and make use of his eyes could potentially be used to improve coordination between Zorian and his golems, or even Zorian and his simulacrum.

Of course, such developments were too general to be the cause of the simulacrum's current happiness with his situation. The truth was, he had recently dodged a huge bullet!

Mother and Father were coming to Koth, and someone had to pick them up and 'smuggle' them into the Taramatula estate. That someone was, of course, Daimen... but Daimen also insisted that Zorian accompany him in this task. He wouldn't budge on this in the slightest, stubbornly insisting it was Zorian's family duty to accompany him to pick up their parents.

Sometimes it was good to be just a simulacrum. While the original had to explain to Mother and Father what he was doing in Koth, he was told instead to stay hidden from them at all times in order to minimize the amount of necessary explanations. An order he was only too happy to obey.

He was currently safely sequestered in the corner of the Taramatula library (of course the estate had its own library), humming a discordant tune to himself and reading a children's book in an attempt to hone his ability to read the local writing. Sadly, language skills were one of those things that were almost impossible for him to transfer to the original in any meaningful manner, so this was something done more for his own amusement than any long-term gain.

As some point Orissa had also entered the room, but he paid little heed to that, giving her a short greeting and then getting back to his book. He had monopolized one of the three tables in the room, stacking it full of books that he judged to be relatively easy to understand, but that still left plenty of space for her to work with. He didn't react even when she looked over his shoulder to see what he was reading. He wasn't ashamed of his choice of reading in the slightest.

Everybody had to start somewhere. Plus, the book had pretty pictures.

However, Orissa didn't just pick up a book from the library and leave, like the simulacrum expected her to. Instead she fetched a chair from a nearby empty table and sat down next to him.

"Yes?" he asked, curious. It was unusual for Orissa to deliberately seek him out like this, to say the least. Aside from that one time when she invited the original for a discussion via Daimen, she had been quite reserved.

"I'm worried," she said simply. "Daimen and your... other self should be back in a few hours."

"Ah," the simulacrum said, suddenly understanding what this was about. "You're worried about Mother and Father coming here."

"Yes," she confirmed. "I know I'm being rude here, but I was wondering if you could tell me a little about your parents."

"Me?" the simulacrum asked incredulously.

"I was told simulacra retain most of the memory of the original," Orissa said blandly.

"You know that wasn't my point," the simulacrum complained. Orissa smiled faintly at him. "I mean, the original doesn't exactly have the best relationship with the rest of his family. What could I possibly tell you that Daimen hadn't already?"

"Daimen got really evasive about his parents once it became obvious they don't approve of our marriage," Orissa said, shaking her head. "He says I shouldn't worry, that he'll handle it, but how can I possibly not worry? He clearly thinks the world of them and here they are, coming all the way to another continent to talk him out of marrying me."

"This will probably sound a little flippant, but there's probably no need for you to worry so much over this," the simulacrum told her. "He's their darling genius son. Whatever he wants, he's going to get it. It's been that way since forever."

"It would still mean a lot to me if you could tell me a little about them before they arrive," Orissa insisted.

Simulacrum number two gave her a contemplative look. Truthfully, he wasn't sure if telling her about Mother and Father would be a good idea. His depiction of them would no doubt be really negative, and might end up worsening tensions between his parents and Orissa as a result. That probably wasn't in anyone's interest, least of all Orissa's.

"You're basically asking me to stick my hand into the fire, here," the simulacrum said.

"I guess I am," she admitted.

"Then let me ask you something first," the simulacrum said. "Are you interested in Daimen only because of his mind magic bloodline thingy?"

He expected Orissa to be either shocked at the question or explode with outrage. He did not expect her to laugh at him.

"What, are you worried I'm taking advantage of your big brother?" she asked with a grin.

"Just a little," the simulacrum admitted. "He's an empath, so he should be hard to fool... but you're a talented mind mage from a family specializing in mind magic. Anything is possible."

"And here Daimen thinks you hate him," Orissa said with a sigh. "To answer your question... it's definitely not irrelevant. I love him, but if he didn't have this innate mind magic affinity of his, I probably would not choose to marry him. I love my family too, and I need to keep their interests in mind. However, do you honestly think your brother is marrying me purely for love?"

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The simulacrum gave her a surprised look.

"By marrying me, he is marrying into nobility and wealth. It's not his only concern, but it's hardly irrelevant. If I was a poor orphan, or even just a well-to-do middle-class girl, he would have never agreed to marry me. So no, I don't think I'm taking advantage of him. We both have our ambitions. It's just fortunate that we can fulfil them with someone we actually like."

"Huh," the simulacrum said thoughtfully.

After a few seconds of silence, Orissa spoke up again.

"So can I get an answer to *my* question, then?" she asked.

"Sure," the simulacrum shrugged. "So, the first thing you should know about our parents is that they're very driven and ambitious people. Our father, Andir Kazinski, was the fourth son of a wealthy farmer. Our mother, Cikan Kazinski, was the only daughter of one of the few remaining witches, who raised her alone after her husband left her. Father knew that as a fourth son, he would never inherit anything. Thus, when he was 15 years old, he managed to procure a small loan from his father and left home to open his own business. He married our mother less than a year later. Over the years, they had turned that small initial business into a local power that has made them quite wealthy and respected. Well, not by your standards, but..."

"It's impressive," Orissa nodded. "They reached surprising heights from such humble roots. That must have taken a lot of work."

"They did work very hard to get where they are," the simulacrum agreed. He had his disagreements with Mother and Father, but they had very much earned their wealth and status. Of course, their success involved just as much scheming as it did hard work, but he was pretty sure Orissa understood that part without him having to spell it out. "But while such attitude brought them success, it does have some consequences. Bluntly put, they view almost everything through the prism of how it will reflect on the family reputation and finances. This marriage between you and Daimen... even if Mother and Father thought this was a good thing for Daimen—"

"That's it! That's what I've been missing all this time! They don't see the benefit for the family as a whole!" Orissa exclaimed suddenly. "Of course. After putting so much money and effort into Daimen, they naturally expect to see some kind of return for their trouble. Ah... we'll continue this later, okay? I need to make some arrangements."

The simulacrum watched, surprised and amused, as Orissa hurriedly left the library. He wasn't entirely sure what happened there, but it would seem that Orissa didn't actually perceive his parents' attitude as wrong. Considering the sort of background she comes from and her explanation about how her marriage with Daimen came to be... he probably shouldn't be surprised.

"Well, at least now I know why Daimen likes her so much," simulacrum mused quietly to himself. "She's like a younger version of Mother!"

Sometimes life really is a comedy.”

- break -

In normal circumstances, picking up Mother and Father from Jasuka harbor and bringing them to the Taramatula estate would have been a simple matter. Now that Daimen was under such intense scrutiny, however, this became a huge, complicated endeavor. The Taramatula mobilized a large portion of their manpower to disrupt and distract surveillance operations that kept an eye on Daimen’s movements. When Daimen and Zorian finally left the estate, five other decoy teams, shapeshifted in their likeness, also left at the same time to muddy the water further. Then, all six teams started teleporting around randomly for a while, before each of them made their way to a completely different city.

Despite all these preparations, the whole plan would have surely failed if Daimen had really gone to pick up Mother and Father during this trip. In reality, the whole operation was simply a giant distraction. Its main purpose was to mask the fact that Zorian had created a third simulacrum while they were teleporting around randomly through Koth and then sent it away to hide while they drew everyone’s attention. When Daimen and Zorian returned to the Taramatula estate, Zorian’s brand new simulacrum slowly made his way to Jasuka and then opened a hidden gate between the city and the estate, allowing Daimen to enter and leave the city too quickly for anyone to really intercept him.

Naturally, this meant that Zorian’s involvement was absolutely crucial for the operation’s success. If it weren’t for that, Zorian would have never agreed to take part in it, no matter how much Daimen begged and threatened. How the hell was he supposed to explain his presence in Koth to Mother and Father? No matter how poor their knowledge of magic was, they would surely recognize dimensional gates and simulacra as high-level magic that should be way beyond him.

“Even if you hadn’t come with me, they would have still realized you were in Koth,” Daimen told him. “You are too well known among the Taramatula by now. Someone would have surely let them know about you, whether intentionally or accidentally.”

“Maybe, but that wouldn’t have been *my* problem,” Zorian countered. “I’d be back in Cyoria, and it would be your job to figure out an explanation that made sense and deal with their attitude.”

Daimen scowled at him, saying nothing.

In any case, the initial meeting was much calmer and more subdued than Zorian expected. The steam ship that carried their parents languidly entered Jasuka harbor and then disgorged an endless stream of passengers and cargo, temporarily creating a miniature pandemonium as the throng of disembarking people and dockworkers shouted and pushed at one another. By the time Daimen and Zorian had found Mother and Father, they already looked absolutely exhausted and were in no mood to start a fight. They were surprised to see Zorian in Koth, of course, but mostly they were glad to have an extra person help out with the luggage and whatnot.

“Aren’t you supposed to watch Kirielle?” Mother asked him, frowning.

“I am,” Zorian said. “I’m just here to pick you up. I’ll be back in Cyoria before nightfall.”

“How?” Father asked. “I thought no one could teleport over such distances. And teleportation is supposed to be advanced magic, anyway.”

“It’s a secret,” Zorian simply said.

Father made an indecipherable hum and said nothing further.

“Whatever it is, I hope you can use the same method to send us home when the time comes,” Mother said, sounding worn and tired. “Ship travel doesn’t agree with me. I think I lost a whole year of my life getting here. It would be great if we could avoid boarding a ship for the return trip.”

And that was it. Nothing more was spoken about Zorian’s presence. Especially since, when the group had finally stepped through the dimensional gate and entered the Taramatula estate, they were greeted by Orissa and the rest of the Taramatula delegation. At that point, the mystery of Zorian’s presence on another continent was the furthest thing from their minds.

Naturally, Mother and Father were full of smiles and compliments. The tiredness they displayed before Daimen and Zorian seemed to instantly disappear and they busied themselves with handing out very expensive gifts and endlessly praising the thoughtfulness and generosity of their hosts. If Zorian hadn’t known in advance what their purpose for coming here was, he would have never guessed they disapproved of the marriage.

Two days passed. Mother and Father slowly settled into the Taramatula estate. Zorian tried to stay away from the place as much as possible, not wanting to get tangled into Daimen’s mess too much, and the simulacrum he had left in the estate did the same. As such, he didn’t really know how their attempts to talk Daimen out of the marriage were progressing. He had his own things to worry about. Now that he had a simulacrum outside the Taramatula estate, he hurriedly arranged for a group of Silent Doorway Adepts to be transported to Koth, next to one of the local Bakora Gates.

Happily, the operation to acquire the gate key was a full success. Both Zorian and the Silent Doorway Adepts were ecstatic about this. For the aranea, this gate key represented access to a virgin territory awash with opportunities. For Zorian, it was a way to ensuring easy access to Koth without having to rely on Daimen. Plus, he suspected that having this key would make it much, *much* easier to convince the Silent Doorway Adepts to cooperate with him in future restarts.

Now, however, Zorian was back in the Taramatula estate. His parents had specifically called for him to come see them. In all honesty, Zorian had totally expected this to happen. They had taken his presence in Koth in stride when they had first come, but now that they had time to rest, talk

with people and think about things, they no doubt realized there was something very much off about him. The only thing he hadn't been certain of was whether the restart would have come to an end before this happened.

He was currently standing in one of Taramatula meeting rooms, Father and Mother standing in front of him. Originally, Daimen had wanted to be present for the talk as well, but they had shooed him away, insisting this was a 'private talk'. That had been kind of amusing. It was not often that they treated their favorite son in such fashion. Apparently, whatever 'arrangements' Orissa did were insufficient, and they still opposed the marriage. And since Daimen stubbornly refused to give up on the idea, they were currently not terribly fond of him.

"We spoke with Daimen about you," Mother said suddenly.

She had a complex, worried look on her face, as if she was having trouble deciding how to handle this. Father, on the other hand, stayed silent and stony-faced, his emotions indecipherable.

"Yes?" Zorian responded blandly.

"He tells us you're incredibly powerful and competent. Far more than you let on," she said.

"True," Zorian admitted. He didn't see the point of hiding it. They already knew he could move across continents in a quick, reliable manner.

"But why would you keep something like that hidden from us?" Mother asked imploringly. "Having another genius in the family is a joyous thing. Surely you don't think we would have stood in your way?"

"Ah, you mean... like you're not standing in the way of Daimen's marriage?" Zorian asked innocently.

"That's something completely different!" Mother said, scowling at him. She quickly reined herself in, however. "And besides, we're *not* standing in Daimen's way. We're simply... trying to pull him back for taking a wrong turn. If he stubbornly refuses to heed our advice, we will reluctantly accept it, not sabotage his life in revenge."

"What she's saying," Father suddenly spoke up, "is that we already disagree with what you're doing with your life, so what's one disagreement more? You can just throw one of your juvenile hissy fits, just like you always do, and we'll grit our teeth and bear it because at the end of the day you're still our son. Just like we always do."

Zorian stretched his mouth into a thin line and gave Father a narrowed stare, but said nothing. Father simply stared back at him, as if daring him to say anything.

"Andir, honey, I thought we agreed I would be the one to talk," Mother sighed.

Father raised both of his hands in a gesture of surrender. He also gave her an exasperated look, but she had already turned back towards Zorian, ignoring him.

"What are you planning, Zorian?" Mother asked him bluntly.

"Nothing much," Zorian said. "I'm going to move out of the house immediately after I graduate. Maybe sooner. Open my own business, buy myself a house, things like that."

"You think running a business is easy?" Father challenged. Well, that didn't take long.

"I'm an amazing mage," Zorian said immodestly. "Even if I had the worst business sense in the world, I'd still be able to make enough for a living."

"But the family business—" Mother began.

"Not for all the money in the world," Zorian said, cutting her off.

A brief silence descended upon the scene as Mother and Father shared a long look between them.

"Oh!" Zorian said, suddenly remembering something. "I'll also take care of Kirielle."

This statement naturally caused both of them to give Zorian a look of surprise.

"What do you mean you'll take care of Kirielle?" Mother asked slowly. "Why would she need someone to take care of her?"

"Well, someone needs to teach her magic and nullify that stupid arranged marriage you prepared for her," Zorian said casually.

A look of intense, shocked outrage appeared on Mother's face. For a moment she seemed unable to process what she just heard, but then she outright exploded at him.

"You little brat!" she snapped at him agitatedly. "You have no idea what you're talking about!"

Weirdly, Father just laughed at the scene, shaking his head at nobody in particular. Zorian was mystified by this reaction, but decided to ignore it for now.

“The situation seems simple enough to my eyes,” Zorian countered, unperturbed by her outrage.

“In regards to living your life, we can humor you, but you have *no* right, no right at all to tell me how to raise my daughter!” Mother shouted angrily at him, stomping threateningly straight into his personal space. “You are way out of line! Andir, you tell him!”

“What, me?” Father said with a look of exaggerated surprise. “I thought we agreed you would be the one to talk to him?”

Mother gave him an angry, venomous look that promised later retribution, but didn’t press him further.

“You have no idea what’s in Kirielle’s best interest, Zorian,” Mother told him warningly. “Don’t stick your nose where it does not belong!”

“I’m afraid that, if I don’t get an actual explanation, I’m still going to go through with my idea,” Zorian told her.

“You can’t take a child from her parents, even if you’re her brother,” Mother told him angrily. “We can call the police!”

“But would you actually do so?” Zorian challenged. She shrank back a little. They both knew she wouldn’t. “Besides, I bet that marriage is of questionable legality to begin with.”

“The marriage is… negotiable,” Mother said, pacing around the room in agitation. “You’re making a mountain out of a molehill. It’s just an informal agreement, not a legally binding document. It’s not like we’d force Kirielle to go through it at all costs. But magic is *absolutely* off the table! She can never, under any circumstances be taught magic!”

“Why?” Zorian frowned.

“I’m trying to do her a favor!” Mother shouted, turning to face him again. “Don’t you know what her roots are? What my mother was?”

Zorian gave her an uncomprehending look. Her *mother*? What did her mother have to do with anything? He knew they didn’t get along well, but he never really heard anything too shocking about her. Besides, she had been dead for a while now.

“Wait,” he said. “Are you talking about—”

“She was a witch!” Mother said, preempting his conclusion. “She was a witch and she was so damned proud of that fact. She never let anyone forget it! Once, she even threatened she was going to poison the town well when a bunch of customers tried to get out of paying her for the potions she made them. You know, just like the witches of old were said to do when someone wronged them!”

Zorian winced.

“You have no idea what it’s like to be the daughter of a witch,” Mother continued. “A son is fine. Witches didn’t care about male children. Everyone knows this. They firmly believed that magic was transferred to the child through the womb, so only a daughter can continue the lineage.”

Zorian raised an eyebrow at her. Why would they—

“I don’t know why they believed what they did!” Mother said, as if reading his mind. “I never cared to know. I just wished she would shut up about witches and let me live some semblance of a normal life. But she never did, so everyone around me saw me as a soul-stealing, mind-ensnaring, poison-wielding witch-in-waiting. And if Kirielle learns magic, she’ll suffer the same fate.”

“Mother...” Zorian sighed.

“I was really lucky to marry your father,” Mother said.

“Well, you were a pretty fine catch yourself,” Father said, grinning. He had been silent while Mother ranted about her childhood frustrations, but apparently he now felt it was safe to throw in a comment or two.

Mother ignored him, though. She was probably still angry about his earlier quip about her being the designated speaker.

“My daughter won’t have to fear for her future and rely on luck to find a good husband. She won’t have people cross to the other side of the road when they see her or spreading vile slander about her completely unprovoked,” Mother continued. “Unlike my mother, I’ve done everything I can to distance myself from our family legacy. So long as she takes my example and stays well away from anything magic related, anyone that tries to start something will end up looking petty and paranoid. But if she starts learning magic, then everything will be *ruined*!”

“You don’t know that,” Zorian pointed out.

“Why take the risk?” Mother challenged. “Maybe if she married early, to a wealthy and respected husband... but you already said you are opposed to that, didn’t you? So where does that leave us?”

Zorian stared at her. This was the side of Mother that he had never really known before. Was this why she was so obsessed with family reputation and social position?

He looked at Father, but the man was uncharacteristically skittish. He just looked away, refusing to meet his eyes.

Though he didn't actually say anything, Zorian understood the message: he was on his own here. Kirielle was Mother's project, and he wasn't going to stick his nose in it unless he had to.

"What if Kirielle doesn't want to go along with your plan?" Zorian asked slowly.

"She's nine," Mother said. "She doesn't know what she wants."

"She's not always going to be nine, though," Zorian pointed out.

"Yes, well, we can continue this conversation when she gets older," she told him firmly. "You didn't start learning magic when you were nine, either."

She had a point there. In all honesty, he wasn't willing to push this matter further than this. He mostly just raised the issue to gauge her reaction to it. He hadn't expected this sort of response. On top of that, while Kirielle said she wanted to learn magic, she was also rather impatient and flighty. Who knew whether she was even capable of the discipline required to become a mage.

Besides, the most important thing was that the arranged marriage was apparently just an informal thing and not something his parents would push for at all costs. He couldn't claim with certainty that it would be a good idea to teach Kirielle magic, but he knew for a fact that she hated the arranged marriage thing.

"Right," Zorian said finally. "I'm not informed enough to make a decision here, so I'll withdraw for now."

"You're damn right you're going to withdraw!" she told him. She still sounded outraged but the anger was visibly draining out of her now that he was no longer challenging her. "What the hell made you think you have the right to give me parenting advice? Not even your father dares to tell me how to raise my daughter and you, an immature brat that has never even been with a woman, think you can tell me what to do. Why don't you make a daughter of your own if you think—"

This was going to take quite a while, wasn't it?

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Father staring at the scene and smiling faintly in schadenfreude.

Zorian sighed. Yes, this would *definitely* take a while.

- break -

"So, I discovered a new function of the orb," Zach said.

Zorian stopped working on the metal, flower-shaped construct on his bench and gave Zach a curious look.

"What do you mean you found a new function?" Zorian asked.

"I mean, one completely unrelated to its role as a mobile palace," Zach said, waving the orb in front of him. "Look. Take the orb and try this..."

It took a while for Zach to convey to Zorian what he had to do to activate this new function he discovered. After all, the way Zorian interacted with the orb was completely different from the way Zach did. Zach's way was more instinctive, almost automatic, whereas Zorian had to take the initiative and actively grope around for a way to interface with it.

Eventually, though, he succeeded. He connected with the orb in the new manner that Zach found and immediately found himself connected to... something. Some kind of empty space, maybe?

"Weird," Zorian eventually said.

"Yeah," Zach said. "I have no idea what this does, though."

"Neither do I," said Zorian after some tinkering. He handed the orb back to Zach. "Keep tinkering with it. You'll probably have more luck with it than I would."

Besides, Zach had far more free time to tinker with the orb than Zorian did. The restart was nearing its end and there were so many things that needed to be done...

- break -

The restart was almost over. Overall, Zorian would have described it as a highly productive one.

The study of the gate stabilization frame they had stolen from the Ibasan base yielded a lot more results than Zorian expected. He now knew that some very unconventional methods had been used while making the gate – instead of carving the spell formula necessary for the operation of the frame, the Ibasans had embedded them directly into the frame in the form of numerous magic threads. The frame literally had to be peeled away, layer by layer, in order for researchers to record the layout of the threads and attempt to decipher it. Sadly, though they had invited many capable researchers on the project, they had failed to make sense of how the frame worked. Perhaps if the gate frame was still actively maintaining a dimensional passage, but as it was? Not a chance...

Still, it was a start. A lot of important groundwork had been done, and future analysis of the gate should go much faster. It was probably good that they didn't manage to take an active gate in this restart – if they did, they would no doubt shy away from simply taking it apart like they ended up doing here, and several crucial insights would never have been made.

The interrogation of Sudomir was also a success. Granted, the man knew so many important things that he and Alanic had already agreed to keep kidnapping him in future restarts as well, but even his current gains were considerable. For instance, Zorian had finally found out what the deal was behind his strange transformations.

While Sudomir was an extremely talented warder and soul mage, and dabbled in lots of other magics as well, he was not terribly impressive as a fighter. Sudomir was well aware of this, and thus decided to close that vulnerability by becoming a shifter.

But he was overconfident and reached far beyond his grasp. Rather than picking one specific magical creature to fuse his soul with, he decided to splice up several magical creatures into some kind of unholy abomination that *theoretically* combined the best features of all of them... and then fused with that.

According to Alanic, it was incredible that the ritual didn't end up turning him utterly insane or a quivering mass of unstable flesh right from the get-go. As it was, the shifter ritual he designed was only a partial failure – the transformation was almost uncontrollable, forcing him to keep it suppressed at all times. But whenever he was under a lot of stress or in emotionally charged situations, his control inevitably started to slip, warping his mind...

Still, while the shifter ritual was a failure in many ways, it did give him his signature resilience. One of the creatures he used in crafting his initial abomination was a troll, and the other a dragon. The other three were similarly hard to kill. Zorian shuddered to think what would happen if he were allowed to completely transform into his composite form.

Another thing they found out from Sudomir was that there were some people related to the Cult of the World Dragon that they had missed thus far when investigating the invaders. This was because they technically weren't cultists. In fact, they were purposely kept separated from known cultists as much as possible, so they would look as clean as possible in case somebody investigated them. This included a fair number of lawyers, low-level politicians and even a respected judge. There was no time left to really check these people out, and Zorian suspected they weren't too important for understanding the invasion, but he made a mental note to investigate them anyway. Just for the sake of being thorough.

Eventually the day of the summer festival came... and no attack occurred. The Ibasans continued evacuating, the Cult of the World Dragon never made a move, and the primordial trapped in the Hole was never released.

But the restart ended right on schedule anyway, and Zorian woke up in Cirin, with Kirielle wishing him a good morning...

73. Plodding Ahead

Chapter 073

Plodding Ahead

Deep in the jungles of Koth, there was a large, circular hole in the ground that led to a narrow vertical shaft and a pool of greenish water at the bottom. Although the place was quite beautiful, very few people could come here to admire it. It was, after all, absolutely teeming with chameleon drakes.

Naturally, this was the cenote where they had recovered the orb of the first emperors in the previous restart. Zach and Zorian stood on the edge of the cenote, observing the chameleon drakes milling around the place and discussing how to go about recovering the orb this time around. Occasionally a group of chameleon drakes wandered past them or scrutinized their location, but between their cloaking spells and Zorian's ability to reach into their minds and edit their senses and memories, there was little chance of them being discovered.

"So how are we doing this?" Zach asked. "Do you think you can sneak us in?"

Zorian stared at the cenote for a second before shaking his head. The drakes inside the cenote tended to clump together in groups of five or more, and the orb cave seemed to be the place that held the largest group.

"It's hard enough to keep the drakes from noticing us when it's just one or two," Zorian said sadly. "Those four independently moving eyes make their senses quite unlike humans. Figuring out how to fool their senses from moment to moment is too tiresome for me to do it on large groups."

Zach didn't seem surprised by this. He seemed to be getting more familiar with the limitations of Zorian's mind magic. "Then we should just go in, spells blazing, then?" he offered. "I mean, why complicate things? We can take them, I'm sure of it."

"I'd rather not fight a swarm of chameleon drakes today," Zorian said. "How about this? You move back from the cenote a little and attack them. If their previous reaction is any indication, they should all swarm out to deal with you. When they do, I will teleport into the orb cave, claim it, then teleport out. Even if they leave behind a few guards, these will be no match for me."

"And what if your attempts to claim the orb cause the hydra to appear?" Zach said with a frown. "I don't want to be mean, but your fighting skills..."

"I'm no match for that thing, I know," Zorian said, nodding. "I don't have to actually fight it, though. I can always just flee if it appears. I'm good enough to survive its assault for the few seconds it takes to cast the teleport spell. Besides, I suspect the hydra can't actually exit the pocket dimension inside the orb cave itself. It's just too big. The last time it emerged from the lake at the bottom of the cenote, and I suspect this time it will be no different."

"But if you snatch the orb and leave the cave, won't the hydra have plenty of space near you to teleport itself in?" Zach asked.

Uhh... damn. He hadn't thought of that.

"And even if the hydra doesn't react immediately, simply having it inside makes the orb into a massive time bomb. The monster can clearly exit the orb whenever it wishes. What if we bring the orb to Cyoria and the hydra decides to enter the city while we're sleeping or otherwise distracted? Imagine the damage it could do. If it decides not to react when we claim the orb, it might be a good idea to deliberately lure it out before we bring the orb to a populated area."

They decided to try Zorian's idea anyway. The execution turned out to be a little more complicated than Zorian had thought it would be. Apparently Zach alone was not threatening enough to whip the entire group of chameleon drakes into a frenzy and make them leave their lair. After all, he was just one man. He might have been ungodly powerful, but that wasn't something that could be gleaned at first sight. Thus, the drakes initially simply sent a group of five young drakes to deal with him. Of course, when Zach effortlessly slaughtered those five, the entire cenote grew more agitated... but not agitated enough to rush out and swarm him. They felt pretty safe in their cenote base, so they just massed themselves together and decided to wait and see if Zach would actually dare attack them in their home. Inconveniently for Zorian, they picked the orb cave as their rallying point.

Thankfully, when Zach started to launch artillery spells at the cenote, they decided they couldn't afford to turtle up like that. They rushed out to try and stop him, leaving only a handful of guards behind. Zorian quickly teleported in, claimed the orb and teleported out.

Mission accomplished. As for the hydra, it never showed up. Not when Zorian claimed the orb and not when Zach and Zorian waited for several hours in the middle of the jungle to see if it would eventually decide to emerge. Zorian didn't know what to think about that. On one hand, this meant they didn't have to fight a giant, teleporting, godtouched hydra. On the other hand, it was just like Zach said earlier – this meant that said hydra could pop out of the orb when they least expected it and ruin the entire restart.

"We really need to figure out how to actually enter the damn orb," Zach said unhappily, turning the orb idly in his hands.

"We need to consider the possibility that the orb simply doesn't have that kind of ability built into it," Zorian told him, staring at the orb in Zach's hands in a speculative manner. "Teleportation magic is tricky to make into magic items. There are recall rods that can teleport a person to a pre-determined point and teleport platforms that can allow teleportation between fixed points, but anything more sophisticated requires a living caster."

It might be that the previous owners of the orb used some kind of specialized spell to enter and leave the orb dimension.”

“Lovely,” Zach said, throwing the orb into the air and triggering its deployment mechanism. The orb distorted and then collapsed inward with a soft whooshing sound. In a flash it was gone, no visible trace of its presence anywhere. “That means either searching for an obscure teleportation spell or creating one from scratch. That could take forever. As if we didn’t have enough time sinks already...”

He reclaimed the orb, causing it to pop back to existence again, and then deployed it again immediately afterwards.

“If you are right, though, then this is really poor design,” Zach continued. “Why the hell would you not include a way in when making something like this? It shouldn’t be that hard to place a teleport platform, recall stone or something similar inside. Then, when the owner of the orb commands it to, it pulls the person inside and deposits them there. That’s a viable method, no?”

He reclaimed and then deployed the orb again.

“It is,” Zorian agreed. “And maybe there really was such a place inside the orb, once. But teleport platforms and recall stones don’t last all that long without regular maintenance. Not for centuries, at least. And there is a chance that something inside actively broke the mechanism. Say, a giant rampaging hydra...”

“I didn’t think of that,” Zach scowled, reclaiming the orb again. “We just don’t—”

When Zach deployed the orb the fourth time, there was a much louder whooshing sound than usual and the two of them suddenly found themselves standing next to a gigantic, pissed-off hydra. It immediately pounced on them with an unearthly roar.

Needless to say, the next few minutes were... somewhat hectic.

- break -

Defeating the hydra took longer than it had the last time they fought, but the fact they didn’t have to worry about Daimen and his men dying actually made the battle easier. Things were a little hairy in the beginning, when the hydra had caught them off-guard, but after that they just kept themselves out of the hydra’s reach and kept hammering away at it until it decided the situation was hopeless and fled into the jungle. That took hours to do, though, because Zach had already reclaimed the orb by that point and the hydra really didn’t like that. It didn’t help that Zorian was interested in how its multi-part mind worked and thus spent most of the battle studying it instead of fighting it for real.

They didn’t chase after it to finish it off. Having it out of the orb was enough for them. They did spend a lot of time discussing what happened, though, and came to a conclusion that it was no accident that the hydra had only emerged after Zach had deployed the orb. It was likely that the hydra couldn’t exit the orb while it was in its portable form and had to wait for Zach to deploy the orb before it could make the attempt. That, in turn, suggested that perhaps entering the orb without deploying it was similarly impossible... which would make their previous method of studying the orb while holding it in their hands a somewhat wrong-headed method of finding the entrance.

Regardless, after claiming the orb and chasing off the hydra that emerged from it, Zach and Zorian returned to their current base in Koth – the small aranean base that the Silent Doorway Adepts had established around the local Bakora gate.

Zorian’s previous suspicion that the Silent Doorway Adepts would get friendlier and more open to his arguments if he brought them a functional gate address to Koth turned out to be true beyond his wildest dreams. The aranea went absolutely crazy once they tried it out and confirmed it worked. It took little more than four days for him to convince them that the time loop was real and that they should work with him, which was less than half of what it was before. He still sent a simulacrum on a slow journey to Koth, though, both because he didn’t want to put all his eggs in one basket and because he needed it to establish a telepathic relay link to Koth by physically placing relay stones along the way.

Still, he was extremely pleased that he managed to get this deal with the Silent Doorway Adepts working. It wasn’t absolutely crucial for reaching Koth, but it would be absolutely necessary when they decided to retrieve the piece of the key that was lost in Blantyre. Blantyre didn’t have any notable human civilizations, meaning that ships traveling there were extremely rare. There was no convenient archipelago to serve as a bridge between continents and allow island hopping, so teleporting there was out of the question. The seas and coasts were wild and untamed, full of dangerous monsters and natural danger zones. Zorian had spoken to Daimen about it, and the conclusion was that it was theoretically possible for them to reach Blantyre within the span of a month... but only just. They would have to fully dedicate an entire restart for the task, and they would be left with a measly handful of days to explore Blantyre before the restart ended.

Thankfully, Blantyre was seeded full of Bakora Gates. In fact, they were seeded much more densely there, as if whatever power that had made the gates originated from that continent. This was curious because, as far as anyone knew, humanity had never really lived there in the past. Scholars often quarreled about what this meant, but Zorian didn’t really care about those arguments – all he cared about was that the Bakora gate network was pretty much the only viable method he had of reaching Blantyre in a timely manner. The fact that one of the imperial artifacts was lost in Blantyre was one of the major worries he had about their chances to collect the entire Key. Now that he knew he could potentially reach the continent in as little as four days if he acquired the correct gate address, it was like a giant rock was lifted off his shoulders. Maybe they really had a chance of doing this...

“What about your brother?” Zach suddenly asked. “Didn’t you hand him a notebook full of descriptions from our previous restart? Surely he left himself information about where the orb is.”

“He did, but I already told him we would be claiming it for ourselves,” Zorian said.

"Ha. He must have loved *that*," Zach said, smiling at Zorian slightly.

"Yeah, he wasn't happy about that," Zorian nodded. "He wasn't *too* bitter, though. He knows he can't handle the hydra without our help. He'd need more than a month just to find, vet and organize the extra mercenaries he'd have to hire to successfully retrieve the orb. He did make me promise I would let him have the orb once we were out of the time loop, though."

"I guess that's fair," Zach shrugged. "I mean, I've really taken a liking to this thing, but he does sort of have a legitimate claim on it, and he's your brother to boot. You owe me, though."

"I owe you?" Zorian said, raising his eyebrow at him. "Owe you what?"

"Another portable palace like this, of course," said Zach, waving the orb in front of Zorian's face. "You'll be trying to get crazy good at pocket dimensions soon, no? Surely, a measly little pocket dimension like this is no big deal."

'Measly', he says. Information about pocket dimension creation was scarce, but what Zorian had found suggested that this orb was near the top end of what was possible to achieve. There were examples of bigger hidden worlds, but not many.

"Correction," Zorian said blandly. "*We'll* be trying to get crazy good at pocket dimensions soon. Are you seriously telling me you'll pass by the opportunity to learn how to create one?"

"I'd never pass up the opportunity to learn something so useful," Zach said with a grin. "But you're the one who's good at creating things, while I am more the kind of guy that breaks them. Plus, we've already established that you owe me. I've magnanimously decided to let your brother claim the orb outside the time loop as a favor to you. As recompense, you need to make another portable palace for me when we finally get out."

"We'll talk about that later, when we find out how feasible the idea actually is," Zorian told him lightly. "However, I can tell you right now that you're never getting an actual palace."

"Whaaat?" Zach whined. "Why not?"

"Because pocket dimensions don't create matter," Zorian told him. He pointed at the orb in Zach's hands. "If you want them to contain a piece of land like that one does, you basically have to 'steal' it by enclosing an actual place into it during the creation process. So if you want a portable palace... well, you first need to *build* the palace in question. Putting aside the actual costs of such a project, which are bound to be astronomical, I just don't have the necessary skills to design and build a palace."

"Oh," Zach said. "Yeah, that makes sense, I guess."

"Now, if you want a tastefully hollowed out rock or a nice wooden cottage... that I can definitely help you with," Zorian told him. "Hell, I might even be able to fit in some actual glass windows if you want me to be extravagant!"

That triggered a lengthy argument about what kind of building would be possible for a single mage to build on his own, using only natural materials. The argument eventually culminated into a building competition where both Zach and Zorian did their best to construct the most luxurious residence they could with the materials they had on hand.

If any jungle explorer were to stumble upon the site several hours later, they would probably be baffled by the series of towers, ziggurats and blocky houses scattered throughout the entire region. Alas, this part of the jungle was very remote and no such explorer would ever come before the restart ended.

The bats and other animals that moved into the buildings after a few days definitely appreciated their new accommodations, though.

- break -

Zach and Zorian floated in the black void. The black sky that surrounded them was omnidirectional and featureless, containing only one point of interest – a roughly humanoid entity with softly glowing eyes. The Guardian of the Threshold.

It had been a while since they visited this place. They tried not to interact with the Guardian too much, lest they accidentally trigger some kind of safeguard and it realized there were two Controllers inside the time loop and that it should do something about that. However, now that they'd gotten their hands on a piece of the Key, it only made sense for them to come and visit the Sovereign Gate to see how it would react.

"Welcome, Controller," the Guardian said, its voice just as soft and devoid of emotion as Zorian remembered it to be. The entity gave no indication it remembered their last visit to this place.

"We have questions for you," Zach told the Guardian bluntly.

"I will do my best to answer them," the Guardian agreed placidly.

They didn't ask it about the orb immediately. Instead, they first confirmed the number of restarts they had until the time loop collapsed, just in case. They had 42 left, exactly as it should be. After that Zorian summoned a list of questions the two of them had prepared for the Guardian over the previous restarts, concerning Red Robe, the mechanics of the time loop and so on.

They didn't get anywhere with that, of course. The Guardian either didn't know how to help them or flat out refused to do so when they asked

things they weren't 'authorized' to know. They had expected that, but it was still frustrating to be foiled so thoroughly. In any case, once they had exhausted their prepared list of questions, they finally moved onto to the main purpose of this visit.

"Guardian, can you tell us more about the Key now?" Zorian asked.

"To find out about the Key, please bring me the Key for inspection," the Guardian told him.

"Yes, yes... in order to find out about the Key, we must first have the Key. A perfectly logical requirement," Zach said, rolling his eyes. "But we're not here for that. Our question is this: if we bring you a single piece of the Key, does that count for something? Do we get to ask you questions about it?"

"Having only one piece of the Key will result in information about that part only," the Guardian noted.

"That's fine," Zach said dismissively. "We brought you one of the pieces, so why don't you take a look?"

"I do not see it," the Guardian told him immediately. "Are you sure you have connected it to the control room properly?"

"Wait, we have to do *what*?" Zach asked incredulously.

As it turned out, simply having the pieces of the Key on them when they connected to the Sovereign Gate wasn't enough. The Guardian neither knew nor cared what they had on their person when they entered this void it inhabited. Instead, it was up to Zach and Zorian to connect the orb to the Sovereign Gate so the Guardian could inspect it and confirm its authenticity.

How were they supposed to do that? The Guardian was naturally of no help whatsoever. It took them two hours of frustrated tinkering before they realized they had to use their marker as a sort of bridge, simultaneously connecting it to both the Sovereign Gate and the orb. Only then did the Guardian recognize it.

Support creative writers by reading their stories on Royal Road, not stolen versions.

"This is indeed a legitimate piece of the Key," the Guardian decided.

"Finally," Zach huffed. "So what does this get us?"

"Nothing on its own," the Guardian responded. "You need the entire key to unlock higher authorization than you have now. However, you can now ask me for information about it like you wanted earlier. Keep in mind that I have no knowledge of the object's mundane functions. I can only give you information about it as it relates to the time loop."

"So if we asked you about the pocket dimension contained in the orb..." began Zorian.

"I couldn't help you," the Guardian said. "I didn't even know there was a pocket dimension encapsulated within the Key piece until you told me."

There was a second of silence as both Zach and Zorian frowned at the information. This was not completely unexpected. It had been very obvious during their previous visit that the Guardian did not perceive the world in the same way humans did and often just plain disregarded things not related to its job. Still, this was disappointing to hear.

"Alright," said Zach eventually. "So what can you tell us about the orb, then? What are its capabilities as it relates to the time loop?"

"It contains a memory bank that the Controller can use to store and organize their important memories across restarts," the Guardian said.

Wait, what? Zach and Zorian shared a shocked glance, not having expected this at all.

"A memory bank..." Zorian repeated slowly.

"Yes," the Guardian confirmed. "You should be able to sense an empty space inside if you focus on the Key piece correctly. Simply focus on the memories you want to store in the bank and push them inside. Once inside, they will persist from restart to restart and be available for viewing at any time, unless you choose to delete them at some point. Keep in mind that this ability only exists inside the time loop – once you leave and this reality permanently collapses, all of the memories you stored inside the Key piece will be similarly destroyed. Make sure to refresh on anything important you placed there before you leave."

There was a brief silence as the two of them digested this information.

"I guess we now know what that mysterious empty space inside the orb was," Zorian finally said.

"Yeah," Zach said distractedly, lost in thought for a second. He then took a deep breath and turned to Zorian again. "It sounds very convenient."

"Yes," Zorian agreed. The ability was a little redundant to him, what with his ability to create memory packets, but he could imagine that an average Controller would find the ability absolutely invaluable. It was almost like having a notebook that carried over from restart to restart, only better. "Guardian, is there any limit on the amount of memories this bank can hold?"

"There are limits to everything," the Guardian told him. "But you are highly unlikely to ever reach these particular ones. Even if you found a way to store your entire memory and did so in every single restart, you would not come even close to filling the available space inside the memory bank."

Good to know. This gave him some very nice ideas... after all, if he could unload most of the notebooks he had kept in his head into the orb, he could really go wild in recruiting experts and having them continue their work across restarts.

"Do you think the other imperial artifacts have similar abilities?" Zorian asked Zach.

"Probably," agreed Zach. "Hey, Guardian! What about the other pieces? Do they all give us an ability related to the time loop?"

"To find out about the other pieces of the Key, please bring them to me for inspection," the Guardian answered.

Zorian snorted in amusement.

"Yeah, dumb question, I guess," Zach said, clacking his tongue. "But I think they probably do all give an ability. No reason for the orb to be the only one. Now I'm even more anxious to get my hands on these things..."

"No wonder we haven't been able to find a way to place temporary markers or remove people from the time loop," said Zorian after some thought. "No doubt those two abilities are also tied to imperial artifacts. Probably the crown Quatach-Ichl is wearing and that dagger that is in Eldemar's royal treasury."

Zach gave it some thought.

"You may be right," he eventually said. "Which do you think gives what?"

"Well, purely thematically speaking, I'd guess that the knife is what removes people from the time loop," said Zorian. "Which would leave the crown as the artifact that allows for the placement of temporary markers."

"Hm. It does make sense if you think of the temporary markers as subordinate to the main one," Zach mused. "The main marker is the ruler, and the ruler needs a crown."

The Guardian of the Threshold remained silent during this conversation, giving no indication it had heard anything. Pity. Zorian had hoped it might react a bit and therefore indicate how close they were hitting to the truth. He really wondered how that thing was made. It appeared to be a mindless automaton, but some of its responses were sufficiently lifelike that he had trouble treating it as a purely mindless thing.

"Guardian, will you remember that we've already brought you this piece the next time we visit or do we need to bring all five pieces simultaneously to get higher authorization?" Zorian asked.

"You must bring the entire Key if you want higher authorization," the Guardian said.

"Damn," Zach swore.

"We suspected it would be like this," Zorian sighed.

They spent another hour pestering the Guardian about the orb and the memory bank it contained. They didn't find out anything terribly important though, so they eventually disconnected themselves from the Sovereign Gate.

Unlike the first time they had gone here, this time they'd made much more thorough, sophisticated preparations. As such, they didn't find their bodies 'catastrophically damaged' by the time they were ready to leave. Quite the contrary, the researchers left them well enough alone with no mind magic necessary. This was partially because they'd brought much more intimidating forgeries of their credentials and partially because they were trailed by two massive 'bodyguards' that kept watch while they were communicating with the Guardian. The bodyguards were, of course, just particularly lifelike golems that Zorian had made for the occasion. They were actually pretty terrible as far as golems went, but they looked human enough to fool casual inspection and that was the only thing that mattered. Their only job was to follow them around in utter silence, looking all grim and intimidating.

They didn't immediately leave the time magic research facility. They had come here not just to have a chat with the Guardian of the Threshold, but also because they wanted to make use of the Black Room for the restart.

However, they had made a mistake this time – they decided to bring the orb of the first emperor with them into the Black Room.

It was a tempting idea. If they could bring a portable palace with them into the temporal acceleration area, then it didn't matter much that space was so limited – they could bring everything they needed, even people, inside the orb. The main limitation of the Black Room would be broken. Sure, they still didn't know how to actually enter the pocket dimension contained in the orb, but neither of them thought the procedure would forever elude them. And besides, they didn't need to be able to enter the orb to test the viability of the idea. All they had to do was bring the orb with them into the Black Room and see what would happen.

Well, what happened was that the Black Room shut itself down almost instantly after initiating temporal acceleration.

After an hour of analysis and heated discussion with nervous researchers, Zach and Zorian found out that the price of temporally accelerating an area of space was based on the volume of space being accelerated. By bringing a palace worth of space inside, even inside a pocket dimension,

the two of them massively inflated the mana cost of the operation procedure. Not to mention that the facility itself was not designed to handle that kind of strain. As such, the Black Room ran out of mana in less than a second and immediately shut itself down. The researchers, though still somewhat intimidated by them, gave them a severe tongue-lashing for even trying the idea without consulting them about it beforehand.

Oh, and they were really interested in studying the orb. Zorian actually considered letting them do so, just to see what a group of dedicated researchers like this could tell them about the artifact, but refused their request for the moment. He had to set things up very carefully before giving them the orb, or else he would simply be handing it to the Eldemarian authorities and starting a manhunt for the two of them.

"I wonder if this is true for the time loop as well," Zach mused later, when they were out of the facility. "If we create our own pocket dimensions here, aren't we also increasing the volume that needs to be temporally accelerated and thus creating a strain on the system?"

"Probably," Zorian said. "But the time loop reality is so huge that even if we increased its internal volume a bit by opening additional pocket dimensions, the added power drain should be pretty minuscule. The problem with the Black Room is that it's pretty tiny. The space inside the orb is actually many times larger than the Black Room itself. As such, bringing the orb into the Black Room is like trying to transport an elephant inside a tiny, one-man boat. No matter what clever method you use to make it fit, it still weighs so much it would sink the whole setup. I fear this idea is dead in the water."

"Shame," said Zach. "The orb does a pretty good job of isolating the space inside from the rest of reality, though. That's kind of what the Black Room is meant to accomplish, only better. What if, instead of trying to bring the orb inside the Black Room, we simply ditched the Black Room altogether and retooled the entire facility to apply its temporal acceleration effect on the orb itself? I know the space inside the orb is much more massive than the Black Room, but maybe the effects of a better dimensional boundary overshadow that? And really, even if it produces less drastic acceleration, I'd rather spend half a month inside a palace than a full month inside a tiny cramped room..."

"An interesting idea," Zorian admitted. "We'd need to get willing cooperation from the staff of the facility to pull something of that scale, though. No way could we pull this off ourselves, especially not on a super-secret research facility financed by the Eldemarian government."

Zorian still made a mental note to revisit the idea later. Perhaps it wasn't very feasible at the moment, but they needed every advantage they could get.

- break -

On one unremarkable Sunday morning, Zorian woke up to find Imaya's house under siege.

Well, not a *literal* siege, but the throng of people gathered around the entrance was impressively large and thoroughly blocked anyone's ability to get in or out of the house. Zorian was quite mystified by this, since he couldn't think of anything he had done that would cause such an occurrence.

Zorian joined the other inhabitants of the house, who had awoken far sooner than him, in staring warily through the window at the mass of people surrounding the house. They seemed to be quite a diverse bunch, ranging from simple curious neighbors that had gathered to see what was happening to groups of healers, mages, various guild recruiters and newspaper reporters.

"Dare I ask what this is about?" Zorian asked Imaya, who was nervously wringing her hands as she eyed the gathered crowd with a wary eye.

"It's my fault," Kael spoke up in an embarrassed voice. "I'm sorry."

"What do you mean it's your fault?" Zorian asked curiously. "What did you do exactly?"

"Well, you know how I keep working on better medicines? And how I've been recruiting other alchemists and healers in my work? Well, the results of that effort are getting... kind of impressive. Impressive enough to cause a stir. Especially when they come from someone as young as me with no real backer," Kael explained. He shuffled in place uncomfortably and Kana squeezed herself closer to him, disturbed by the fearful, awkward atmosphere in the room. "I'm really sorry. I hadn't considered this possibility at all."

Zorian shook his head, not really angry at the boy. Part of the blame rested on him too – he should have paid closer attention to what Kael was doing and what kind of attention it was garnering. Though in all honesty, this was just a mild inconvenience for him. He could teleport in and out of the house at will.

"They were initially much more aggressive about trying to get in," Imaya told him. "But those wards you placed on the house stopped them cold so they've been more restrained since then. The wards themselves drew some people here, though. I'm not sure, but I think some people from the Mage Guild are here to talk to you about that..."

It was only then that Zorian remembered that raising heavy wards around a residence required a special permit from the city's mage guild. A permit that Zorian didn't have. He had been warding places so often these days, with zero regard for local laws and customs, that he had almost forgotten that this sort of thing was regulated in most places.

Okay, maybe this was more than just a mild inconvenience...

- break -

In the mountains of southern Altazia, there was a fairly famous cave system that surrounded an ancient volcano. The volcano hadn't been active in over a century, but the caves still held spacious caverns and winding corridors full of lava that never cooled. This was a magically powerful place

heavily aligned with fire, and it was absolutely teeming with fire elementals.

And one of those elementals was Kilnfather, the elder fire elemental that Zach and Zorian were currently visiting.

Kilnfather wasn't the oldest of the elder elementals living in this place, but he was the only one even remotely interested in talking with humans. The others lived deep in the lava fields of the volcano cavern system – simply reaching their strongholds would be a monumental task, considering the incredible heat and the omnipresent poisonous fumes of their home environment, and convincing a taciturn elemental to talk with you was a notoriously futile endeavor. So Kilnfather it was.

They met Kilnfather in a wide, spacious cavern of black basalt stone. Steam and poisonous fumes billowed up from the cracks in the floor and walls, but the air was entirely breathable with the aid of the right air filtering spells. As for the temperature, well... it was hot, but not unhealthily so. They could endure it for the few hours the talks would last.

The only thing Zach and Zorian really had to watch for was not to hurt any of the Kilnfather's 'children'...

Kilnfather looked like a giant gecko made out of cooling lava. He was black, with cracked skin that pulsed with inner fire, dimming and brightening in a regular rhythm. His eyes were big, yellow, slitted and shining. Surrounding him was a small throng of smaller black geckos that looked like tiny copies of him. If one looked at the smaller geckos closely enough, however, they would notice they were not elementals like Kilnfather. They were actual living beings.

The black geckoes had been, as far as anyone could tell, just regular animals until Kilnfather had implanted some of his elemental spirit into them, causing them to swell in size and develop powerful fire-based magic. Kilnfather loved his creations with all his heart, to the point where he styled his entire appearance after them, and some people speculated he was trying to shape them into a legitimate sapient species as time went by. He did not tolerate any violence towards his 'beloved children' and would immediately start hostilities with anyone who hurt so much as a scale on their back... and call the rest of the domain's fire elementals for help if he thought he was outmatched.

The trouble was, sometimes these children started hostilities, forcing people to defend themselves... but the Kilnfather didn't care. No matter the circumstances, his children were always in the right.

"Welcome, guests," Kilnfather said, his voice deep and resonant. "Come closer, come closer. Mind my children, please. They can sometimes get a little... overzealous in their welcome, but they always mean well."

"Kilnfather is as welcoming as stories say," Zorian said politely. "Hopefully these two guests will be found worthy of your hospitality. Please accept our gifts."

They directed the floating field of force that carried a small basalt chest towards Kilnfather, forcing it to stop at a respectful distance from the elemental. It opened on its own, revealing a plethora of rare stones and materials that were said to be attractive to fire elementals.

"Oh my, you shouldn't have, you shouldn't have," Kilnfather said, his large, bright yellow tongue darting out his mouth to lick his eyes one by one. "But it would be impolite of me to refuse a gift. What was it that you said you came here for?"

"Well..." began Zorian. "We were wondering if you ever heard of any of the locations where the primordials were imprisoned..."

- break -

House Letova was a fairly important House in Falkinea. They were a new House, having achieved their status due to their knowledge of certain unique potions that nobody else could figure out how to make, but their future looked rather promising. Their potion business was booming, giving them plenty of money to throw around to make themselves heard and boost their political influence in Falkinea and elsewhere.

Naturally, they guarded the secrets of their alchemy very, very closely. They invested a great deal of their newfound wealth into security, well aware that if their competitors managed to get their hands on their secrets their ascent to greatness would be greatly jeopardized.

Today, Zach and Zorian were trying to break into House Letova's alchemy repository. They weren't doing it because they honestly wanted to steal their alchemical secrets, though Zorian *would* take a look at their records if they succeeded, simply to satisfy his curiosity. No, they were doing it because they wanted to practice their ability to break into secure areas.

The problem was simple. They needed to get the imperial dagger that was stored in the Eldemarian royal palace. However, the palace was way out of their league at the moment. They just didn't have enough experience in breaking into places like that. Thus, Zorian had hit upon the idea of targeting 'minor' Houses, gradually tackling greater and greater challenges until they gathered enough expertise in infiltration to tackle their real goal.

They had already tried their hand at breaking into some wealthy estates, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. House Letova would be their biggest challenge yet.

"You know," Zach had told him before they launched the mission, "I am amused by the fact that you have qualms about stealing people's secrets by rooting through their minds, but have no problems at all about physically rooting through their stuff."

"It's not the same," Zorian protested.

"I know," Zach said. "And don't get me wrong, it actually sets me at ease that you have some standards about your mind magic usage. I can't help but find it a bit amusing, though."

"You don't seem to have any problems going along with this," Zorian remarked.

"Nah, I've done things like this all the time when I was alone," Zach said dismissively. "Only with less sneaking in and more blasting the door off its hinges and powering through the wards. One of these days we'll have to do these raids my way. It's a rush. I bet you'd love it."

Zorian snorted. "I bet I wouldn't," he countered. "Though maybe you're on to something. Somehow I feel less conflicted about taking people's notebooks, research documentation and the like than I do about taking their thoughts and memories. Mind magic is... something I can do on a whim. It's easy, it's convenient and I don't think I'm a good enough person to resist the temptation to use it all the time if I get into the habit of using it lightly. But this kind of thing... it's terrifying and stressful and takes effort to organize and pull off. I'll probably never feel casual about it."

"Hmm," hummed Zach. "I wouldn't be so sure. Almost anything gets pretty mundane if you do it long enough. But it is true that raids like this aren't something you do on impulse alone. Anyway, we came here to steal alchemical recipes, not to talk philosophy. Are we doing this or not?"

"We're doing it," responded Zorian. "Let's go."

- break -

Nine restarts had passed since the restart in which Zach and Zorian had found where the orb of the first emperor was located. The two of them had worked on their skills, sought out experts and raided places for practice and critical secrets. They expanded their research initiatives massively, making use of the orb's memory bank to store all the research notes that resulted from this, and then found new sources of money and materials to pay for all this. Sudomir was completely interrogated several times and his knowledge of the invasion and soul magic made full use of. They worked with Daimen to get in touch with his friends and colleagues, narrowing down the location for the piece of the Key that was lost in the Xlotic desert. They worked hard to understand and reverse-engineer the Ibasan gate and tried to figure out a faster, easier way to activate the Bakora Gates.

They managed to enter the orb near the end of this period. They had been forced to design a specialized teleportation spell to do so, which took multiple restarts due to the rarity of pocket dimension magic and the corresponding difficulty of finding the right experts and manuals. When they had finally managed to get in, they found that the pocket dimension did contain a teleport platform that served as an in-built entrance... but the platform had broken down a long time ago due to lack of maintenance. Once the platform was fixed, the spell was no longer necessary... but since they were in the time loop, this repair was undone at the end of every restart. Zach and Zorian eventually stopped bothering to repair the platform and just used the spell to enter and leave as they wish. The spell was the superior option anyway, since it allowed them to enter and leave the orb in any location they wished.

As for the contents of the orb... well, they hadn't found any more giant hydras inside, much to Zach's disappointment. They had found a lot of dangerous plants and animals, though, so it was hardly peaceful. They also found a great deal of potions, magical equipment, secret grimoires and valuable materials... virtually all of which had expired, rotted, broken down or were hopelessly outdated. They had high hopes that there was something good buried in all that trash and rubble, and were still stubbornly combing through it.

Mercifully, the general decay of the place also extended to palace defenses. It was clear the palace had once sported impressive wards and a frankly ridiculous number of traps (giant boulders rolling down the corridors... seriously?), but most of them had broken down over the centuries.

Currently, Zorian was sitting on the grass in the middle of an isolated meadow. Not far from him was a simulacrum absorbed in assembling a magical rifle, tirelessly pondering design improvements and occasionally testing out prototypes on a distant rock. Zorian didn't want to disturb him, but made a mental note to himself to add better sound dampening wards on the final design – those magical rifles he had been building were painfully loud. Though considering how large some of the latest designs were getting, that was to be expected. He had told the simulacrum to design a better rifle, not a portable cannon, dammit!

In any case, Zorian himself was controlling a group of golems against a group consisting of Zach, Alanic, Xvim and Taiven. His four opponents were holding back a lot, or else the golems wouldn't last very long, but that was okay. This wasn't a test of his golem making skills – it was a combat exercise meant to test different tactics and figure out the most effective method of controlling and deploying his golems.

He took advantage of a short pause in the battle to quickly check up on his simulacrum in Koth. These days he no longer needed a long chain of telepathic relays to do so – the soul magic knowledge he got from Sudomir had allowed him to devise a method of establishing telepathic contact with his simulacra through the soul they all shared. He found out that the simulacrum was busy arranging some kind of trade deal along with Daimen and left him to his devices.

Eventually the combat exercise ended and the other four joined Zorian in relaxing on the grass.

Well, they *were* relaxing until the simulacrum fired its prototype cannon again and startled them all with another devastating boom.

"Gods, Zorian," Taiven complained. "That thing your copy is building is like a miniature siege engine and you're *still* not satisfied? What on earth do you need a gun like that for?"

Zorian smiled at her.

"We're going to kill a giant spider," he told her. "And then we're going to visit an annoying old woman with its remains..."

74. The Return

Chapter 074 The Return

Simulacrum number four was worried. He really shouldn't be, considering what he was and how many times the original had fought the grey hunter by now. If anything, he should be feeling excited – he had a good feeling about this attempt. Their skills had grown, they had become intimately familiar with the grey hunter's capabilities and they had brought a number of surprises designed specifically to counter it. This could work. This could actually work, unlike so many previous attempts they'd made.

Maybe that was it. In their previous attempts, Zorian – and, by extension, simulacrum number four – had always felt the attempt was a long shot. Even if they failed, it was to be expected. This time he actually felt good about their chances, making him more emotionally invested in the outcome.

Then again, they actually had a pressing need for the grey hunter's eggs this time. They could contact Silverlake without them, but talking to Silverlake was going to be much harder and much more annoying if they couldn't bring her something she desperately wanted.

He unconsciously clutched the rifle closer to his chest, the sensation of it dispelling his current stream of thought. He remembered practicing with it over and over, but it still felt a bit alien to his mind... and so did the arms that held it. He was a brand new type of simulacrum that the original had thought up recently – instead of being embodied into an ectoplasmic shell like a regular simulacrum, he had been attached to a real matter golem body designed to mimic the original. This was a step up from the base spell in just about every regard, granting him vastly increased durability and halving his maintenance cost at the same time. It allowed Zorian to maintain twice the usual number of simulacra and ensured that they wouldn't be destroyed by relatively minor damage. The only downside was that making the golem bodies was very time consuming, and that the materials were expensive as hell. Or at least that was the idea, anyway. The simulacrum actually felt significantly stiffer and more restricted in his movements than he was used to, a clear sign that his joints weren't working quite as well as the original had hoped they would. No doubt the original would find a way to fix or mitigate these issues as time went by, but that would make no difference for him personally. He really hoped he wouldn't lock up or miss in the actual battle because of this.

Alas, the time for contemplation was over. A short message rippled out of his soul and into his consciousness, informing him (and the other three simulacra gathered around the area) that the original was about to start the fight. He quickly checked up on his rifle one final time and then sent a confirmation that he was ready through the exact same method, using their shared soul as a conduit for communication. Very convenient, that. The original was already working on further upgrades, based on their studies of the hydra and the cephalic rat collective, but that was still in the initial stages and nowhere near ready for field use. For now, 'normal' soul conduit communication would have to suffice.

And then it began. The grey hunter leapt out of its cave and immediately moved to attack Zach and Zorian, completely ignoring the simulacra scattered around the area. A swarm of projectiles answered its charge, Zach and Zorian doing their best to keep it pressured without wasting too much of their mana reserves. Zach launched powerful beams of force at it, forcing it to keep dodging and breaking up its momentum. Zorian, on the other hand, borrowed Kirma's trick – holding a greyish metal cube as a spell focus, he launched swarms of smaller, cheaper projectiles that homed in unerringly on the grey hunter's weak points. He timed his attack to coincide with Zach's, forcing the grey hunter to take at least a few hits from every barrage. Although individually weak and unable to truly threaten the grey hunter, they were apparently doing *something* because the spider was clearly getting angrier and more agitated as seconds ticked by.

Simulacrum number four trailed the grey hunter with the scope of his rifle, but did not shoot. The grey hunter was currently ignoring the simulacra because it did not perceive them as a threat, but that wouldn't last very long if they started blindly firing into the battle zone. No, if he and his duplicate brethren wanted to help Zach and the original, they needed to pick their moment carefully.

The problem with using the gun on the grey hunter wasn't in whether or not it could dodge the bullet. It couldn't. To Zorian's knowledge, nothing was fast enough to dodge a projectile that moved faster than sound itself. The problem was that the spider never sat still long enough to get a good shot on it. Bullets didn't track their target and using magic to make them do so was incredibly difficult. The most Zorian could do was curve their trajectories slightly towards where he wanted them to hit. And the simulacra didn't just have to hit the grey hunter – they had to hit it in a way that left the egg sack unharmed.

Basically, they needed the grey hunter to stay still for a second. A tall order, but the simulacrum was confident that Zach and the original could pull it off.

The grey hunter lunged towards Zorian. Zach was a bigger threat, but Zorian was more annoying and probably looked more vulnerable to its senses. If it could get rid of the annoying weakling first, it could then focus its full attention on the true threat and its victory would be assured. But looks could be deceptive. The grey hunter smashed straight into Zorian's shield at full force and was stopped cold. The thick barrier of force that surrounded Zorian was a marvel of spell engineering, a custom spell that Zorian had designed with the help of a dozen professional spell crafters to make maximum use of Zorian's exceptional shaping skills. The softly glowing threads, woven through every inch of the thick sphere of force, lit up like blazing lamps, distributing the incoming force away from the impact points and into the shield as a whole, lessening the strain on any individual point in the shield.

The grey hunter attacked the shield again and again in quick succession, and it finally gave way... but rather than the whole shield shattering, three small hexagons of force broke down instead, leaving the main structure unharmed. Before the grey hunter could take advantage of that the entire shield shifted and automatically rearranged itself, nearby hexagons sliding into place to close the gap.

Suddenly aware that Zorian was no easy target to be brought down quickly, the grey hunter tried to back off, but it was too late. Zach had positioned himself carefully while the grey hunter had been trying to batter down Zorian's shield, and now launched a barrage of three hyper-dense stone spheres at the spider. The grey hunter spun around like an acrobat, deflecting the spheres away from itself with measured kicks, but Zorian took advantage of its predicament to launch a pair of metal cylinders at it. The grey hunter, accustomed to weathering Zorian's annoying but weak attacks and not seeing any great concentration of mana in the cylinders, chose to ignore them in favor of the much more threatening stone spheres.

Just before they were going to impact the grey hunter, the cylinders detonated into a cacophony of sound, bright light, magical disturbances and aromatic smoke – all of it specifically optimized for grey hunter senses.

Dazed and disoriented by the flashbang grenades, the grey hunter stumbled and stopped. Just for a moment.

Simulacrum number four pulled the trigger.

Another deafening blast sounded out, closely followed by two more. Simulacrum number two didn't fire, as he was positioned very inconveniently and there was a danger he could hit the egg sack if he fired. Of the three bullets, one missed the grey hunter completely – simulacrum number one had apparently aimed his shot so poorly that not even the trajectory correcting magics the original placed on the bullet could help. It didn't matter, though – both he and number three had hit the grey hunter straight into its cephalothorax, the bullets successfully breaking through its carapace.

It was a testament to the grey hunter's toughness that, mere moments following this, it shook off the stun effect and retreated at top speed, as if it hadn't just been shot twice in the head with high-caliber armor-piercing bullets. But it didn't matter. It was living on borrowed time – from the moment those bullets sank into its flesh, its fate was sealed. The bullets were filled with the distilled essence of the crystal ooze – a magical creature every bit as powerful as the grey hunter, whose touch turned all flesh into inert crystal. The crystallization bullets, as Zorian called them, were already turning the grey hunter's organs into lifeless crystal, and there was nothing the spider could do about it.

The grey hunter seemed to realize it too. It went berserk, lunging at Zach and Zorian with even greater zeal, and then tried to flee. They couldn't allow that, of course. If it escaped, it would doubtlessly retreat into the deep dungeon and hide before dying, and other denizens of the dungeon might eat the egg sack before they could track down its corpse. Thus, walls of stone and force sprang up to bar its path, ectoplasmic threads and tentacles sought to entangle it and dimensional gates barred the path to its lair.

Eventually, the internal crystallization process advanced too far for the grey hunter to keep functioning and it started to visibly slow and then stop. Simulacrum number four and his fellow duplicates were then sent in to hack it apart and claim the egg sack, because the original was too much of a coward to do it himself. Then again, the grey hunter did mangle one of the simulacra beyond repair as its last act before dying, so maybe he shouldn't judge.

But anyway... the grey hunter was dead... and the egg sack was still intact.

It was time to visit Silverlake again. After some thought, simulacrum number four wandered off from the grey hunter's corpse and sought out the original to talk to him about visiting the old witch. He was so looking forward to seeing her reaction when she realized what they had done, and it wasn't fair that he wouldn't get to see it just because he was a simulacrum! He was the one that shot the grey hunter! Well, he and number three, but number three ended up being killed by the grey hunter's last hurrah.

He totally earned this and was not taking no for an answer.

- break -

After securing the corpse of the grey hunter, Zorian and his simulacra went about carefully removing the egg sack attached to its underbelly without damaging it – a task far harder than Zorian would initially have assumed it would be. Then again, the egg sack had stayed attached to the grey hunter while it was doing all sorts of sharp movements and acrobatics, so it was a bit silly of him to assume he could just peel it off the spider as he wished. Still, it was nothing that Zorian and his duplicates couldn't solve with a bit of time and analysis. After an hour or so, they finally managed to separate the egg sack from the corpse without ruining it.

They immediately set off to see Silverlake. They had no idea what it took to keep the eggs alive in the long term, after all, so it was better to deliver them to Silverlake as soon as possible. They also kept the grey hunter's corpse, stashing it in the orb of the first emperor. Much of its value was ruined when its insides crystallized, but there should still be enough of it for a potion or two.

After some reasoned and totally calm discussion, Zorian also decided to take simulacrum number four with him to see Silverlake. Being accompanied by a simulacrum might help him convince her that he wasn't just a precocious teenage mage and that she should actually take him seriously.

In any case, tracking down Silverlake's home wasn't hard this time around. She may have hidden it in a pocket dimension, but Zorian knew the general area it was in and had specialized divinations that could find such things. They didn't try to break into the pocket dimension, though. That would have been threatening and rude. Instead, they got her attention in a more civilized manner – by taking the grey hunter's corpse out of the orb and parading it around the pocket dimension entrance while chanting her name.

It didn't take long before she decided to come out to meet them. She gave the dead grey hunter a quick, intrigued look before seemingly ignoring it in favor of focusing on them instead. She remained standing next to the entrance to her pocket dimension, though, a long iron rod clutched tightly in her bony fingers.

“Hello,” Zach said, giving her a sunny smile and a casual wave of his hand.

“What a curious bunch of visitors you are,” Silverlake said, unmoved by his friendliness. “It’s not every day that two baby mages manage to track me down to this place... and is that a simulacrum attached to a golem frame? My, aren’t you a clever sort.”

“Well, you’re a pretty clever sort yourself,” Zorian noted. “You figured out what my simulacrum is without casting any obvious analysis spells.”

He really meant that, too. Certainly he couldn’t pull off something like that. He’d have to spend several minutes casting analytical divinations before he could work out what he was dealing with. Granted, she may have done that before she stepped out of her pocket dimension, but it was still impressive.

“Well? Out with it,” Silverlake demanded. “Why are you bothering this old woman in the middle of her afternoon nap, making all this racket?”

“We have come to trade!” Zach said in an equally cheery tone, undaunted by her wariness.

“We have killed the grey hunter and retrieved its eggs fully intact,” Zorian said without preamble, waving his hand at the corpse of the giant spider on the ground next to them. His simulacrum, meanwhile, casually extracted the grey hunter’s eggs from the box he was carrying, letting Silverlake see them. Her eyes immediately lit up with greed and excitement. She hid it quite quickly, but it was there. “We thought you might be interested in them.”

“Oh? And why did you think that?” Silverlake asked him, inclining her head to the side, like a bird that spotted something interesting.

“Because you told me so in the past,” Zorian said blandly.

“Because I told you so in the past,” Silverlake repeated slowly, looking at him like he was stupid. “What a curious thing to say. Old I may be, but my memory is still going strong... and I don’t remember ever talking to you.”

Zach and Zorian had discussed extensively what to tell Silverlake before coming to this place. Telling her the truth about the time loop was dangerous, because she was likely proficient in both soul and mind magic. She was a highly capable witch, after all, and they were famous for dabbling in both of those fields. However, convincing her to help them through lies and manipulations would take a long time... and time was, amusingly enough, something they had a chronic shortage of. Thus, they had unanimously decided to just tell the annoying old witch the truth and see how she reacted. Even if she was hostile, they could *probably* handle it.

Probably.

“You don’t remember because the world we live in is constantly repeating itself. On the night of the summer festival, the world ends. Everything reverts to how it was the month before, and then carries on as if nothing was wrong. Like an endlessly repeating music box, you repeat your actions over and over in month-long intervals... constantly forgetting, constantly starting over,” Zorian explained, being deliberately a little melodramatic and mysterious.

Silverlake listened to his explanation with an arched eyebrow, looking surprised and amused in equal measure.

“My word, you came all this way just to deliver this kind of tall tale to me?” Silverlake said, chuckling lightly. “I suppose I can understand where you’re coming from. I have been told, on occasion, that I am rather repetitive in my arguments.”

“It’s not just you,” Zorian said, shaking his head. “Everyone is reliving this month over and over. Only me and Zach here are immune.”

“Oh, but of course!” Silverlake said, slapping herself in the forehead. “Of course it’s like that! No doubt I too can get this kind of immunity at very favorable prices, thus saving myself from this awful, awful fate of... repeating myself for all eternity? I must say, the scammers these days are getting really inventive.”

“Actually, there is nothing we can do to help you retain awareness of previous restarts,” Zach said, clacking his tongue unhappily. “Kind of depressing, but there you go. We’re not here for that. As I have noted earlier, we’re here to trade – the grey hunter’s eggs in exchange for magical help.”

Silverlake stayed silent for a second.

“Ah, I see,” she finally said. “This is just you answering my question. I asked how you knew I needed the grey hunter’s eggs and you gave me an answer. I supposed if I asked you for an actual explanation...?”

“This is an actual explanation,” Zorian said. “It’s not my fault you don’t believe me.”

“Hmph,” Silverlake scoffed. “Out of curiosity, during this conversation that I have no memory of, did I ever actually tell you what I needed the grey hunter’s eggs *for*?”

“No, you did not,” Zorian admitted. “To be honest, I was rather angry with you back then and didn’t inquire too deeply. I came to you for help with a pressing problem and you sent me on all sorts of tasks, all of which I did without complaint. But my only reward was to be told to go after the grey hunter for its eggs. I was a lot weaker back then, so that basically amounted to sending me on an impossible task in order to get rid of me.”

"That does sound like something I would do," Silverlake nodded sagely. "Which brings me to my next point – why are you so certain that I actually desire these eggs? Maybe I just sent you on a fool's errand to waste your time, and didn't actually care about the outcome."

Well, the truth was that Zorian didn't know this for certain. He was making an educated guess, based on things like her clearly having tried to acquire the eggs herself in the past. But she didn't have to know that.

"I'm an empath," he told her. "So I am certain you *do* want these eggs very, very much."

Silverlake scowled at him.

"A mind mage," she spat out in disgust. "I have the most rotten luck, I swear. I only like mind magic when I'm the one using it on others! Fine, fine, I admit it, I do want the grey hunter's eggs... but they're not as valuable as you might hope!"

"Meaning?" Zorian asked calmly.

"I have an important project that requires them, but it's only one of the two critical components that I lack. If you had brought both of them, I would really be desperate to make a deal with you. But it's a shame, a shame, for without the other critical component, the eggs are merely... *interesting*."

Zach rolled his eyes at her.

"You're just like Zorian described you," he said. "Every time one of your tasks is accomplished, you come up with another one."

"Well that's not very fair," she said reasonably. "I don't remember ever giving you a task, after all. But that aside, I never said I will not trade for the eggs. I just said you better not hope to swindle something actually good from me in exchange for something that minor."

'Minor', she says. Right.

"Out of curiosity, what is this other critical component?" Zorian asked.

"Bones and certain organs of a giant brown salamander that has grown past a certain size," Silverlake said.

"That's it?" Zach asked incredulously. "Those things are everywhere around here!"

"It's not as simple as it sounds," Silverlake said. "Yes, there are plenty of them to be found in the rivers and creeks around us, but they simply aren't big enough... not *mature* enough. Giant brown salamanders never die of old age, you see. They simply get bigger. But they are a fairly weak type of magical creature, and they grow really slowly past a certain point, so almost none of them reach the size I need them to be. I need a salamander that has survived for at least one hundred years, and that's incredibly rare."

"They can't be bred in captivity?" Zach asked.

Silverlake looked at him like he just asked the dumbest thing ever.

"Who would be willing to wait a hundred years for a creature to grow up?" she asked. "Nobody has that much time, boy. Besides, they'd probably all get sick and die before the hundred years are up. I have no idea how to go about raising giant salamanders."

Zorian couldn't help but remember how his first meeting with Silverlake had gone. If he remembered correctly, he had just been attacked by a particularly large giant brown salamander and had killed it in self-defense. This was the catalyst that had caused Silverlake to finally reveal herself to him. Back then he had blithely given her the salamander corpse, not even realizing how valuable it was... and Silverlake, after receiving something so apparently valuable from him, *still* decided to send him on a bunch of fool's errands without even hearing him out.

That withered old *bitch*!

"Let's stop dancing around the issue for a moment," Zorian said, swallowing down his annoyance in favor of actually accomplishing something. "This is our offer: the grey hunter's egg sack in exchange for a month's worth of instruction in pocket dimension creation. What do you say?"

"Oh? Pocket dimension creation?" Silverlake said contemplatively, tapping her chin with her index finger. "So that's what you're after. That's a pretty exotic and high-level skill. Are you sure you're even capable of learning it?"

Oh, good – she didn't deny she possessed the skill in question. Zorian had kind of been afraid that her hideout was just something she had found through luck and that she wasn't actually capable of creating pocket dimensions herself. It would have been a pain trying to find someone else who had that kind of expertise.

In any case, Zorian didn't try to convince Silverlake with words – instead, he simply opened a dimensional gateway straight to Koth right then and there. Silverlake was instantly on guard when he started casting a spell, but didn't try to stop him. About half-way through, she seemed to realize what he was doing and relaxed. Instead, she got an intrigued look on her face, especially when the dimensional passage itself sprang into existence beside Zorian.

She circled the gate a few times, peering intently at it, before turning to Zorian again.

“Well, you are full of surprises. I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a stable, well-crafted dimensional passage,” Silverlake reluctantly admitted.

Zorian smiled. That was only natural. After all, Zorian’s gate creation skills were a fusion of more orthodox gate creation skills that Xvim had taught him, as well as the insights Zorian had made from studying the Ibasan permanent gates and seeing the Bakora Gates in action. He doubted many people had had the opportunity to study so many different gate creation methods.

“As you can see, I’m quite good at dimensionalism,” Zorian said. “And so is my friend Zach, here. You don’t have to worry about us not being able to follow your instructions.”

“Well that’s good,” Silverlake said with a wide, happy grin. “Then that just leaves the question of payment. You see... I don’t think the grey hunter’s eggs will be enough to pay for this.”

Zorian didn’t bat an eye at this. He’d fully expected Silverlake to discard their initial offer and reach out for more. Someone as greedy and insatiable as she was would never agree to a person’s first offer.

It was good then, that he had many more things to offer.

“I could dispute that, but I am feeling generous today,” said Zorian. He motioned for Zach to take out the orb of the first emperor, which he promptly did. “What my friend is holding is a portable pocket dimension holding an ancient ruin. It’s a lost artifact from the Age of Gods, probably impossible to reproduce in modern times. If you agree to this deal, we will allow you to study the artifact for the duration of our lessons. I’m sure you can imagine how beneficial this could be for your own pocket dimension creation skills.”

Silverlake clearly could imagine, because she stared at the orb with such intensity that Zorian was afraid she would attack them both on the spot and try to take it from them. But after a few seconds, she shook her head and tore her eyes away from the orb.

“Throw in that modified Gate spell of yours and we have a deal,” Silverlake said.

“Ah, no, I can’t agree to that,” said Zorian with fake sadness. “Still, that spell isn’t completely out of the question... if you agree to some additional concessions.”

Silverlake scowled at him, but Zorian completely ignored her displeasure. If she could be greedy, so could he. He could tell she really wanted that Gate spell, so why not get everything he could out of it?

“I suppose you have something specific in mind?” she asked him.

“I want to acquire the ability of soul perception,” Zorian said. “And unfortunately, the potion made out of dirge moth chrysalises is not an option.”

“Yes, that potion doesn’t keep well at all,” Silverlake confirmed. “It can last six months at most, and even that’s pushing it. But really, why are you bothering me with such a minor request? Just go kill some people. That’s how nearly all necromancers get that ability these days. Even if you have no talent whatsoever at soul magic, you should be able to get it after twenty or so sacrifices.”

“That isn’t an option,” Zorian said, glaring at her lightly. “At all. If I have to ritually murder people to get the ability, I’d rather give up on the idea.”

“Bah,” Silverlake spat. “What’s a touchy-feely, squeamish kid like you trying to get soul perception for, then? You’ll never achieve anything worth a damn in soul magic with *that* attitude.”

“I may need it to save my life,” Zorian told her. “It’s not something you need to worry about. The question is: can you do it? Can you make me a potion that can grant me soul perception in less than a month’s time?”

“Hmph,” Silverlake scoffed. “Do you even know how difficult it is to acquire soul perception through a mere potion?”

“Yes,” Zorian said decisively. “I really do. That’s why I came to you for help.”

Truthfully, most of what Zorian knew about that came from Sudomir, who had been extensively interrogated for his knowledge in previous restarts. Alanic contributed some, but the scarred battle priest was cagey about his knowledge of necromancy and outright admitted to be inferior to Sudomir in that regard. Anyway... apparently, all souls had some measure of soul perception in them by default, but it was tightly locked and unavailable for use. Alanic’s explanation for this was that soul perception was something the gods intended to be only activated after death, to help guide the soul to its destination, and that its premature activation on the material plane was ‘dangerously tempting’. Thus, the gods sealed it away until death, lest it lead people to heresy and sin. Sudomir’s explanation was that this ability was something inherent to souls themselves, and that the gods had selfishly sealed it away because they were afraid of humanity’s power and ingenuity. Considering necromancers tended to be wildly immoral, Zorian was kind of leaning towards Alanic’s side of the argument.

It didn’t matter, though. Even Alanic admitted that soul perception wasn’t evil by itself. The Triumvirate Church urged people not to deliberately seek it out, but at the same time they encouraged its use among their priesthood. Every high-ranking priest and quite a few lower-ranking ones had some measure of soul perception. With the disappearance of the gods, the Triumvirate Church had to find a way to make up for their loss of divinely-granted powers... and granting soul perception abilities to their priesthood on a mass scale was one of the methods used. It was the Triumvirate Church who developed and perfected the dirge moth potion – the most affordable and reliable alchemical method of gaining soul

perception to date. It was just that the recipe for the potion was so simple and distributed so widely that it eventually leaked outside the Church hierarchy and became wildly employed in necromantic circles.

Zorian once felt it was strange that a potion only available in 23-year intervals would be so attractive to people... but then he found a fragmentary recipe for an alternative potion in Sudomir's memories and immediately realized why. The ingredients required absolutely couldn't be acquired either in stores or on the black market. These were the sort of things one needed to personally seek out in the wild and dangerous corners of the world... and most of the ingredients came attached to creatures possessing some method of attacking the soul. Even for Zach and Zorian those things were a major danger. In order to make a potion outlined in Sudomir's memories, one would have to possess top-notch connections or a great deal of time to track down all the ingredients, have enough power to claim them, and then find someone with enough alchemical skill to make a complicated potion they had probably never made in their life and succeed on their first try.

On top of that, all such potions were based on the same basic principle – they brought the imbiber on the very brink of death, only to pull them back at the very last moment. Very much like that 'special training' Alanic had put him through, only even more extreme. Needless to say, if you made that kind of potion incorrectly, you were highly likely to die on the spot after drinking it. Dirge moths may only come every twenty-three years, but they were rather abundant when they did show up, thus allowing alchemists to actually practice with the ingredients.

Of course, there were other methods of getting soul perception. They just weren't very useful for him.

For instance, one could simply be born with it. Some people had innate soul sight, called 'ghost eyes' by the scholars, much like he had been born innately empathic and capable of instinctive mind magic. He obviously wasn't one of these. Some people, after almost dying, unlocked the ability by accident. But this was something that couldn't be counted on, since nobody knew how that really worked. Finally, there was a really simple, accessible method involving a sacrificial ritual. All one needed to do was forge a temporary soul bond with a person and then kill them. Slowly. While keeping them conscious, because of course it wouldn't work otherwise. This was the method Sudomir used, and the method that most budding necromancers used, since it was cheap and easy to set up.

Having experienced what the procedure entailed from Sudomir's memories, Zorian knew he didn't have what it took to go through that. He was, as Silverlake said, way too squeamish to basically torture a dozen people to death.

"If you know how difficult those potions are, then surely you understand that making one of those in a month is nonsense, even for me. Just gathering the ingredients alone—"

"Whatever ingredients you need, we will procure for you," said Zach, cutting her off. "You only need to put them together into something that works."

"Hmm," Silverlake said, humming to herself thoughtfully. "You did kill the grey hunter while not damaging its egg sack in the slightest. That speaks well of your combat skills. Still, gathering ingredients for an old-fashioned soul perception potion will require you to have at least elementary soul defenses."

"We have those," Zach told her.

"You do?" she asked, sounding surprised. "Well fine then. So long as you take care of ingredient collection, I guess I can make you a potion of soul perception. But only that! I will not give you the recipe or allow you to watch the creation process itself."

"Acceptable," Zorian nodded. He waited for a few seconds, but it did not seem like she would say anything else. "So, do we have a deal then? In exchange for the grey hunter's eggs, research access to the portable pocket dimension in our possession and my expertise with the Gate spell, you agree to teach us pocket dimension creation and make us a potion of soul perception."

Silverlake stood silently, mulling the deal in her head. She frowned and grimaced to herself, occasionally breaking into indecipherable muttering and strange gestures. Zorian watched her suspiciously, worried that she was trying to slip in some stealthy spellcasting in all that nonsense, but it all seemed to be completely innocuous. Well, as innocuous as that kind of unstable behavior could be, anyway.

"I have a question," she finally said. Zorian motioned her to continue. "Earlier, you told me that wild story about this month endlessly repeating itself and how I lose all memory of it while you don't. Wouldn't that mean that everything I gain in this deal is illusionary, while everything *you* gain from it will actually stay with you?"

"I thought you didn't believe in that," Zorian remarked.

"Let's pretend I do for a moment," Silverlake said without batting an eye. "Am I wrong?"

"You're not wrong," Zorian shook his head. "In the grand scheme of things, this deal heavily favors us. Everything you gain will be gone at the end of this month, while the knowledge we gain and the unlocking of my soul perception will stay with us for future use."

"Then... don't you think it's stupid to tell me that?" Silverlake asked him curiously. She didn't seem to be actually angry, merely interested in the logic he used to arrive to his decision. "I mean, I don't actually believe that nonsense you're spouting, but if I did, it would make me totally unwilling to accept this deal of yours."

"I'm thinking towards the future," Zorian told her calmly. "It's not possible for me to absorb your pocket dimension creation skills in less than a month. We both know this. I will be coming over here with this same deal again and again, and I'll need to continue from where we left off in the previous restart. I might be able to fool you at first with lies of having learned the basics from someone else, but that will quickly get untenable. At

some point, I will have to explain how I know skills that are obviously yours... even though you don't remember teaching me."

"Well, that's all good but... how does this help you *right now*?" Silverlake asked expectantly.

"Right now would be a good time to discover something I can use to convince the future you I am telling the truth," Zorian said. "You might not believe me, exactly, but you're clearly willing to entertain the idea for a time... as your current line of questioning amply proves."

She scowled at him, but he ignored her displeasure.

"Basically, I am hoping you will eventually tell me something that I can show off to your future self in order to convince her that the time loop is real and we really have met before... even if she has no memory of it."

Silverlake stared at him for a moment before breaking into cackling laughter.

Zorian sighed. He really didn't see what was so funny about that.

"Boy, you are madder than I am!" She finally wheezed out, punching herself in the chest a couple of times to get her laughing under control. "Anyway, I *accept* your deal! And since I'm in a good mood right now, I'll throw in a reward for you! You want a secret? I'll give you a good one. The reason I need those grey hunter's eggs and the body of a hundred-year-old giant salamander is because I'm working on a potion of youth."

"You're trying to stave off death from old age?" Zach asked, surprised. "Wow. That's an incredibly advanced skill. I heard from Zorian you were a master alchemist, but I didn't know you were *that* good."

"Silly boy," Silverlake chuckled. "I'm not trying to stave off old age. I already have *that*."

They were both struck speechless at the admission. An immortal?

"Ha ha!" Silverlake cackled. "Surprised, aren't you? Yes, I could persist like this indefinitely. Don't get fooled by my dashing good looks – I'm positively ancient."

"How ancient?" Zach asked cautiously.

"It's impolite to inquire about a lady's age," she said with mock bashfulness. "But it's a three digit number, I can tell you that much. Anyway, I did a fine job of stopping time from ravaging my body, but this isn't good enough for me. I want my youth back. And with those spider eggs you brought me, I'm only one step away from that goal."

A short silence descended on the scene, Zach and Zorian being at a loss what to say about that.

"Pretty good secret, isn't it?" Silverlake said.

She told them all this just so she could brag about how amazing she was, didn't she?

"Yes," Zorian coughed. "Yes, it is. Anyway, about this trade..."

"Come back here two days from now," Silverlake said dismissively. "You came here completely unannounced, so you've caught me completely unprepared. My house is a total mess right now, completely unsuitable for entertaining guests. I need to get some extra chairs out of the basement, dust off the furniture and maybe prepare some refreshments. I think I still have some of that mushroom cake I experimented with a few years back. I know that sounds a little dodgy, but it keeps really well and it gives you such wonderful dreams..."

"The eggs stay with us until we meet again, then," Zorian warned her, completely ignoring her banter.

"Hmph," Silverlake scoffed. "Fine, be that way. Paranoid brats. Make sure to stash them in a dry, dark place with plenty of ambient mana around or they'll get ruined and the deal will be off!"

"I'll keep that in mind," Zorian nodded. The eggs were a lot simpler to preserve than he feared, then. "Just to make sure, this thing is safe, right? The eggs won't hatch in a few hours and release a bunch of tough little spider monsters everywhere, right?"

"No, no, no... well, they *shouldn't*..." Silverlake said, hesitating slightly.

"We're stashing them well away from any populated areas," Zach said decisively. "And when we go to retrieve it, we're sending one of your simulacrum in first."

"Hey!" the simulacrum currently present protested.

"Stop that," Silverlake snapped at them. "It will be fine. Trust me."

All three of them gave Silverlake an unamused look, clearly telling her how they felt about her reliability and trustworthiness.

"Kids these days, no respect for their elders..." she muttered angrily. "Well, off with you then! Go away. This has been such a pleasant meeting

thus far, it's best to end things on a high note. Don't forget to bring gifts the next time we meet! Honestly, I can't believe you two came to visit someone and didn't even bring them a bottle of brandy or something. Don't you know that gift-giving is an important tradition? No, don't answer that, I was just lecturing you, not actually asking you for your opinion. Go. Shoo!"

And thus their meeting with Silverlake ended – with her shooing them away like a bunch of naughty cats loitering around her backyard. Still, they'd largely achieved what they came for, so Zorian was happy.

He just hoped she was actually going to keep to her end of the bargain.

- break -

When Zach and Zorian came to visit Silverlake again, she was standing next to a humble cottage, messily butchering a pair of giant brown salamanders. These were smaller specimens, incomparable to the giant that had tried to eat Zorian so long ago, so Zorian assumed they were not the sort she needed to complete her potion of youth... but apparently she still had some use for even younger salamanders. In any case, she welcomed them with a wide smile and an immediate demand to hand over the spider eggs. They did so, patiently waiting as she ignored them entirely for over a minute in favor of inspecting the eggs for damage and whatever else she was looking for. She ushered them into her cottage, which proved to be less of an actual cottage and more of a disguise for the entrance to her pocket dimension.

Well, the *inner layer* of her pocket dimension. The cottage itself was also hidden in its own pocket dimension, which is why Zorian couldn't find it by just wandering the forest. But the cottage dimension was just the outer layer of her hidden world, one that could be deployed (thereby becoming actually accessible to visitors) and compressed (seemingly disappearing from the world entirely) on a whim. Nested inside this cottage dimension was another, bigger pocket dimension, which served as Silverlake's actual home and base of operations.

In Silverlake's own words, the cottage was 'just a front to fool idiot visitors'.

As for the contents of the inner layer, it consisted of three things: a nice, luxurious two-story house, an expansive herb garden full of rare magical plants and a heavily warded alchemical workshop where she did most of her work.

Yes, a powerful witch that was clearly very proud of her traditions and made distinctions between alchemy and 'potion making' had a fully equipped alchemical workshop that would be familiar to any conventional alchemist out in the major cities. Zorian couldn't help but find that a little amusing.

It had been five days since then, and thus far Silverlake was keeping to her side of the deal. Zorian was afraid she would try to shirk her duties as an instructor, giving them inscrutable training regimens that weren't certain to work before disappearing into her workshop for the rest of the day, but this didn't happen. Probably because they were deep inside her home base and there was a real danger that they could torch her home and herb garden if they felt cheated by her. Or maybe because she really wanted the Gate spell modifications and knew that the level of cooperation she could expect out of Zach and Zorian in regards to that would directly correlate to the level of dedication she showed when teaching them how to make pocket dimensions. Whatever her reasons, Silverlake actually gave them long, exhaustive explanations and even created a few fist-sized pocket spaces in front of them as a demonstration.

Creating a pocket dimension was deceptively simple. The basic idea was to stretch and fold a chosen volume of space into a miniature spatial bottle and sort of... cap it. This 'cap' was called the anchor point and it prevented the folded space from snapping back into its natural form the moment it was no longer being forced into shape, as space was naturally wont to do. After that, the pocket dimension could be gradually inflated to the maximum size the anchor point could bear.

Obviously, the creation of an anchor point was the most important part of pocket dimension creation. It was the place where the dimension was connected to the main reality, and served as both an entrance and as a foundation upon which the stability of the dimension ultimately rested. Its size, power and sophistication determined how big and stable a pocket dimension could be. If it was ever destroyed, the dimension attached to it would quickly meet the same fate.

Neither Zach nor Zorian had yet managed to successfully create a stable anchor point, no matter how minor. The process was every bit as hard as learning how to cast the Gate spell, except it required even more mana and attention to detail. Zorian was somewhat annoyed to realize that Zach would probably get the grasp of the ability far sooner than he would, simply because he had far more mana to burn on training than Zorian did.

It didn't help that Zorian had heavily stunted his ability to recover mana by maintaining six different simulacrum. Funny how he invented a brand new method of using simulacrum, halving the maintenance cost of each one... and then promptly doubled the amount of simulacrum he kept going at any particular time.

Currently, Zorian was sitting on the ground in Silverlake's pocket dimension, reviewing reports from his simulacrum while he waited for his mana reserves to recover. One of the simulacrum was in Koth, brainstorming how to get to the other pieces of the Key with Daimen. Another was raiding the academy library for restricted theory books on advanced dimensionalism. The third one was arranging a trade deal with one of the minor experts they were approaching for work. The fourth and fifth ones were working on upgrades to the simulacrum's golem frames. Not quite something he'd invest so heavily in normally, but he had little choice – all simulacrum went on a strike until he agreed to permanently station two of the copies on that particular task.

Finally, the sixth and last simulacrum was working on something very delicate and possibly dangerous – mental enhancements.

It was pretty low-key for now. He didn't want an insane copy of him rampaging around, or worse, going after him. Additionally, the simulacrum

were still essentially him, which meant they were not at all okay with thoughtlessly risking their minds. Taking into account the possible risks to his own safety, and the disturbing possibility that his own simulacra might mutiny if he pushed things too far in this direction, Zorian had ordered the last simulacrum to limit himself to self-inflicted illusions for now. Things like figuring out how to block out noise and other distractions, add highlights and reminders to his perception, and so on. It was a very orthodox, very *safe* sub-field of mental enhancements. Because it only modified the caster's senses, not their thoughts and emotions, there was only so much one could mess up, and little of it was unfixable. Human mages had done quite a lot of work in this regard, mostly because they had been trying to make divinations that could display their output through illusions projected on the caster's senses. Of course, Zorian also consulted the various aranean webs too. The Luminous Advocates and Perfect Phantasm Crafters were the two webs most helpful to this project, though he had also received notable help from several otherwise minor webs such as Band of Fog and Dreaming Refuge.

"Boy, I told you to keep an eye on that cauldron," Silverlake snapped at him, breaking him out of his thoughts. "It's going to boil over if you keep daydreaming like that. Quit it. It's unprofessional."

"Ugh," Zorian grunted unhappily, throwing a glance at the huge iron cauldron to his left. Silverlake did basically rope him into helping her with her alchemy – sorry, *potion making* – while he recovered. However it was only supposed to be for 10 minutes and she had only come back now to take over, after at least half an hour had passed.

"We never agreed I would be your personal assistant when we made the trade. I should start charging you for these things," Zorian muttered, just loud enough for her to hear him. She pretended he didn't say anything. He raised his voice at her. "What is that cauldron even doing? If you're going to recruit me in your projects, you should at least tell me what's going on."

"It's an experiment," Silverlake said distractedly, too busy cleaning some kind of carrot-like wild root to look him in the eye while speaking. "I'm sure you noticed me chopping up those runty salamanders in the last few days. I'm trying to artificially concentrate the salamander's regenerative essence to see if I can create a workable substitute for the hundred-year-old salamander that I lack. Probably won't work, but eh. It's worth a try."

"Regenerative essence?" Zorian said, frowning. "Is that what the giant salamander is for?"

"Of course," Silverlake said. "They can regrow anything, repair any damage. If you carve them carefully enough, both halves will regrow into fully healthy, functional copies. Useful thing, that. Most healing magic simply enhances and accelerates the body's natural healing abilities, so it doesn't work well on some wounds. The salamander's regenerative essence, if concentrated enough and combined with some other ingredients... why, it might even turn back the clock and undo the effect of old age!"

"Hmm," Zorian hummed thoughtfully. Okay, so this was slightly more interesting than he assumed. Still... "So why are you doing it like this, doing the procedure under the open sky, in a simple iron cauldron? You have an alchemy workshop that nearly every professional alchemist would be envious of. Why not use it?"

"Hmph. Shows what you know," Silverlake said. "I'm doing it this way because this is the superior option. It's good enough for the job. Doing this with a complicated alchemical setup wouldn't get stuff done any faster or give better results – it would just inflict wear and tear on delicate equipment and be a nightmare to clean up afterwards."

Zorian had nothing to say to that. Her argument did make a lot of sense, after all.

They both stayed silent for a while. Eventually Silverlake finally finished preparing the wild roots and unceremoniously dumped them into the boiling cauldron. She watched the liquid bubble for a few seconds, before nodding sagely to herself and adding a couple of wooden planks to the fire.

"Do you know what the difference between alchemy and potion making is, boy?" Silverlake asked suddenly, glancing at him with narrowed eyes.

Zorian was tempted to tell her that potion making was just a subset of alchemy, but he knew she would consider that a wrong answer.

She was asking about potion making in the sense that ancient witches understood it, not in the sense that was currently taught in schools.

"Potion making focuses on using a cauldron, and nothing else, to make their wares," Zorian said.

"Yes," Silverlake agreed. "Sounds very foolish, doesn't it? A botched potion can release clouds of poisonous or mutagenic gas, explode in your face or splash all over you and melt your skin. Hell, a correctly made potion can be just as bad! Very often, old witches carried a mark of their minor failures in the form of scars, strange odors and skin diseases from the years of exposure to magical fumes and concoctions. Modern alchemy is so much safer, so much more *precise*. Why, then, do you think the old witches do things in the way they did?"

Zorian cocked his head to the side, trying to figure out what she was getting at. What's that got to do with anything?

"Because it was... cheaper?" he tried.

"Ha. Close," Silverlake said. "It's because alchemy, in its current form, requires an entire society built to enable it. Somebody has to build all the vials, containers, heaters, and other equipment. Somebody needs to grow, gather and track down the ingredients used in it. Somebody needs to transport and distribute it to those that need it... or have the right connections to use it. Somebody needs to guard the workshops full of valuable equipment from thieves and various miscreants. The old witches had access to none of that, so they had to make do with chucking things into a big iron cauldron and eyeballing things. It is, as you said, cheaper. Cheaper in terms of money and also cheaper in terms of social infrastructure needed to support it."

“I see,” Zorian said after a while.

“These days there are virtually no witches that do not use alchemy in some form, in addition to their traditional cauldron-based skills,” Silverlake continued. “The ancient covens would have considered us all heretics, I bet. But the ancient covens have all died out to my knowledge, and that’s hardly an accident. Times change. The covens didn’t and paid the price for it. Alchemy has its place... as does potion making. Don’t be so quick to look down on it.”

“You made that entire long-winded speech just to deliver that little lecture at the end of it, didn’t you?” Zorian huffed in annoyance.

“You’re going to remember it better this way,” Silverlake cackled. She prodded the bubbling liquid in the cauldron with an iron ladle she used to mix it. “Well, whatever, I think we can leave this be for a few hours. You recovered yet, boy? I say, you sure take your time with your rest – it’s a miracle you got this far with such an awful work ethic. Why, when I was your age, we...”

Zorian sighed and got up, doing his best to drown out her moralizing. He sent a quick message through his soul to the simulacrum working on implementing sensory filters, telling it to work quickly. He was going to need those skills as soon as possible.

75. Soul Stealer

Chapter 075 Soul Stealer

The great wilderness that existed in the north of Altazia was a place that contained many rare and valuable things. Exotic natural resources, interesting locations, magical plants and animals extinct in the south... all of those and more could be located if one was willing to spend time searching for them and was strong enough to survive deep in the untamed mountains and forests. This wasn't because the northern wilderness was particularly blessed in natural resources and magical hot-spots, of course, but simply because most of it had never been settled and systematically exploited by human societies. The southern areas had once had these kinds of things as well, but the spread of civilization and rising number of mages had caused many of them to disappear. Mines were depleted, forests chopped down and turned into farmlands, Dungeon openings sealed away or turned into carefully-regulated mana wells, delicate areas destroyed through war or short-term greed and dangerous plants and animals deliberately hunted to extinction. After all, nobody wanted to live next to a man-eating magical tiger or a walking tree that periodically planted itself in your field and ruined the crops, no matter how valuable they were to some mage in the neighboring country.

Such was the case with the plant that Zach and Zorian were currently after. The soulseizer chrysanthemum, as it was called, was one of the rare entities that ate souls. Since nobody wanted a soul-eating flower growing in their garden – or anywhere near them, really – the plant rapidly went extinct any time humans moved into an area. Thus, if Zach and Zorian wanted to find one, they had to go to the wild areas untouched by most of humanity.

Currently, the two of them were hiding under a globe of invisibility, warily watching a huge black bear amble past them. Though the bear wasn't truly a life-threatening danger to them, they were in no mood to pick a fight with it. It was a resilient monster, and no part of its body was particularly valuable on the general market. Considering they had been trudging through the dense foliage of the Great Northern Forest for most of the day, they really just wanted to find where the soulseizer chrysanthemum was hiding and go home.

Thankfully, the bear did not appear to be hunting and paid little attention to its surroundings. It simply walked past them and soon disappeared from sight.

Zach dispelled the globe of invisibility that hid them from sight and then cautiously scanned the area for further dangers. Although not as dangerous as the deeper layers of the Dungeon and the like, Altazia's northern forests were not a place for the unwary. This deep in the wilderness, there lurked threats that posed a danger even to Zach and Zorian working together, should they be caught by surprise.

"Gathering all these ingredients on Silverlake's list is surprisingly hard," Zach said, relaxing slightly upon detecting nothing of note. "They're rare, dangerous, or both, and Silverlake never gave us a single clue where we could find any of them... and yet, the task is still clearly doable, so we can't really complain about being given a completely impossible task. The old witch really has a knack for this stuff."

"I'm half-convinced that most of these are not necessary for the potion at all," Zorian said, sighing lightly. He spent a few seconds reorienting himself and then set off in the northwestern direction. Zach followed him without complaint. "She probably added quite a few of these because she personally needs them for something, not because the potion we ordered demands it. The trouble is—"

"We have no idea which ingredients are essential and which are not," Zach finished for him. "She never lets us see the actual recipe. We can only speculate and try to call her bluff, but we're more pressed for time than she is and she knows it. She wouldn't relent, even if we guessed correctly, and might even up the price out of spite."

"Yes," Zorian nodded. "Whatever. It's doable, that's all that matters. Let her have her little victory if it pleases her."

"True," Zach agreed. "Say, are you really sure we're in the right place? We've been looking for more than two hours and the flower doesn't appear to be here. Maybe the yeti tribe we spoke to lied to us. Relations between them and humans are not exactly the best."

"The tribe's shaman didn't lie," Zorian said, shaking his head. "He thinks we're cocky idiots that will get our souls eaten by the soulseizer chrysanthemum, so he told us the truth as he saw it. He gets the payment we promised him and two humans end up dead. It's a win-win as far as he was concerned. It's just that yetis don't really have any concept of maps or precise coordinates, so all I have is a set of vague directions regarding the local landmarks. Just be a little patient."

"But this is so *boring*," Zach whined childishly.

"Tough luck," Zorian told him pitilessly.

Zach was quiet for a few seconds before he started talking again.

"You know, the idea of fighting a flower is kind of funny. And embarrassing," he said.

"I don't know," Zorian said. "I think fighting those rabbits a few days back was way more embarrassing. Especially since both of us ended up getting bitten before we managed to bring them down."

"Ugh. Don't remind me," Zach groused. "Those have got to be one of those fake ingredients Silverlake added to the list. I mean, how are a bunch of rabbits like that related to a potion of soul perception?"

"I think those red gems embedded in their foreheads were some kind of sensors," Zorian speculated. "They did see through our every attempt to sneak up on them."

The two of them spent the next half an hour discussing which of the ingredients were likely to be fake, only to realize that none of them were obvious imposters. They could all potentially be valid, which meant that either Zorian was too paranoid or Silverlake was very clever when picking her additions. Zorian was leaning towards the second option.

"I know we already talked about this before visiting Silverlake, but are you really sure this is even necessary?" Zach eventually asked. Seeing Zorian's confused look, he moved to clarify. "Acquiring soul sight, I mean. Are you really sure you need it?"

"Of course I'm not sure," Zorian said, shaking his head. "Maybe once we get the whole key, everything will be neatly resolved, and me getting soul sight will end up being a pointless diversion. The thing is, even if the Guardian of the Threshold overlooks the fact there are two of us and places our souls back into our bodies, there is a problem..."

"Your original body still has its old soul," Zach said.

"Well, it would be more accurate to say that the body I hope to inhabit was never truly mine to begin with," Zorian said. "But yes, that's the core issue. If I want out, I need to steal my real world body somehow. I guess this could be done by convincing the Guardian to switch my soul with that of the original, but... the Guardian has made it clear that this goes against the very nature of his job. I'm skeptical that acquiring the Key will let us ignore this."

"I get that," Zach said. "But maybe you don't have to literally *steal* the body, you know? Maybe you can kind of, you know... coexist with your old self?"

"An interesting idea," Zorian said. "I don't know enough about soul magic to say if that would be possible, but... that kind of thing would still require me to acquire soul perception first."

"Yeah, I guess," Zach sighed.

They walked through the forest in silence for a few seconds, Zorian keeping an eye out for that funny-shaped rock outcropping that the old yeti had told him about. It should be around here...

"What's really on your mind?" Zorian eventually asked.

"You know I'm not really sure that I'm the real Controller of this time loop," Zach said. "And if I'm not... I could be facing the same choice you are."

"Ah," Zorian said, nodding. Personally, he felt Zach's fears were unfounded, but he knew by now it was useless to tell him that. "I see."

"Do you think I should try to acquire soul perception too?" Zach asked. "I'm not nearly as comfortable as you are in killing my old self, but I have to admit... if I have to choose between myself and him..."

"It would be the safe thing to do," Zorian told him. Concerns about not being the true Controller aside, he didn't see any particular downsides about Zach acquiring soul perception. "But best not to try that in this particular restart. We have no idea how the safety triggers on your marker are going to react to a potion like that. I mean, they did terminate the restart when you tried to undergo Alanic's training, remember?"

"I remember," Zach scowled. "If it weren't for that, I would have had simulacrum of my own by now."

"Right. They could easily trigger this time too, since the potion works on similar principles," Zorian remarked. "It's best if we wait for a less interesting restart before testing this."

"Yeah, I'm in no hurry," Zach said. He glanced around the area they were traveling in. "How long do you think it will take you to find this soul-eating flower? Maybe we should stop for now and come back tomorrow?"

"Actually..." Zorian began, his eyes zeroing in on a bunch of seemingly unremarkable trees, "we're here."

He pointed at the base of one of the trees, where a beautiful white flower proudly sprouted from the forest floor.

There was nothing overtly supernatural or sinister about the soulseizer chrysanthemum. It was a large plant, but not monstrously huge. Its leaves and stalk were the most mundane of green, easily blending into the rest of the nearby vegetation. A single white flower the size of Zorian's head crowned the otherwise unremarkable plant, its numerous rows of petals folded inwards into a sort of flowery hemisphere.

This sort of peaceful, unremarkable appearance was merely a trap, though. Since the soulseizer chrysanthemum was immobile, most of the time it behaved as inconspicuously as possible to lure its victims near. The moment Zach or Zorian stepped close enough, the flower would reveal its true nature.

"You know how I said earlier that the idea of fighting a flower is kind of funny?" Zach asked.

"Yeah?" Zorian prompted.

"I take it back," Zach said. "There is nothing funny about a dangerous creature that hides itself so thoroughly. I looked straight at it and I still can't see any sign of danger. If we hadn't been clued-in in advance about its true nature and where exactly it can be found, we'd never have noticed it."

"Mm," Zorian hummed in agreement. "If you really think about it, this is one of the most dangerous enemies we could possibly face. Stuff like the grey hunter could kill us, but the time loop makes that just an inconvenience. But this flower? If we stumbled upon it by accident, without being mentally ready or applying some kind of soul ward beforehand, there is a good chance we'd really end up with our souls devoured by it."

"Well, you would," Zach pointed out cheekily. "The safeguards on my marker would probably kick in the moment my soul was torn away from my body. You, on the other hand, would be thoroughly doomed. You know what soul devouring entities do, right?"

"They flay the outer layers of the soul for nourishment and keep the indestructible core as a sort of mana battery," Zorian said. "Or in the case of wraiths, they use the core to make more of their kind. I don't know how fast this process is, but even if it takes a while, I'd probably end up with my soul severely damaged by the time the restart ended. I would probably spend every single restart thereafter in a deep coma and stay that way until the time loop collapsed."

They both stared at the seemingly peaceful flower for about a minute, both of them lost in their own thoughts.

"Alright, enough dawdling," Zach suddenly said, clapping his hands loudly to wake up Zorian from his reverie. "Let's get this thing uprooted and chopped up into ingredients!"

After discussing it for a few minutes, they decided it would be best if only one of them confronted the chrysanthemum. The other would stay back and be ready to extract them if something went wrong. This, however, led to the issue of who would be staying back and who should advance upon the dangerous plant.

The argument was surprisingly charged, with both of them arguing that they should be the ones attacking. Zorian argued that his soul defenses were better than Zach's by far and that they couldn't afford to get into the habit of triggering premature restarts. Zach, on the other hand, argued this was dumb and that he should definitely be the one making the attempt. Zorian might have much better soul defenses, but if they proved to be insufficient, he could wind up permanently dead in all future restarts. In light of that sort of risk, who cares about a single interrupted restart?

"This is beyond stupid," Zach told him. "You don't even like fighting!"

"But I fight when I have to," Zorian countered. "Besides, I think you're exaggerating the level of danger I would be in. If you see me slump dead, immediately kill yourself. That will trigger a restart and get my soul out of its stomach. I doubt the chrysanthemum can mutilate my soul in such a short time."

Zach scowled at him. "Any plan that involves me committing suicide is a bad plan. I swear, I still can't believe you were wearing a bomb around your neck before getting control of your restart trigger..."

"Actually, I *still* carry a bomb around my neck," Zorian told him, showing Zach the plain-looking golden chain he usually kept tucked into his shirt. His spell formula skills had advanced to such an extent by now that the chain was no longer obviously a magic item – unless one specifically decided to inspect it with analytic spells, it would look just like a mundane accessory. "Having more contingencies is always useful, after all. Still, I guess you have a point... I don't think I'd fail here, but the worst scenario is worrying. Tell you what – I will agree to back off here, but if you fail and end up cutting the restart short, I get to confront the chrysanthemum the next time around. Deal?"

"Deal," Zach nodded. "If I can't do it now, I probably won't be able to do it on the second or third attempts either. I guess it is kind of unreasonable of me to cut restart after restart short like that. I still feel an urge to hit myself when I think of all the restarts I frittered away by doing just that..."

Then Zach started walking towards the flower, and all their arguments were revealed to have been moot. The soulseizer chrysanthemum twisted itself to face them both, the flower stalk moving with the speed and fluidity alien to normal plants, and a barely perceptible ripple emanated from it, covering a spherical area easily large enough to cover them both.

They had been within its striking range all along. It just chose not to attack them immediately.

Fast and omnidirectional, the ethereal ripple released by the chrysanthemum was impossible to dodge. Zorian, caught off guard by the attack, could do nothing except take it head on. Zach, having expected some kind of response from the flower, had successfully erected a shield around himself before it hit. It didn't matter, though – the ripple passed through the shield like it wasn't there at all. It slammed into both of them at almost the same time, sending them reeling.

Zorian felt sick in a way he had never experienced before in his life. His vision swam, assailed by numberless fleeting illusions and flashing lights, and his ears felt like a bomb had gone off right next to him. His sense of balance went completely haywire, his skin stung all over and his stomach churned like something was trying to tear itself out of him. It took a monumental act of will not to vomit all over himself and collapse on the ground. It was some kind of stun attack, Zorian realized. An incredibly complex stun attack, weaving together physical, mental and spiritual aspects into one unified whole.

Zorian reached into his own mind and forcibly shattered the mental aspect of the stun. The whole structure of the attack immediately became unbalanced, allowing Zorian to stabilize his condition somewhat. His vision cleared up a bit, and he saw Zach collapse to his knees, hands shaking, and vomit all over the forest floor. That... wasn't much of a surprise, to be honest. Zach was not as adept as Zorian in defending either his mind or

his soul, and he was closer to the chrysanthemum when it attacked.

Before Zorian could do anything, the soulseizer chrysanthemum turned towards him. Perhaps because he had weathered its stun effect better than Zach, or because he was closer to the border of its attack radius and it worried he would flee, but the flower chose to deal with him first. Its multitude of petals erupted with ghostly blue flame and unfolded like a mouth full of teeth, revealing a pitch black area in the middle of the flower.

Zorian's soul immediately started vibrating in his body, sending waves of pain throughout his very being. Normally, this level of soul attack would never be able to seriously threaten Zorian... but with the aftereffect of the stun still lingering, resisting the pull of the flower was proving difficult. And the effect wasn't stopping. Instead, the suction only seemed to get stronger as time went by and the flower searched for a firmer grip on his soul.

Despite that, Zorian was not worried. Before it attacked, the flower felt just like any other plant in the forest. It had no discernible mind, and thus nothing that Zorian could target with his mind magic. Now, however, he could very much feel a thinking mind behind the chrysanthemum.

He gathered all of his concentration and then launched a massive telepathic attack at the plant's mind. This time, it was the flower's turn to reel back in shock. Its attack on Zorian's soul immediately ceased as it silently shook and waved around, trying to stabilize itself.

Zorian wasn't going to let it have the time. Even though he still hadn't entirely recovered from the initial attack, he poured all of his energies into launching one mental attack after another. The flower resisted fiercely. It was clearly a complete amateur when it came to mental combat, but it possessed an instinctive ability to form mental barriers and was armed with a powerful magic resistance that made it difficult and mana expensive for Zorian to target it.

After a while, Zach recovered enough to make his own move. He summoned a massive ghostly blade and sent it chopping down at the stem of the plant. In all honestly, it looked like compete overkill and Zorian worried he was going to ruin the chrysanthemum's value as an alchemical component. They needed it fairly intact, after all.

The flower was undaunted, though. Threatened by the incoming blade, it spat a stream of glittering stars out of the black hole in the center of the flower. The glittering motes of light immediately arranged themselves into a dome-like construct that stopped the blade cold with barely a flicker.

They were soul cores of creatures the chrysanthemum had devoured in the past, Zorian realized. Somehow, it could control them and shape them into defensive constructs.

Well, not *just* defensive constructs, it turned out. After Zach and Zorian kept hammering its defenses for a while, it realized that at the rate things were going, it was going to lose. Its shield was going to get battered down sooner or later, and Zorian's strategically launched mental attacks were disrupting its attempts to launch further soul attacks at them. Upon realizing this, the chrysanthemum reshaped the soul cores into a series of long, hair-like whips and started flailing them around. Zorian at first thought the chrysanthemum intended to attack them with those, but it turned out he had once again underestimated the plant. It quickly wrapped the whips around the nearby branches and uprooted itself right out of the ground before turning to flee.

Zorian had to admit, seeing an uprooted flower swing about from branch to branch, like some kind of weird monkey, was a unique experience.

Sadly for the soulseizer chrysanthemum, such desperate measures would not save it. It launched another stunning pulse at them in an attempt to lose them, and this did slow them down quite a bit, but in the end it was chased down and killed.

"We have been outsmarted and nearly killed by a flower," Zach said, still keeping a wary distance from the chrysanthemum's remains. "We are never speaking about this again."

Zorian readily agreed to this request.

- break -

The Esoteric Order of the Celestial Dragon, known to most people as the Cult of the World Dragon, was more than just a weird religion. It was an entire support organization that helped its members advance forward in life. They vouched for their fellow members when skills and trustworthiness were questioned, they helped them get the jobs and mentorships they needed to advance in their careers, offered their members loans under favorable conditions, granted free access to spell libraries that would be too restricted or expensive for members to otherwise get and they provided legal aid if members got into trouble with the mage guild. The higher ranking one had in the Cult, the more pronounced these advantages got.

This was the main reason why the Cult got so powerful and widespread. The sort of large-scale, highly treasonous plot that the Cult was currently participating in was not really something that they usually did. It was actually very, very atypical. For the vast majority of their existence, they had simply been a mystery cult crossed with a mutual aid society – kind of shady and disreputable, but nothing that the authorities would go too crazy over. Their biggest enemy was the Triumvirate Church and their faithful, which considered the Cult's beliefs to be a direct affront to their dogma.

In any case, an expansive organization like that had more than just direct members of their secret club to draw upon. They also had a multitude of outside associates and other experts that sporadically worked with them. Some of these were true faithful that deliberately maintained distance from the main organization so that outsiders could not easily puzzle out the connections between them, others were just mercenaries that sporadically took missions from the Cult and some simply didn't know who exactly they were working with. Zorian had largely ignored these people during his investigation into the Cult's activities, since tracking them all down was an incredibly time-consuming and difficult task. He had

better things to do with his time.

Then Alanic interrogated Sudomir a bunch of times and they discovered that the crazy mayor of Knyazov Dveri had detailed knowledge of these people. Sudomir appeared to have gone out of his way to gather as much information about the Cult as possible, worried that they might move against him at some point. The relations between him and Cult leadership hadn't been the best since they realized he intended to publicly advocate for the legalization of necromancy, something they regarded as lunacy.

Zorian still wasn't terribly interested in spending time to investigate all these people. He didn't think that would result in anything substantial. But Alanic was, and he didn't have too many other things vying for his time. Thus, he wholeheartedly threw himself into the investigation, making full use of the time loop to comb through every lead and scrap of evidence Zorian could wrench from Sudomir's mind.

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And today, that effort seemed to have borne some kind of fruit. Alanic had notified Zach and Zorian that he had uncovered something important and told them to meet him next to an unassuming house in one of Cyoria's richer neighborhoods.

When they arrived, they found the place cordoned off by the mage guild personnel, but they had been notified that the two of them were coming and let them through on Alanic's orders. Once again Zorian wondered just what position Alanic occupied that he could command people like this, but Alanic stubbornly refused to answer such questions and Zorian respected the man's help too much to go prying into his thoughts.

"You called, we came," Zach said, waving his hand at Alanic to get his attention. "What do you have for us?"

"I don't claim to understand every detail of the... situation you have found yourselves in," Alanic said, choosing his words carefully due to the presence of other people in the room, "but I believe you've indicated the name 'Veyers Boranova' is important to you, yes?"

Zorian looked at him in shock.

"What? What does Veyers have to do with this? Is he here?" Zach asked.

"In a matter of speaking," Alanic said evenly. He motioned them to follow him and led them down the stairs and into the basement beneath the house. "This is the house of one of the lawyers deeply associated with the Cult of the World Dragon. He is not a member, but he has helped on a number of occasions and is known to be sympathetic to their organization. I managed to get authorization to conduct a search of his house and... well, this is what I found when I opened the icebox in his basement."

Alanic stopped next to one of the three iceboxes lined up next to the basement wall and unceremoniously lifted the lid up. Inside was a frozen body of a teenage male, a peaceful expression on his frosted face.

It was unmistakably Veyers Boranova.

Zach and Zorian stared at the body for nearly half a minute, not saying anything.

"He's... dead?" Zach asked lamely.

"Indeed," Alanic said. "I hear neither of you really got along with him well, so I will not offer you condolences."

"So the owner of this house..." Zorian began uncertainly.

"Jornak Dokochin," Alanic told him.

"Yes, this Jornak... did he kill Veyers?" Zorian asked. "When did this happen?"

"He is adamant that he did not kill the boy," Alanic said. "He claims the boy died of unknown causes while sleeping. One day he was fine, if a little surly, and the next day Jornak went into his room to check up on him and found him dead in his bed. I'd normally scoff at that explanation, but the timing..."

"He died on the first day of the restart, didn't he?" Zach guessed.

"Yes," Alanic nodded. "The frost damage and the sheer passage of time make it difficult to tell for certain, but I'm pretty sure this is the same situation like those aranea beneath Cyoria and the mercenaries that were found mysteriously dead in their homes."

"Doesn't that mean Veyers was soulkilled?" Zach frowned. "He isn't Red Robe?"

"We can't say that just from this," Zorian said, shaking his head. "We have no idea how exactly he entered the time loop, or what would happen if he left it. For all we know this could be the natural result of his leaving the time loop."

"Ugh," Zach grumbled. "So we found Veyers and yet learned nothing of value. I hate things like this."

"Well, anyway... I guess Veyers being frozen in the basement of a heavily warded house does explain why we never managed to find him when we searched for him in the previous restarts. What was he doing here, anyway?"

"Jornak has been disinclined to cooperate with us in this regard," Alanic told them. "He refuses to discuss details with me. He is a lawyer so he is harder to shake up and interrogate than most people I deal with. That's why I told you to come here immediately. If you want to get anything out of him, we need to talk to him now. I'm afraid House Boranova has already heard of the news and is going to descend here sooner or later."

Alanic then led them to the second floor of the house, where Jornak was currently under house arrest with a couple of guards posted next to him. When they arrived they found Jornak pacing around his room like a caged tiger, angry and agitated. He deliberately ignored their entrance, not giving them so much as a glance.

Zorian observed the man and the room itself. Jornak was younger than he thought he would be, probably in his mid-twenties and with a very handsome, boyish face. He was immaculately dressed in expensive but conservative clothes, and the room he was in seemed to be designed to maximize his image as a cultured, well-read intellectual. The walls were lined with filled-out book shelves and small works of art laid scattered around the place to give it a bit of artistic flair.

Zorian's parents had a similar room back in Cirin. Much like them, Jornak had probably never even read most of the books lining the bookshelves.

"So, mister Dokochin," Alanic began. "I'm back. Don't mind my two helpers here, they're just here as support. Now that you've had a chance to calm down a little, are you willing to discuss things like a civilized person?"

Zorian gave Alanic a mildly questioning glance. Was he deliberately pissing the guy off? Jornak did not look calm at all. Alanic did not react to his silent question though, so Zorian simply trusted him to know what he was doing. He supposed that with him here, it hardly mattered whether Jornak wanted to talk or not.

Jornak finally deigned to look at them, giving Zach and Zorian a brief, contemptuous glance before dismissing them as unimportant.

"Your church really likes them young, doesn't it, priest?" Jornak said, grimacing at Alanic unhappily. "I know my rights, mister Zosk. I will not talk to anyone until Mage Guild representatives and my lawyer arrive. Until then, I will patiently wait here and I'd appreciate it if you stopped wasting my time."

"Curious that a lawyer would want someone else to defend them," Alanic said.

"A surgeon would be foolish to try to operate on himself, and a lawyer is ill advised to represent himself in court," Jornak said dismissively. "I would not expect a Church dog to understand these things. People like you always think you're above the law, anyway."

"Hmm," Alanic hummed, completely unaffected by Jornak's caustic comments. "I'll be honest and say I expected as much. Zorian?"

Zorian did not ask Alanic what he wanted. He already knew. He reached out mentally towards Jornak. The young lawyer actually had rudimentary mental defenses, but this was not something that could stop Zorian. He punched through those defenses as if they were paper and pressed down on the man's mind.

Jornak's eyes widened like saucers as he realized what was happening.

"Answer the questions," Zorian commanded.

"N-no!" Jornak protested. "This... this is illegal! I'll... damn it. Damn it!"

"Did you kill Veyers?" Zorian asked, just to be sure.

"I didn't kill him! I didn't kill anyone! I already said I just found him dead one day! It's the truth!"

"What was he doing in your home?" Zorian asked.

"That's... we were friends," Jornak said, gritting his teeth.

"A friendship between a 15-year-old-boy and a 25-year-old man like you?" Alanic commented lightly. "Who is it that likes them young, again?"

"You people..." Jornak hissed angrily at him. He took a deep breath and forcibly calmed himself down. "Look... I promise to tell you the whole story. Just... release me from your mental compulsion. It's hard to think with this thing muddying my thoughts."

Zorian gave Alanic a questioning glance. Alanic nodded for him to do as Jornak said, apparently willing to give the man a chance. Fair enough. He supposed they could always repeat the procedure if Jornak became uncooperative later on.

"I'm still keeping an eye on your surface thoughts," Zorian told him as he released the compulsion to make him talk. "So don't try to lie to us."

"I don't have to lie!" Jornak snapped at him. "This whole thing is just... damn it, Veyers! Even when dead, he still makes trouble for me."

"Yeah, he has that effect on people," Zach said with a sagely nod.

Jornak ignored that comment, gathering his thoughts for a moment.

"Alright," Jornak said. "So, I met Veyers almost a year ago when he came to talk to me about his legal options in regards to his... situation... in

his House. I empathized with him then. What happened to him reminded me a little of myself. I too have had my birthright stolen from me.”

“Really?” Zach asked curiously.

“I don’t want to talk about it and I ask you to be merciful and not force me,” Jornak said. “It has nothing to do with this, and you can find out most of it through public documents. It’s not like I’ve ever hid my grievances, after all.”

“Just give us the short version,” Alanic said.

Jornak gave him a hateful look, but after glancing at Zorian for a second he decided to humor the scarred battle-priest anyway.

“In short, I was a relative of a small House that went extinct some time ago. Although not a true member of the House, I was the closest thing to a descendant and I was supposed to inherit their wealth and properties... but then a new claimant suddenly appeared, completely out of nowhere, claiming even closer relations. His proof of his lineage was painfully fake and all the documents obvious forgeries, but he was better connected than me and in the end, courts assigned everything to him and left me with nothing.”

“I see,” Alanic said. “And so you saw young Veyers coming to you for help and felt touched by this young man that was seeing his legacy usurped from him by branch members of his House.”

“Yes, precisely,” Jornak said. “In truth, I couldn’t help him much. Formal Houses like his own are given a lot of leeway in how they govern themselves internally, and general law is only somewhat applicable to his situation. Still, the boy seemed to appreciate my advice, and the fact that I cared... which not many people around him did, if he was to be believed.”

“And him coming to live inside your home...?” Zorian prompted.

“That... you know he was expelled from his school?” Jornak said, frowning. “Well, he didn’t want to go back to his family after that. After wandering all over the city to cool down, he came over to my house and begged me to house him for a few days. He said he needed a place to hide for a while and think about what to do about things. How could I refuse?”

“That’s very generous of you, and I mean that sincerely,” Zorian said. “But how does that lead to his body being stuffed into your icebox?”

“That... I didn’t know what to do, okay!?” Jornak said, becoming agitated. “I just came into his guest room one morning to see why he missed breakfast and found him dead. I didn’t know what to do! Despite all his problems, he was still a noble and House Boranova would never take this lying down. He died in my home and the wards didn’t register any intruder at all. How would I possibly explain this? I empathize with the boy, but I don’t want to ruin my life for him! Haven’t I suffered enough!?”

Jornak gritted his teeth and started pulling at his hair in frustration. With a sharp turn, he started pacing around the room again, gesticulating to himself and muttering under his breath.

It wasn’t an act, as far as Zorian could tell. Jornak had never bothered to reform his mental barriers after Zorian destroyed them, leaving his thoughts completely unguarded. Everything he said was truth as he saw it, and he was honestly panicking and unsure what to do.

“So, this could be a dumb question, but why keep Veyers’ body in the icebox in your basement?” Zach asked suddenly.

“I didn’t know what else to do,” Jornak said, still pacing around the room. “If I took it out of the house to dump somewhere, the trackers hired by House Boranova would find me the moment I stepped out of my house’s privacy wards. As for destroying it... well, I’ve never destroyed a body before! I mean, obviously I didn’t! How would I know how to do that? So I put the body on ice while trying to think up a solution...”

They didn’t find out much from Jornak after that. Although Zorian personally found the man’s choices to be rather questionable, he was ultimately just a man who found a dead teenager in his guest room and panicked. If Jornak hadn’t knowingly helped the Cult of the World Dragon so many times in the past, Zorian would have even felt sorry for the man.

About fifteen minutes after Zach and Zorian left Jornak’s room, another group of Mage Guild personnel arrived, accompanied by several representatives from Noble House Boranova, and took over the scene. Alanic informed Zach and Zorian that this marked the end of his involvement with the case... and thus the end of their ability to examine the house or question the man.

It was just as well, though. The restart was coming to a close, so there was not much time for a detailed examination. Additionally, it would have been better if they arrived in the man’s house at the start of the restart, before he had a chance to stuff Veyers’ body in an icebox. And in the next restart, they would do just that.

Until then, Zach and Zorian agreed to keep speculation about what this meant about Red Robe to a minimum.

- break -

Despite numerous issues that had cropped up in their search, in the end Zach and Zorian managed to gather all the ingredients Silverlake needed (or at least *claimed* she needed) for a soul perception potion. It took them most of the remaining time to do so, however, and by then the end of the restart was looming close. Thus, they were somewhat anxious as they waited for Silverlake to finish making the potion.

“It should work,” Silverlake told them. “I mean, I’ve never actually made that specific potion in my life and the old witch recipe that describes it is

not nearly as clear and precise as the modern recipes you two are familiar with... but since it's me making the attempt, it will probably work out fine."

"Yes, yes, we get it – you're awesome," Zach said with a tired nod.

"And don't you forget it," Silverlake said shamelessly. "It shouldn't take long. Gathering the ingredients is the time-consuming part; the actual potion making could be done in as little as two hours. You two go play outside while I work. You can practice your pocket dimension creation skills or something."

"You have a real gift for finding exceptionally infuriating teachers, Zorian," Zach told him after they got out of Silverlake's earshot.

"Yes, but they tend to be exceptionally capable ones, too," Zorian countered. He took out a small box from his jacket pocket and flipped it upside down, allowing a stream of marbles to pour out of the box and into his waiting palm. A moderately perceptive person would quickly realize that there was no way all these marbles could fit into such a small box.

"Only 28 marbles?" Zach smirked. "Amateur. I managed to cram 32 of them inside a box like that."

Zorian gave Zach a suspicious look, but it didn't seem like his fellow time traveler was lying about that.

"Damn it," Zorian grumbled. "All those specialized shaping exercises and I still can't advance faster in this field than you do."

"I have six times more mana than you do and you're further hampered by the number of simulacrum you keep around you at all times," Zach said with a careless shrug. "It's hard to make up for such a disadvantage."

He was right, of course. Truthfully, it was amazing he was able to keep up with Zach's learning rate at all. It still made him feel a little annoyed that he lost their informal competition about who would advance faster in the field of pocket dimension creation.

Oh well – there was still time to catch up. They would be chipping away at the topic for quite a few restarts after this, and he was confident he had more patience than Zach did...

It ended up taking Silverlake nearly four hours to finish the potion, despite her claim that it could be done in as little as two hours. She claimed she had merely been waiting for the concoction to cool down to a comfortable drinking temperature before bringing it over, but Zorian suspected it had more to do with the process being harder than she'd thought it would be rather than anything considerate like that.

"You should drink the potion soon," Silverlake told him. "The instructions were a little fuzzy about its shelf life and there was a bit of unplanned excitement involved in making it, so I had to add in a little something to forcibly stabilize it. It should retain its potency for about a week, after which there is a small but non-trivial chance it might explode in your face. Best not to take that chance, hmm?"

"Unplanned excitement", you say," Zach dead-panned. "That doesn't exactly inspire confidence."

"I'm 97.3% sure it will work as expected," Silverlake said firmly.

There was a small silence as Silverlake looked at them expectantly, no doubt hoping one of them would ask her why it was 97.3 instead of 99 or something like that. She would be sorely disappointed. They both knew better than to humor her like that.

"I'm 97.3% sure you pulled that number out of your ass," Zorian told her bluntly. "But it doesn't matter. This month is approaching its end and time will soon reset itself. I'm going to drink this right away."

"Ah yes, the great time reset," Silverlake said. "You're still going on about that, huh? Well, did I ever tell you about—"

But Zorian wasn't listening anymore. He uncapped the potion bottle Silverlake handed to him and immediately drank the entire potion. The thick green liquid was bitter as hell, but otherwise unremarkable. For a few seconds, nothing happened...

...and then he experienced a sensation reminiscent of the soul-stealing move he had experienced when fighting the soulseizer chrysanthemum and his senses rapidly began to dim.

He lost consciousness.

- break -

When Zorian woke up, he found out two days had gone by. They had expected as much, though. According to what they knew, the process of gaining soul perception through this method always took at least a day, and could take as many as five. Some unfortunate souls, ignorant of this little detail, had been known to die of dehydration after drinking a potion like this in secret.

In regards to what had happened while he was unconscious, Zorian had only the fuzziest of recollections. He had periodically regained awareness throughout the process, but it was like trying to remember a dream. He remembered a series of senseless, disjoined images: a sea of suns connected by glowing threads, a massive volcano in the middle of an eruption, a carpet of smoke crawling across desolate lands...

Just like his usual dreams, in other words. He put it out of his mind, and focused on the important stuff... like whether he had successfully acquired soul sight or not.

The answer was that he had. It wasn't as instinctive as Zorian's mind magic, but Zorian had found a sufficient amount of instructions in Sudomir's mind to figure out what he had to do. So long as he poured mana into his soul in very specific ways, he could 'see' the souls of other people. It wasn't really sight as such, so much as a whole new sense that gave him headaches when he tried to process what it was really telling him, but that would improve with time and practice.

Overall, Zorian considered the whole thing to be a massive success. The only problem with the whole thing was that he had forgotten to mention to Imaya and Kirielle that he would be absent from home for several days, so Zach had to take the brunt of their ire and convince them not to report his disappearance to the police. Now all three were kind of annoyed with him...

Currently, Zorian was sort of hiding from them in Silverlake's pocket dimension. Of course, he did have a valid reason for being there, beside that – he was trying to find something that would convince her future self that the time loop is real. Silverlake did have a penchant for telling him little personal stories from time to time, but it was hard to discern which ones were fake and which ones real, so he doubted that would help him convince her in the future.

"Did you know I was considered a dangerous radical in my youth?" Silverlake asked him. Zorian didn't and told her so. "Oh yes. When I was born, the covens had already been on their last legs – Ikosian magic had shown itself to be mostly superior to our own spellcasting traditions. After all, most of *our* spells are long rituals involving lots of chanting and standing still for hours on end, or relied upon invoking the spirits of the land – who are notoriously fickle things if you ask me, you can never rely on them to aid you when you need them the most. The one thing we had going for us – our potion making – the Ikosians simply copied and then improved upon. I saw all this, and I decided to commit a huge heresy – I decided to study Ikosian methods in addition to the traditional education I received from my mother. My coven exiled me for it when they found out."

"Tragic," Zorian said. "But that wasn't quite what I was looking for. I'm pretty sure you wouldn't really be surprised if I revealed I knew this little tidbit of your past."

"No, of course not," Silverlake said. "I'm sure you could find out that and more if you really decided to investigate my history. If you came to me and started narrating my past, I'd just think you did your homework before coming to see me."

"Right," Zorian nodded. "So I'd really prefer if you gave me something more substantial. Surely you have some kind of private password that you could easily tell me without truly inconveniencing yourself. You can change it immediately after you tell me, so it's not like there is any danger I'll abuse it."

"Not during this month, no," Silverlake scoffed. "But what if you're right? I have no assurance you'll only use such a secret to convince my future self of your crazy tale – you could use it just as easily to rob her blind!"

"But you don't believe in the time loop?" Zorian tried.

"If I'm going to entertain a stupid hypothetical, I'm not going to do a half-assed job," Silverlake said, her tone brooking no argument. "But... hmm. I think I have it. Do you remember how you came in front of my home and made all that racket to draw my attention?"

"Of course," Zorian nodded. "It's one of the best moments of this month."

Silverlake took a sudden swipe at him with her bony, withered hand, but Zorian successfully dodged her strike.

"Brat. I should refuse to say anything now, but I don't want you pestering me about this further," Silverlake grumbled. "Anyway, at some point I actually considered the possibility of someone finding my abode and trying to catch my attention. I was thinking of what would be the proper, *polite* way of doing that, and I realized I would probably have to install some kind of doorbell or something. And that would be kind of incompatible with the whole hidden nature of this place, no?"

"Right," Zorian agreed. "So the doorbell would have to be hidden too, accessible only to people who have been told about it in advance."

"Exactly!" Silverlake said. "Now, in the end, I just scrapped the whole idea. I didn't want people visiting the place too casually. However, I did implement part of the system before I gave up. There is a stone in this place that emits shrill whistles when a special keystone is activated right outside the entrance to this dimension. These keystones were never actually made, so the whistle stone just sits there, uselessly gathering dust. I guess there is no harm in showing you how to create a matching keystone..."

"And that would convince you there's something funny going on?" Zorian asked.

"Well yes, I guess it would," Silverlake said. "I mean, I never actually made a single keystone, let alone distributed them to people. How could you possibly create one that matches perfectly with the whistle stone in my dimension? If you showed up holding one of those, that would catch my attention for sure."

Zorian grinned. He had a feeling their chances of convincing Silverlake in the future had just dramatically improved...

- break -

One of the more unexpected things about this restart was that Daimen had made a surprise decision to stay in Cyoria for the last few days of the restart. Zorian was not sure what exactly triggered this decision. Perhaps it was because Zorian had asked to borrow his divine artifice mirror for a little research or because his eldest brother had joined them in exploring the ruined palace inside the orb this time, but he suddenly decided he absolutely *must* see the invasion that occurs on the night of the summer festival.

Zorian thought nothing of it at first. Even when Daimen came to Cyoria a few days before the actual day of the invasion, making a mysterious claim that he had ‘something he needed to do’, Zorian just dismissed it as him wanting to talk with his old friends or whatever. Then Daimen came to him for help and Zorian realized he probably should have inquired deeper into what Daimen was doing while back home in Eldemar.

“No, Daimen,” Zorian told him firmly. “I am not going to set up a meeting between you and Fortov.”

“Come on, Zorian, this is our family at stake here,” Daimen pleaded.

“Oh, please,” Zorian protested. “You and Fortov not getting along with each other is not a crisis. That’s par for the course in our family. Stop being so melodramatic.”

“Crisis or no, this time loop is perfect for solving things like this, and it will take so little effort, too! Show some compassion for your big brother and do me a favor, eh?” Daimen insisted. “Haven’t I let you borrow my mirror when you asked, despite my better judgment? And let’s not forget about that secret room full of treasure that I found in the ruined palace – it would have taken you months to find that without me, if you ever did.”

Zorian made a sour face. Yes, Daimen was rather more helpful in this restart than he usually was. That secret room in particular… they were still sorting through the contents, but it would seem there were some very nice things hidden there. One of the daggers appeared to be a genuine divine artifact! They had no idea what it did yet, but even if it turned out to be underwhelming, it would be extremely valuable as a research subject and priceless trade good.

“Look,” Zorian said. “Using me as a lure so you can basically ambush Fortov out there in the open really doesn’t sit well with me. Don’t you think that’s kind of a jerk thing to do?”

“I thought you hated Fortov?” Daimen challenged, raising his eyebrow at him

“I don’t like him, but this sort of manipulative maneuver doesn’t sit well with me,” Zorian said. “Just go confront him directly, okay? I’m sure he’ll relent if you keep pestering him.”

“No, he won’t,” Daimen said slowly. “Do you think I’d suggest this if that worked? Besides, you’re looking at this the wrong way. You don’t have to trick him or anything. You said he always seeks you out at the end of the restart, so long as you don’t avoid him. Something about the cure for the purple creeper rash, yes?”

“Yes,” Zorian reluctantly admitted. “So you want me to just go somewhere where he can easily reach and wait for him to show up on his own?”

“Yes,” Daimen nodded. “Since you haven’t asked him to meet with you, he has no right to complain when it turns out I was in the vicinity.”

“Well… alright,” Zorian sighed. “Though if you have been pestering him these past few days, he might decide to deviate from his usual pattern. It’s amazing as it is that he *always* ends up pushing Ibery into that purple creeper patch. That has got to be a deliberate move on his part…”

“Mm,” Daimen agreed. “I should ask about that too, I guess.”

The final plan was very simple. Zorian would spend the evening walking around the city, occasionally casting divinations to see if Fortov was approaching. If he was, he would quickly seek shelter in one of the many coffee shops scattered around Cyoria, under the theory that Fortov was slightly less likely to start yelling at Daimen in the middle of a crowded coffee shop than in the middle of the street or whatever. Once Fortov sat down, Daimen would show up to crash the event.

Daimen’s little plot worked perfectly. Fortov did show up, looking for Zorian’s help in procuring an ‘anti-rash potion’. Zorian had already made the necessary salve before coming here, so he just handed the little jar full of salve to Fortov and sat back to finish the cup of tea he ordered.

Fortov looked down at the cure jar in his hand, fingering it awkwardly, and frowned at him.

“You just… happened to have that very specific cure lying around in your pocket?” Fortov asked Zorian incredulously. “What the hell, Zorian? Do you carry a whole apothecary with you at all times or something?”

Well, the way his pocket dimension creation skills were advancing, that might actually be a possibility in the future.

“I knew you’d be looking for that,” Zorian said. “I spoke to Ibery, after all.”

Fortov’s face twisted in surprise.

“She *spoke* to you!?” he asked, shocked. “Oh man… why me? Look, I… thank you for this, but…”

“You pushed her into that purple creeper patch deliberately, didn’t you?” Zorian said, not really asking so much as making an observation.

“It’s not that simple, okay?” Fortov said defensively. “You don’t know what she’s like. I know she looks quiet and all, but she was being really aggressive and wouldn’t take no for an answer and she kept trying to kiss me and… I guess I went a little overboard.”

“And a purple creeper patch just happened to be nearby?” Zorian asked. Fortov’s explanation was great and all, but how did that explain Ibery ending up in in that bush every single time?

"I deliberately took the purple creeper related task when they were distributing class assignments, because people usually avoid them like a plague. But that didn't deter her this time. I guess in retrospect it would have been smarter to take something where lots of other people would be nearby. At least that would stop her from trying to get physical with me..."

Zorian was going to inquire more about this, but this was the moment that Daimen finally showed up to crash the meeting. Strange... he actually kind of wished Daimen had taken longer to arrive. The story was just getting interesting...

"You again!" Fortov hissed, giving Daimen an angry glare. "Why can't you take the hint!? And how the hell are you even here? I thought you were supposed to be in Koth!"

"Please, I just wanted to talk, okay? Why are you being so..."

Zorian leaned back in his chair, taking another sip of his tea, and mentally toned down the volume of the shouting going around him. So much for the idea that Fortov would hold back because they were in a public location. But it didn't matter because this was Daimen's stage now and there was no need for him to get involved.

Well, there *wasn't* any need for it until both of them decided to pull him into their argument just because he was there. And because his 'smug attitude' pissed them off, apparently.

Sometimes he just couldn't win.

76. Critical Blunder

Chapter 076 Critical Blunder

The evening was a pleasant one, with cool winds blowing through the streets of Cyoria and the moon shining brightly in the sky. Zorian took it all in, feeling somewhat invigorated by the evening chill, and thought about life. It was interesting, Zorian mused, that even after all these years spent in the time loop, some simple experiences had eluded him until now.

Getting thrown out of a coffee shop for disturbing the other customers, for instance, was an entirely novel experience.

He glanced to the side, where Daimen and Fortov were currently having a tense face-off, staring at each other with serious expressions. He wasn't even angry, in all honesty. Yes, being ejected out of the building was mildly embarrassing, but it didn't bother him all that much. What *did* bother him was that even after causing such a commotion, they still failed to even establish what the problem was. Honestly, these two...

"Fortov, look..." Zorian began cautiously, "I understand you being mad at Daimen but you're only shooting yourself in the foot here. The reason Daimen sought you out is because he wants to know why you're angry with him. If you want to get rid of him, just tell him what your problem with him is and he'll go away. Well, probably."

"Don't you start," Fortov said, giving him a suspicious frown. "You helped him set this up, didn't you?"

"I didn't ask you to seek me out," Zorian pointed out calmly. "You decided that on your own. And nobody forced you to stay around and argue with Daimen, either. You already have the salve you came for, no? You could have just picked yourself up and left the moment Daimen showed up. That's what I'd have done in your place. The fact that you stayed around means you *do* want Daimen to know why you're angry after all."

For a second, Fortov just stared at him, a stony expression on his face. It was a somewhat alien look on the normally amiable Fortov.

"I so want to punch you in the face right now, you smug asshole," Fortov eventually said. "But I suppose there is something to that logic, so I'll restrain myself."

"Finally," Daimen mumbled, just loud enough for both of them to hear him. "All this dancing around and refusing to say what's bothering you, I almost thought you had turned into a woman while I wasn't looking."

Fortov glared furiously at him, to which Daimen reacted only by rolling his eyes. Thankfully, the shouting didn't start up again. It seemed that Fortov had gotten his anger out of his system a bit.

"Right, now, just before the nice waitress asked us to leave the premises, I believe you were saying something about your problems with the academy being Daimen's fault?" Zorian prompted. It was in his best interest to help Daimen get his answer now, or else the man would no doubt make more annoying plots like this one in upcoming restarts.

"Which is ridiculous," Daimen butted in. "We barely even interacted with each other by the time Fortov started attending the Academy in Cyoria."

"Yes!" Fortov said, pointing his index finger at Daimen with a stabbing motion. Then he repeated the gesture for emphasis. "Yes, that's exactly my problem! We barely interacted at all!"

"What?" Daimen asked comprehendingly.

"You don't even know what I'm talking about," Fortov said, more as a statement of fact than a question. "I think that's what pisses me off the most about this. You don't even remember! You've completely forgotten all about your promise!"

"Wha- What promise?" Daimen fumbled.

"You were supposed to help me!" Fortov burst out, pointing at Daimen again and then hitting himself in the chest with a closed fist to indicate himself. "Remember? I came to you before enrolling here and asked you if I could count on you to support me when I run into troubles at the Academy, and you said yes... you said I could always come to you for help if I needed it and that it's no issue, no issue at all..."

Daimen visibly winced at those words.

"Oh," he said weakly. "That."

"Yes, *that*," Fortov said sullenly. "I was such a fool to actually trust you on that. What good is a promise like that when you're always busy with something, always unreachable and brushing me off when you're not? You probably forgot about that promise the moment you made it... if you ever took it seriously at all."

"I made that promise in good faith," Daimen protested. "It's just that I had some professional opportunities come up afterwards that were too good to let go. Don't you think it's kind of unreasonable of you to expect me to sabotage my career just to help you with schoolwork? I mean, you could have always just asked Zorian for help instead and..."

Both Fortov and Zorian gave him a glare for that. Daimen considered his words for a moment and then mumbled something that was either a quick prayer to the gods or a colorful curse before dropping the idea and moving on.

“Anyway, moving on,” Daimen said, coughing into his fist. “I guess I kind of did fail you there. I do admit that. However, to say that makes me responsible for your academy problems, that’s still rubbish. Let’s be honest here Fortov... me helping you out every once in a while wouldn’t have made much of a difference in the grand scheme of things.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be ‘every once in a while’, you jerk...” Fortov protested.

Zorian stood off to the side, shaking his head as the two continued to argue. As minutes ticked by, it became obvious that this promise thing meant completely different things to Fortov than it did to Daimen. Fortov, it turned out, had understood Daimen’s promise as a commitment to a much heavier form of support. Though Fortov did not phrase things that way, Zorian understood his middle brother’s explanations for what they were: an admission that he expected to be carried along throughout his entire education on Daimen’s coattails. Daimen, on the other hand, probably made that promise without much thought put into it, thinking it a mere formality. He evidently expected that Fortov would come seek him out once every few months to ask a question or two and talk about girls and life and stuff.

Amusingly enough, he ended up not even getting *that* in the end...

“Can’t you see you’re being completely unreasonable?” Daimen said, gesticulating wildly. “Do you even hear what you’re saying? You basically expected me to do half of your work for you. That’s completely ridiculous!”

“He’s right, it is,” added Zorian, nodding sagely.

“I was just describing an ideal case, I would have been happy with even a fraction of it,” Fortov shot back. “And it doesn’t matter because in the end I got *nothing at all!* You gave me a promise and then you forgot you’d ever made it. That’s a jerk thing to do, no matter how you try to spin it.”

“He’s right, it is,” added Zorian, nodding sagely.

“Shut up, Zorian!” they both said in perfect synchronization.

Zorian pretended to stagger back from the outburst and mimicked clamping his mouth shut.

As for Daimen and Fortov, the two of them shared an uncertain look between each other before quietly deciding to calm down a little and take a step back. Zorian would have liked to claim that this was his plan all along, but truthfully he was just messing with them for his own amusement.

“But seriously, you’re being kind of crazy here,” Daimen said to Fortov again, a little more sedately this time. “I get that you’re having problems with your studies, but—”

“Man, you just don’t understand,” Fortov complained, cutting him off. “This city, this academy... it’s out of my league. I know this. I’ve *always* known this. I know my limits. I’m not as smart as you and Zorian...”

“You’re plenty smart, Fortov,” Zorian cut in. “You’re just lazy.”

Fortov didn’t even try to refute him, but Daimen gave him a sidelong glance.

“I thought you were going to keep quiet?” Daimen asked.

“I lied,” Zorian said with a careless shrug.

“Whatever,” Fortov said, exhaling heavily. “I’m not as *good* as you two. Happy now?” Zorian made a circular motion with his hand, signaling him to keep going. “Anyway, my point was that I only agreed to enroll here because Daimen said he would support me. If I had known I would have to do this alone, I would have told Mother and Father to enroll me somewhere else. Somewhere less... prestigious. But they pushed hard for this, saying what an opportunity this is and I thought... well, at least I’ll have my genius older brother there to help me sort things out...”

Zorian didn’t say anything after that, quietly waiting by the side and letting the two of them talk. He didn’t feel much compassion for Fortov’s plight. Daimen may have a cause for feeling a little guilty about how things turned out, but all Zorian saw was the same old Fortov he’d known from his childhood – a lazy, shallow asshole constantly looking for ways to shift his own responsibilities onto people around him. He was darkly amused when the two of them eventually decided to just take a step back and have another meeting in a week or so... something that would never happen, and Daimen damn well knew so.

Oh well, it wasn’t really Zorian’s problem. That is, until Fortov left the scene and Daimen tried to *make it* his problem...

“No, Daimen, I am not going to delve into the hows and whys of Fortov’s failures and assemble a tutoring program for him,” Zorian bluntly told him.

“Why not? You do for Kirielle and even that female friend of yours,” Daimen said. “He’s your *brother*, Zorian.”

“Sorry, but you can’t guilt-trip me into doing this. Mother’s antics have made me completely immune to guilt-trips,” Zorian said dispassionately. “I am sick and tired of having to pick up after Fortov’s failures time and time again. How about you do it for once in your life? You’re the one who

made a promise that you failed to keep, no? Don't you think it's in poor taste to try fobbing this off on me so quickly after your little heart-to-heart with Fortov?"

"The restart is just about to end, when else am I going to talk to you about this if not now?" Daimen protested. "And I don't retain memories over the restarts like you do, that's why I can't do it."

"But you can leave yourself notes at the end of each restart and work on the problem that way," Zorian countered. "You are doing that very thing in order to figure out how to get Mother and Father to accept your marriage to Orissa, so I don't see why you can't apply it here too."

Daimen frowned, either because he did not like the idea or because he was reminded of how utterly he had failed in his task of convincing them thus far.

"He's your *brother*, Daimen," Zorian said, flinging his words back at him

"Ugh," Daimen grumbled. "You can be such a little shit sometimes... Fine, you win. I guess it has to be me. But I'll need you to do me a small favor..."

- break -

One restart ended and a new one began. At the start of the new restart, Zach and Zorian immediately invaded Jornak's home, knocking him out, kidnapping him and searching his home. They found Veyers dead in the guest room, just like Jornak's story in the previous restart suggested they would. Using his brand new soul perception and a couple of soul magic forensic spells he had stolen from Sudomir's mind (unsurprisingly, necromancers had a very developed tradition of analytic spells meant to be used on corpses), Zorian determined that Veyers was in a virtually identical situation as the soul-killed aranea beneath Cyoria.

Normally, when one's soul was ripped out of their body, there would be subtle signs left etched into the flesh of the deceased, and these could be used to infer the method of extraction used. Neither the aranea nor Veyers showed such traces, though – it was as if they were merely flesh puppets that had never held any life to begin with.

They had expected such a result, but it was nice to have things confirmed so clearly.

After examining Veyers' body, they moved on to Jornak. Zorian had expected the young lawyer to be absolutely livid at them, but the way they just barged into his home and brutally subdued him must have clued him in to the fact they weren't here on behalf of regular law enforcement. Or maybe it was their age – Zorian sometimes forgot to account for that little detail, as he felt pretty old these days, but he and Zach still looked like teenagers. Jornak was thus a lot more subdued this time around, too terrified about what they wanted to do with him to put up much of a resistance. Sadly, interrogating him with the aid of truth potions and mind magic yielded very little of note. Everything was mostly as Jornak had said in the previous restart, except that Veyers was also something of an informant for the young lawyer in addition to being a 'friend' – he basically reported anything interesting that occurred in his House to Jornak, who then forwarded the information to the Cult of the World Dragon. Thus, Veyers was something of an unwitting low-level spy for the Cult.

Finally, Zach and Zorian sat down one day to discuss their findings and what they meant regarding the identity of Red Robe.

"So," Zach began, "we've confirmed that Veyers is either Red Robe or connected to him in some fashion. His body is clearly just a meat puppet that never held a soul to begin with, just like the bodies of your aranean friends beneath the city. Either he was somehow connected to Red Robe and the man decided to use soulkill on him, or he *is* Red Robe and this is what happens to a controller's body when they leave the time loop. Is that about right?"

"It is," Zorian confirmed. "Additionally, the fact Red Robe saw fit to delete your memories of Veyers reinforces his importance. We haven't been able to find anyone else whose entire presence had been scoured from your mind, so whatever link he has to Red Robe isn't small."

"He also has a reason to be bitter at the city and a link to the Invasion, however tenuous," Zach added. "Yeah, he could totally be Red Robe. Even his height and build matches what I remember of him when he attacked me at the start of that one restart..."

"Sadly, that is not real proof of anything," Zorian said, shaking his head. "At the level of skill we are working at, that sort of thing is trivially easy to fake. All it takes is a quick transformation spell and you could radically change your height and build."

"Well, he did attack me at the very start of the restart when he was undoubtedly in a hurry and didn't have much time to make detailed preparations. Maybe it slipped his mind? You have a better memory than I do and you saw him up close... how does the Red Robe in your mind compare to Veyers?"

Zorian considered it carefully. After a while he decided that Zach was right – Veyers did have the appropriate height and build to be the Red Robe in his memories.

"It is as you say," Zorian said slowly. "He does kind of fit under that robe. But really, in order to get to the bottom of this, we need to find out what happens when a controller leaves the time loop. This should tell us whether Veyers is just a soulkilled victim or the very mastermind we are looking for."

"And how are we supposed to do *that*?" Zach complained. "That stupid Guardian of the Threshold thing refuses to entertain hypotheticals like that. We already asked it what happens in this scenario, remember? It simply insisted that no such thing could transpire. Besides, we still don't

know what method Red Robe used to leave. If he's a later addition to the time loop like you assume he is, he couldn't have used the normal method to do so. He would have run into the problem of his original already having a soul, which should have led to the Guardian refusing to cooperate. Depending on what method Red Robe used to leave the time loop, the answer to the question of what would happen to his body might radically change..."

"Not necessarily," Zorian said. "One thing that always stuck with me about Red Robe is that he honestly seemed concerned about the possibility of there being a large number of other time travelers involved in the time loop. That means that he knew of a very easy and reliable way of inducing people in the time loop and thought it was entirely plausible that someone was using it on a mass scale."

"He did seem quite certain that there were a lot of other time travelers lurking around," Zach said, frowning. "My memory of that time is not the best, but that did appear to be the main thing he sought answers about when he probed my mind that night..."

"Right," Zorian said. "And this method couldn't have been the same as what I went through, because what happened to me is highly dangerous to the marker donor and probably doesn't give consistent results. It also couldn't have been something that is hard to set up, or else Red Robe wouldn't have accepted it happening so readily and on such a large scale..."

If you stumble upon this tale on Amazon, it's taken without the author's consent. Report it.

"So what is it then?" Zach asked impatiently. "I'm guessing you have some sort of answer, or else you wouldn't be mentioning it. Don't try to re-enact those cheap detective novels with me, please. I always found the long reveals in those books to be really annoying..."

"Fine, I'll be blunt," Zorian sighed. Killjoy. "I think Red Robe was simply using a modified temporary marker to persist in the time loop. Sure, they're supposed to last only six months, but that's probably just an extra restriction rather than something inherent in the marker itself. And my own marker demonstrates quite clearly that these markers can be damaged. Perhaps *selectively* damaged, allowing people to remove some of the functions."

"There have to be some protections against that," Zach frowned. "I doubt that the makers of the system would just allow people to tinker with their work like that."

"Possibly," Zorian conceded. "Not having seen any temporary marker yet, I can offer little except baseless speculation. But still, this seems to me like the most likely and straightforward way for Red Robe to enter the time loop."

Zach considered his words for a while before giving it a careless shrug and focusing his attention back to Zorian.

"Well... alright," Zach shrugged. "Let's assume you're right. So what? How does that relate to what we were talking about?"

"Well, the temporary markers are supposed to be *temporary*," Zorian said. "There is probably a clear course of action meant to be done when they run out and the person they were supporting... disappears. And this course of action will probably be performed even if the person disappears prematurely through some other method."

"Oh!" Zach said, slapping himself in the forehead. "Of course! So if Red Robe entered the time loop through a 'selectively damaged' temporary marker, all we have to do to find out what would happen after he leaves... is place a temporary marker on someone and see what happens after it runs out."

"Exactly," Zorian nodded.

A brief silence descended on the scene.

"You know," Zach began after a while, "I'm pretty sure we already know the answer to that question. It probably just recreates a person from its usual template, as if they were never a temporary looper to begin with. I have no proof of this, but it intuitively makes sense to me."

"You are probably correct," Zorian nodded. "I also have no proof, but it is consistent with the intent of the time loop as the training simulation to set things up in that fashion."

"Which would mean that Veyers isn't Red Robe," Zach continued with that line of thought. "Red Robe should have ended up as a normal person with no memory of his time looping self, not a soulless corpse."

"If he really did enter the time loop via a modified temporary marker, that is probably the case," Zorian nodded.

"Hmm," Zach hummed thoughtfully, tapping his fingers against his chin. "So let's assume for a moment that Veyers is just a broken link. I still think he's the most likely candidate for Red Robe, but whatever – your theory does sound rather plausible. Who is Veyers linked to? Jornak? Is he Red Robe?"

"He could be, I guess," Zorian said uncertainly. "I mean, I see no real evidence for that, and the man is not very impressive..."

"We weren't very impressive before the time loop happened to us, either," Zach pointed out.

"True," Zorian said. "I'm not saying it's impossible for Jornak to be Red Robe, just that I see no real evidence *for* the idea."

“Did Veyers have any other friends and associates other than Jornak?” Zach asked.

“I think he did, but Jornak did not know who these people were,” Zorian said. “Veyers didn’t like to talk about his personal life and Jornak didn’t pry into it too much. The fact that Veyers chose to take shelter in Jornak’s place might be artificially skewing our perception of how close they were – they weren’t really *that* close. Jornak was actually quite surprised when Veyers came knocking on his door with a plea to let him stay for a while, and even contemplated refusing.”

They discussed things for another hour or so before deciding to shelve the discussion for now. They would be interrogating Jornak in more detail in upcoming days, which would hopefully shed more light on the issue. They also intended to use pieces of Veyers’ body as divination tools to try and track his movement while he was alive. They would have to do this very, very carefully though, lest they get tracked down themselves by the Boranova House investigators.

Eventually the two of them retired into one of the quieter, less frequented taverns on the outskirts of the city and sat down to have a drink and talk about less serious topics. The waitress gave Zorian a really weird look when he ordered fruit juice instead of anything alcoholic and Zach mocked him for it, but Zorian wasn’t really bothered about that. Instead he decided to make use of this opportunity to complain about the family drama that Daimen forced him to participate in near the end of the previous restart.

“Oh man, your family is such a train wreck,” Zach laughed. “It’s not even funny, except it kind of is. Though I have to admit, I kind of get the urge to defend Fortov when you explain his situation like that. I mean, I understand why you feel the way you do, but us fuck-ups needs to look out for each other, you know?”

“What do you— Oh yeah, you were kind of doing badly in the Academy yourself, weren’t you?” Zorian suddenly realized. He winced. “Sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

“No, it’s fine,” Zach said, shaking his head. “I’m not insulted. Much like Fortov, I too had excuses for my poor performance. But I understand now that they were just that: excuses. Perhaps Fortov will eventually learn his lesson as well, eh?”

“Perhaps,” Zorian agreed diplomatically.

Zach responded by taking a deep sip out of his beer keg and then leaned back in his chair in contentment.

“You know, every time I think about what my future would have been like if I never got pulled into this time loop thing, I get both furious and horrified,” Zach said, staring at the ceiling of the tavern with unfocused eyes. “It’s been so long but I remember what it was like so very vividly... How I lived in an empty, half-abandoned house, constantly hearing about how I was expected to rebuild my entire House from scratch and feeling utterly lost as to how I can accomplish it. How I eventually decided it was a hopeless task and began to coast by on the least amount of effort I could get away with and just tried to keep myself happy. But hey, it was fine! I had plenty of money! I mean, that was why Tesen fired all the servants and sold off all our properties, right? So it doesn’t matter if I don’t do too well at the academy and have no real professional skills. Everything will work out... just... *fine!*”

Zach suddenly finished off his beer keg and then slammed it violently onto the cheap wooden table. The tavern workers all turned towards them, and for a moment Zorian thought he would be thrown out of a building for the second time in two restarts, but in the end they just shook their heads slightly and went about their work. Evidently this was not a rare occurrence around here.

“I’m getting angry again,” Zach explained unnecessarily. “I shouldn’t be talking about this while drinking.”

Zorian scratched his cheek awkwardly, not sure how to respond to that. He was really regretting starting the topic about Fortov now...

“You know what the problem with teaming up with you is?” Zach asked him suddenly, staring intently into his eyes. He didn’t wait for his answer. “I can’t start a restart by beating Tesen into a bloody pulp anymore. I used to do that every once in a while to work out my frustrations.”

Zorian remembered that. It used to occur quite frequently, leading up to a lot of speculation about Zach and his reasons for doing that...

“It’s probably for the best you stopped doing that,” Zorian told him. “You might develop unhealthy habits and end up becoming a fugitive for no good reason once we’re out of the time loop. That would be a pretty sad way for all this to end, no?”

“I guess,” Zach said. “But it was *so* satisfying...”

Zach eyed his keg for a couple of seconds, as if considering if he should get himself another, before sighing and pushing it to the side. Good. He’d rather not deal with a drunk Zach right now.

“What do you intend to do about Tesen, anyway?” Zorian asked. “When we get out of the time loop, I mean.”

“What else? I’m going to sue him into oblivion,” Zach said. “He may be powerful and well connected, but I still have some friends in high places and he was pretty brazen in his actions. He broke the law when he robbed me of my inheritance and I’ll do my best to make him pay for it through official channels. If that doesn’t work... well, I hope it doesn’t get to that.”

“I see,” Zorian said. “I didn’t see you do any research on the topic thus far...”

“I’ve already done all the preparations a long time ago,” Zach said. “I have all the evidence I need, I know how to blindside him when putting

things into motion and I can afford to hire the best damn lawyers in the country to represent me. There is nothing more that can be done within the confines of the restart. These kind of legal cases take years of legal wrangling, not weeks. Still, a strong start does count for a lot and all the lawyers I spoke with tell me I have a good chance of winning.”

“That’s good,” Zorian nodded slowly. “Though I have a suspicion Tesen and his faction won’t limit themselves to mere legal wrangling in their attempts to deal with you.”

“I know,” Zach grinned. “But you know me. I don’t shy away from danger. Let them come. It will just give me a stronger case when it turns up what they’ve been up to.”

“Anything I can do to help?” Zorian asked.

“Probably not, actually,” Zach said, shaking his head. “This is mostly a job for lawyers, not for the likes of us. Once I put things into motion, I just need to keep the money flowing and ward off any assassination attempts and the like. But we’ll see. Rest assured I will not be too shy to ask for help from my fellow time traveler.”

The conversation wound down after that, and they each went their separate ways for the day. The upcoming days were going to be somewhat busy ones, involving a great deal of preparations and planning.

It was time to visit Silverlake again... and this time they planned to seriously try and convince her that the time loop is real.

- break -

When Zach and Zorian showed at Silverlake’s hidden base, they came carrying the grey hunter’s egg sack and the ancient giant salamander that Silverlake was looking for. The eggs were acquired in the exact same way they had been in the previous restart. As for the salamander, they just went to the same place Zorian had found it in the past and then started their search from there. Eventually, after two whole days of searching up and down the river and examining nearby hiding places, they found the giant salamander buried in the mud of one of the flooded caverns, almost undetectable if one didn’t know what to look for. Without an appropriate starting point, it would have taken them forever to track it down.

But no matter, the point was that they had both of the ingredients that Silverlake wanted so badly for her youth potion, and Zorian had created the keystone that Silverlake had shown him how to make in the previous restart. They also loaded up a bunch of combat golems into the portable palace orb, ready to be taken out at a moment’s notice, just in case Silverlake reacted badly to their approach... something that was entirely possible, but unavoidable. They didn’t have the time to take things slowly anymore.

“I’m ready,” Zach said, twirling a combat staff in his fingers to pass the time. “Go ahead and ring the bell.”

Zorian nodded and activated the keystone in his hands. Nothing visible happened, but Zorian was sure he had performed the action correctly. Now they could only wait.

They had to wait a surprisingly long time, longer than they had to the last time they had come here. Zorian suspected this was because Silverlake was studying them from inside before deciding to come out, and this time they had come more heavily armed and visibly dangerous. Eventually, however, she decided to greet them anyway. The fact that Zach had gotten bored at some point and started building a giant statue of himself via alteration spells right outside her home might have motivated her to hurry up.

“How the hell did you activate that old piece of junk?” She immediately demanded, squinting at each of them suspiciously. “I never gave anyone a matching keystone. Hell, I never even *made* any matching keystones. Suspicious. Very, very suspicious. Who are you two?”

“To answer your last question, I am Zach Noveda and this is Zorian Kazinski. We are but humble academy students coming here to pay our respects to a living legend,” Zach flattered shamelessly. Silverlake snorted derisively at him, saying nothing. “And also to arrange for a trade, I guess. Or should I say... re-negotiate our existing one? After all, this is the second time we’re meeting like this.”

“I don’t think so?” Silverlake said curiously. “I don’t remember you. I may be old, but I’m pretty sure I’d never forget a couple of brats as brazen as you two. I mean, I kind of like that kind of attitude, but only when it’s directed at other people...”

“That’s just because your memory of our meeting has been wiped clean from your mind,” Zorian said in a carefree manner. “Nothing to worry about. Anyway, here is a gift.”

Zorian reached into his backpack and withdrew a bottle of brandy and a box of sweets from it, which he then handed to a surprised Silverlake. She made no move to claim them, looking at both objects like they were poisonous vipers.

“A gift?” she asked emotionlessly.

“It is customary to bring gifts when visiting someone,” Zorian said sagely. “It’s an important tradition.”

Silverlake made a sour face at that explanation. She spent a few more seconds scrutinizing the two objects before finally deciding they were probably harmless. She took them both from his hands and immediately stuffed them into one of her jacket pockets. Even though the heavy bottle and the large box of sweets shouldn’t have possibly been able to fit into that tiny jacket pocket, they somehow did.

What a casual use of pocket dimension creation... Zorian couldn’t help but feel a little jealous. He wouldn’t be able to duplicate that feat, and in

fact didn't even know how to go about achieving it. He could only extend the space of rigid containers right now, and had no idea how to use something as flexible as a pocket as a base for a pocket dimension. He knew it was unreasonable to expect to be as good as Silverlake after only a month of instruction, but this was a pretty stark reminder of how far he had to go to match the old witch's expertise in that regard.

Silverlake grinned at him in triumph, savoring this little victory for all it was worth.

"Let's back up a bit, shall we?" she asked, a little more confident this time. "You said something about my memory being wiped?"

"Yes," Zach nodded. "You see, about a month ago we came to you with a certain offer..."

And Zach started giving Silverlake the summarized version of what happened in the previous restart, though they took pains to temporarily omit any mention of the time loop itself. They figured it would immediately make Silverlake disbelieve anything else they had to say if they started with that. Instead they just narrated the general terms of their deal and the way she had instructed them in the art of pocket dimension creation and occasionally sent them on random errands.

And they used plenty of props in their explanation. When they spoke of how they offered the previous version of Silverlake grey hunter's eggs, they took the eggs they obtained in this restart out of the portable palace orb and showed them to her. When they spoke of how Silverlake told them she also needed an ancient giant salamander to complete her youth potion, they took out the living salamander they captured and showed it off as well.

Silverlake's eyes shone brightly when she saw the two alchemical ingredients she wanted the most laid out in front of her, but she remained silent and motionless as she listened to their story in a rapt manner.

When it came time to move the story into Silverlake's home dimension, though, her expression fell and turned grave. This was because Zorian started using illusionary scenes from his memory to illustrate his points. Normally these kinds of illusory images weren't worth much as a proof. After all, nothing stopped the illusionist from fabricating things, and people's memories tended to be kind of fuzzy in even the best of cases. However, Zorian had the ability to remember a scene down to the tiniest detail and it wasn't like one could randomly invent a detailed layout of Silverlake's dimension and be correct. He could replicate the image of her favorite cauldron down to the tiniest scratch and replicate the exact number of dried onions and mushrooms hanging from the hooks on her wall. It was a pretty damning proof that he had at least been there at some point, even if he wasn't telling the truth about anything else, and Silverlake clearly knew it.

"Stop, stop," she suddenly told him, waving her hand in a forceful manner. She looked honestly shaken at the sight of these images. "I... I need to check something."

Zach and Zorian stood by the side while Silverlake started casting one diagnostic spell after another on herself. Occasionally she would stop and mutter to herself in some alien Khusky tongue that neither Zach nor Zorian had ever encountered, before shaking her head and continuing with her self-diagnostics.

After that she started examining the entrance to her dimension before wordlessly disappearing inside. Zach and Zorian still waited patiently, not saying anything. She returned twenty minutes later, looking more disturbed than ever.

"It doesn't make sense," she loudly proclaimed. "None of this makes sense. My memory is fine. It hasn't been tampered with. I *know* it hasn't, because there are always, *always* traces left when one does so and my mind doesn't have any. But you've clearly been inside my home long enough to dig up that old stone and puzzle out a matching keystone for it, long enough to memorize every corner of it down to the smallest detail. Except there is no trace of illegal entry, not even the faintest whiff of it, and there is no way in all the hells and all the heavens I'd ever forget letting someone like you inside. And your story! What a bunch of rubbish! You say you sold me grey hunter's eggs a whole month ago, yet I see no evidence I've ever processed them! And now you come here with a new sack of grey hunter's eggs, as if those can be acquired just by going into your neighborhood store or something. Who are you people and what is happening here!?"

She punctuated her statement by making a sweeping hand gesture, causing two huge, hulking humanoids of earth to suddenly coalesce out of the soil around them.

Earth elementals, and not minor ones either. However...

"Should we...?" Zach mouthed.

Zorian quietly nodded and made a sweeping gesture of his own, though his one was mostly for show, not because he actually needed to make it. Then again, maybe it was the same for Silverlake. In any case, he made use of the time needed to make the gesture to reach out into the ever-useful orb, causing a bunch of equally huge and hulking war golems to pop into existence next to them.

"We don't want to fight," Zorian said. "But if you really insist on it, I guarantee you it won't end in your favor."

Rather than answer him, Silverlake stomped her foot on the ground, causing a set of heavy, potent wards to radiate out of the entrance to her pocket dimensions. The warding scheme quickly enclosed the entire area, shutting down their teleportation, filling the area with fog, inhibiting their shaping skills, disturbing their souls...

Even as Silverlake was making her move, though, Zorian was doing the same. He quickly reached into his backpack again and retrieved from it a truncated pyramid made out of glittering blue stone. He threw it in front of him, and it promptly righted itself in the air and began to hover there, golden lines and glyphs suddenly appearing on its surface. In a blink of an eye, it had enclosed Zach, Zorian and their war golems under a dome of

yellow light.

Silverlake's wards crashed into the dome... and were immediately halted in their tracks. The old witch was way better than Zorian in a number of fields, but her skill at setting up wards wasn't one of them. Not to mention that wards were always more effective as a means of defense than they were as an offensive tool.

There was a tense silence as the two sides stared at each other from behind their respective barriers. After about a minute of this, Silverlake suddenly sighed and commanded the earth elementals to merge back into the earth and the wards to retreat back into her pocket dimension. After a second of hesitation, Zach and Zorian similarly put away their own defenses.

"Well..." Silverlake said, sounding surprisingly chirpy and relaxed. She chuckled at their wary postures and serious faces. "I really suffered a loss this time, didn't I? I guess this is what I get for trying to escalate things into combat. I was never that much of a fighter, truth be told. I don't suppose we could all forget this ever happened, hmm?"

"Sure, let's," Zach said, giving her a friendly grin. "It's probably for the best if this never happens again, though. I only ever give people two chances."

"Oh?" Silverlake said, cocking her head sideways like a curious bird. "Oh, I see. Everything I've been met with thus far is your friend's work, but he isn't actually the combat specialist. *You* are. And you never even made a move thus far..." She shook her head, speaking to herself self-deprecatingly. "Silly old girl, making such blunders at your age... it's just as they say: you learn all your life and still die a fool. Though there should hopefully be no dying for me just yet..."

"In any case," said Zorian, coughing into his fist to attract her attention, "I believe I have an answer for the concerns you expressed just before this... unpleasantness. You were wondering how this was all possible, yes?"

"Yes," she bluntly confirmed. "I'm *very* curious as to how this could happen."

"It's like this," said Zorian, creating another illusory scene, this one depicting the planet they lived on, spinning placidly in the air. "There is an artifact from the Age of Gods that can take our entire world, take a snapshot of every single thing in existence and create a flawless copy of it in a giant pocket dimension..."

Surprisingly, after Zorian had gotten about halfway into the story, Silverlake suddenly started to ask a series of rapid-fire questions about the Sovereign Gate, the Guardian of the Threshold, the exact mechanics of the time loop itself, and so on.

"Alright, you can stop now," she eventually said, tapping her leg with her bony fingers. "I think I know what's going on now. Well, somewhat. And if I'm right, then there is a very easy way to check if you're telling the truth or not."

Zach and Zorian perked up at her words.

"Oh?" Zach asked excitedly.

Silverlake grinned, obviously enjoying the fact that she knew something they didn't. Or at least thought she did – Zorian wasn't going to get excited before he heard what she actually had to say. For all he knew, she was just trying to patch up her wounded pride.

"Tell me," she said, "have you two ever heard about the primordials?"

77. Testing

Chapter 077

Testing

Primordials were strange, enigmatic creatures. They were supposedly first-born children of the primordial dragon from which the world was fashioned, ancient and powerful. In life, their abilities had rivaled those of the gods themselves. In death, they had spawned a multitude of lesser primordials to continue their struggle. One would think that such fearsome beings and everything related to them would be vividly remembered by history, but this was not the case. In his search for primordial prisons outside Cyoria, Zorian had consulted many church documents, historical records and elementals, largely in vain. Primordials may have been powerful and frightening in their heyday, but they had been sealed away thousands of years ago. That was a lot of time for information to be forgotten, especially since the gods had actively tried to limit knowledge of them and their prisons while they had still been active in the world. Thus, finding any substantial information on them was quite hard.

Moreover, even when such information was found, it was hard to gauge how much of it was reliable and how much of it was pure fabrication. A lot of the stories that bothered going into the details of the nature of primordials were mutually contradictory, and there was no way to test any of them to see which one was closer to the truth than the others.

"In other words, you know virtually nothing about primordials except that they exist and that one of them is imprisoned in Cyoria," Silverlake concluded after hearing their explanation.

"Yeah, pretty much," Zach confirmed. Although they were searching for the locations of other primordial prisons in their free time, that hadn't produced much in the way of actual results. "What does this have to do about confirming the truth of our story, though?"

"Patience, boy, patience," Silverlake urged smugly. "A house must be built from the foundation up. In order to answer that question, I must first show you the truth about primordials and the way they were imprisoned..."

Oh? She could actually answer those questions? Zorian was torn between excitement and a healthy dose of caution. On one hand, this was a powerful witch that has lived through more than a century – surely she wouldn't be making claims like that without a good reason to be confident? On the other hand... well, it was Silverlake.

After some thought, he decided to voice his concerns to the old witch in front of him.

"Ignorant brat," she complained. "Do you think I'd be joking about something this serious!?"

Zach and Zorian shared a knowing look between each other.

"Well... yeah," Zach said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Now that you mention it, that does sound like something I would derive dark amusement from," Silverlake mused, rubbing her chin with her hand as she stared at the tree branches above her.

"Not exactly something you should be proud of," Zorian pointed out unhappily.

"Anyway, do you want to hear what I have to say or not?" Silverlake asked loudly, abandoning her musing pose in favor of folding her hands over her chest and looking at them both defiantly.

"Sure we do," Zorian said. As annoying as the old witch was, she had some very unique skills and insights that were almost impossible to find elsewhere. "Let's hear it."

Silverlake stayed silent for a few seconds. Before either Zach or Zorian could say anything about that, the entrance to her secret hideout flared into life again and another Silverlake stepped out of it, carrying a large brown book in her hands.

Zorian raised an eyebrow at this. Silverlake having some kind of duplicate was not that surprising. There were lots of spells that duplicated the appearance of a caster in some way, after all. Even if it was an actual simulacrum, Zorian still wouldn't find it unusual, since Silverlake was clearly proficient in soul magic. The really interesting question was which Silverlake was the real thing: the one they've been talking to all this time or the one that had just walked out of her dimensional hideout?

He activated his newly-acquired soul perception and took a look.

It was not easy for Zorian to use his soul perception. Training it had been slow and frustrating thus far, though he had been told by Alanic that he was doing just fine by normal standards. He'd had the ability for less than a month, so it was to be expected that his control over it was crude and that he had trouble interpreting what it was telling him. Zorian imagined this was how non-psychics felt when they tried to train their non-structured mind magic into something usable.

Still, identifying whether something in front of him had a soul or not was well within his modest capabilities. With that in mind, he focused his soul perception on Silverlake and immediately realized that she indeed had a soul. She wasn't an illusion, a remote-controlled puppet or a simulacrum, then. So they *had* actually been talking to the real Silverlake up till now; that was nice to know. Just to be thorough, he shifted his soul perception to the approaching book-carrying Silverlake and...

She had a soul too. What?

Zorian shifted his attention between one Silverlake and the other repeatedly, trying to work out what was happening here. It was no use, though – his soul perception simply wasn't sophisticated enough to unravel this mystery and he didn't want to start casting analytical divinations at the old witch and her weird clone. Blatantly scanning someone without their explicit permission was widely considered to be rather rude and insulting behavior.

The other Silverlake soon reached the one Zach and Zorian had been talking to and gave her the book she was carrying. The first Silverlake glanced at the book, nodded slightly and then snapped her fingers.

The other Silverlake seemingly imploded, badly startling both Zach and Zorian, her form collapsing into a smoky black ball. The ball existed for only a moment before reforming itself into a large black bird, which promptly hopped onto Silverlake's shoulder. It was a raven, Zorian realized.

'Of course!' Zorian thought, slapping himself in the forehead. Silverlake had a raven familiar! The link between a mage and their familiar allowed both of them to assume the form of one another really easily, provided that the mage knew the proper spells.

And Silverlake no doubt knew the proper spells, because familiar magic was one of the things that witches were known to be really fond of. Hell, she'd even found the way to shield the raven's mind from scrutiny, preventing Zorian from easily identifying it as a shapeshifted animal.

Zorian opened his mouth to say something but was interrupted when Silverlake tried to blow away the layer of dust on the cover of the book and ended up sending herself into a coughing fit due to all the dust suddenly flying into her face.

The raven cawed indignantly at this, flapping his wings a couple of times for emphasis.

"Shut up," Silverlake said to the raven in between her coughing and wheezing. She glanced towards Zach and Zorian. "And why are you two just standing around like that! Come closer and take this blasted thing away already! Who do you think I brought it for? Do you think I wanted to refresh my memory or something?"

Zorian stepped closer and Silverlake immediately pushed the large leather-bound tome into his hands. He grunted softly and took a step back, caught off-guard by her sudden movement and the book's considerable weight. Damn, this thing was heavy...

"Read this and everything will become clear," Silverlake said, finally getting her breathing under control.

Zorian eyed the heavy leather book in his hands suspiciously. The cover was brown and non-descript, with a title that proclaimed, in plain white letters, that this was a collection of cookie recipes. Flipping the random pages of the book seemed to reinforce this claim.

He glanced at Silverlake and saw that both she and the raven perched on her shoulder were eying him closely, waiting for his reaction.

With a small sigh, Zorian swiped his hand across the book and cast an appropriate dispel, shredding the illusion covering the book into pieces. Following that, he was confronted with a lot less innocuous title: *Unspeakable Cults, Volume Four*.

"You just can't resist pulling these kinds of tricks all the time, can you?" Zorian asked rhetorically.

"You made a lot of tall claims today," Silverlake shrugged. "It's only natural for me to test them every now and then in small ways. If you two are really a bunch of old time travelers like you claim to be, a simple illusion wouldn't have posed a problem for you. Besides, I can't exactly leave a book like this out in the open without disguising it somehow..."

"What do you mean?" Zach frowned.

"*Unspeakable Cults* is one of the most widely banned series of books circulating around Altazia and Xlotic," Zorian explained, idly leafing through the book. All sorts of ghastly drawings and descriptions immediately assaulted his eyes. "It was written by an anonymous author that had a penchant for infiltrating secretive cults and mage organizations so he could observe their ceremonies and activities. No one is quite sure how he did it, but considering the furor the books created, it's clear he didn't make it all up. Anyway, after infiltrating all these cults and watching them for gods know how long, he wrote a series of eight books that go into great detail about what he had seen. Every debauchery he had seen, every messed up sacrifice or morally-bankrupt experiment is described in great detail, and he even illustrated some scenes with drawings and diagrams. Although the books contain no actual spells or ritual setups, they have been banned almost everywhere as blasphemous, degenerate filth."

He closed the book, eying it in great distaste. He really didn't want to read this stuff...

"I don't suppose you're going to tell me what page I should be looking at?" Zorian asked Silverlake, staring at her pleadingly.

Silverlake just grinned at him nastily. Damn witch...

Zorian glanced towards Zach speculatively, but the boy immediately shook his head at him before he could even open his mouth.

"No, no, no," Zach said quickly, extending his arms in front of him in a warding gesture. "Sorry Zorian, but this definitely sounds like a job for you. You have a lot higher tolerance for this kind of stuff than I do."

Ugh. As much as Zorian hated to admit this, his fellow time traveler kind of had a point. Reading the minds of high-ranking cultists, Sudomir, Ibasan invaders and others had shown him enough of the dark side of humanity that he had been numbed to the horror of it all to a large extent.

He still didn't want to wade into a book like this one, though, so he decided to get a little creative. He started casting divination after divination spell at the book, trying to divine the section of the book that Silverlake wanted him to read. This was harder than it sounded, because the book was heavily warded against divinations and did not ever mention primordials by name, but Zorian was very good at divinations by now. Especially these kinds of divinations. He'd had his simulacrum in charge of researching mountains of documentation for obscure clues for quite a while now, so a task like this was pure routine by this point.

After five minutes or so he found the section that seemed right and flipped the book open. Both Silverlake and Zach peered over his shoulder to look at the page he had picked.

"You're no fun, boy," Silverlake said, scowling at him.

Zorian took that as an admission that he had indeed found the right page to start at and began to read.

The chapter in question described a small cult of mages, 'somewhere in Xlotic', which worshipped an entity imprisoned behind some kind of 'dimensional veil'. They did this by capturing unwary travelers, implanting some sort of magical worms into their brain and then forcibly establishing contact between their mind and the mind of the imprisoned entity. Normally, mental contact with the entity resulted in quick insanity as one's mind was overwhelmed by the flood of incomprehensible thoughts and images, but the chemicals released by the worms as they fed on the victim's brain tissue somehow allowed them to last longer under this assault. Drugged out of their minds to keep them talking and half-insane, the victims would then spend the next couple of hours screaming, pleading, cursing and babbling gibberish while the cultists diligently wrote down their feverish ravings for later study.

After repeating this process gods know how many times, the cultists eventually assembled a fair amount of information about this entity, which the cultists called 'the Golden-Feathered Worm'. To Zorian's eyes, it appeared clear that this Golden-Feathered Worm was actually an imprisoned primordial, even if the book never actually identified it as such.

Because of the relatively unpleasant nature of the text, the somewhat archaic language the book was written in and the unhinged nature of the 'insights' obtained by the cultists, it was tempting to just dismiss all of their findings as delusional gibberish. However, after re-reading the chapter a handful of times and thinking of it in some detail, he felt there was some actual insight hidden amidst the insanity. The victim's mutterings of 'eyes between spaces', 'time that moves in braids and spirals', 'bones that stretched inside and outside' and other such nonsense all hinted at the idea that the Golden-Feathered Worm was a very dimensionally complex being.

"The path of the Golden-Feathered Worm is the path of the self as the universe," the book said. "Indeed, the rest of his kind is also as such: each one a world unto itself, their flesh but a thin, porous cloak to hide the depths beneath."

That was interesting, to say the least. The book was basically saying that primordials were not really creatures in the way Zorian commonly understood it, but more like living miniature universes. He... didn't know what to think about that. It sounded crazy, and considering where it had come from, Zorian would normally dismiss the idea without a second thought.

He handed the book to Zach, who had given up on trying to read over his shoulder a while ago, but would probably still want to see what the book had to say. Zorian couldn't wait to see his face when he got to the lovingly illustrated description of the worm implantation procedure.

"So?" Silverlake asked, not bothering to wait for Zach to read the book too. "What do you think?"

"I presume you're referring to the idea of primordials being living universes masquerading as flesh-and-blood beings?" Zorian asked.

"Wait, really?" Zach asked incredulously, slowly leafing through the book. He was going through it too fast so Zorian assumed he was only skimming the text instead of meticulously poring over it like Zorian had done. "How does that work?"

"Read the book and you might get your answer," Silverlake said blandly. What a lie. Zorian had read that chapter several times over and he still had no idea how that could possibly work. "But yes, that is what I was getting at."

"Great," Zach said. "But what does that?"

"I think we are living inside a primordial," Silverlake said.

There was a brief pause as they both digested this statement.

"I think you're going to have to explain that a little," Zach said slowly, letting the book hang by his side for the moment so he can focus on her better.

"Well, provided that what you are saying is at all reliable," Silverlake said. "You are saying that this Sovereign Gate thing can copy the entire world and create its very own miniature universe to house it all. Oh, and run the whole thing at absurd temporal dilation levels. That is *not* the level of power you get from a divine artifact. The gods may have been able to build such things, I don't know, but I have never heard of them handing out something on this level of power. Surely such a device would require an absolutely titanic expenditure of divine energy to produce, no? Sounds like a lot of effort just to give a mortal a new toy to play with. On the other hand, if the Sovereign Gate is 'just' a modified, mutilated primordial... well, suddenly the whole thing becomes a lot more plausible. Turning one of their ancient enemies into an item like that and handing it down to a measly mortal to use and abuse sounds exactly like something the gods of old would do. Especially if the primordial in question had irritated them particularly badly by primordial standards..."

Stolen novel; please report.

A long silence descended upon the scene as Zach and Zorian considered the plausibility of the story. Silverlake waited calmly for their reaction, hands clasped behind her back. She appeared to be trying to project an air of serenity and unshakable confidence with her stance and expression, but the effect was ruined by the fact she couldn't stop herself from nervously tapping her foot against the ground as she waited.

Silverlake could be onto something, Zorian decided. It had always seemed to him that the Sovereign Gate was ridiculously powerful, even for a divine artifact, and this was as good an explanation as any as to why this was the case. He suddenly remembered the Iksian myth of how the entire world they lived on had been fashioned by the gods out of the body of a defeated primordial dragon. He'd never taken the old myth very seriously, but maybe there was something to that story...

"You said there might be a very easy way to check if we're telling the truth or not," Zach said cautiously. "Is this related to that? Are you saying it's somehow possible to check whether we are inside a primordial or not?"

"Well, perhaps," Silverlake said, humming softly to herself. "You see, I have known about the primordial sealed away in Cyoria for quite a while, and have been carefully, *carefully* studying its prison from time to time. It was never the focus of my studies, but I reckon I know it quite well. If my speculation is correct, I should be able to notice some kind of change in the prison when I study it again. I refuse to believe that being recreated in the body of another primordial will not have a noticeable effect on it. Well, truthfully, my first instinct is to say that such an item couldn't possibly affect beings on the level of primordials, even if they are sealed away... but from what you say about Panaxeth, I am completely wrong there, so whatever. Anyway, let's go check!"

"Now?" Zorian asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Is there any point in waiting?" Silverlake challenged.

"I guess not," Zorian admitted. "I'm just a little surprised at your... decisiveness."

"I've just found out I could be trapped inside the body of a primordial god-like monster that probably hates all humanity," Silverlake said, looking like he was an idiot. "Of course I want to confirm or deny this as soon as I can! Don't you?"

"A *copy* trapped inside a body of a primordial god-like monster," Zorian corrected her.

"And you were preceded by countless other copies that lived out their short lives in vain, all their thoughts and accomplishments undone at the end of the month," Zach added.

"A bunch of brats, both of you," Silverlake told them. "Let's just take a look at that primordial prison in Cyoria for now. You two know how to teleport, right?"

"We do, but there is no need for that," Zorian said. "I have a much better way for us to get there quickly."

- break -

After the three of them returned to Cyoria (via Zorian's dimensional gate spell, of course), they immediately proceeded towards the place the primordial was imprisoned in – the massive circular abyss around which the city of Cyoria was built, known simply as the Hole.

Fortunately, accessing the Hole was not terribly hard. Although the incomprehensible amounts of mana gushing out of it were the foundation upon which the city rested, the Hole itself was not monitored very closely. The biggest concern the city had about it was that it was rather popular for people to commit suicide by throwing themselves into its depths, which meant they had to put a token patrol here and there to try and curb this behavior. These patrols were not very good and only checked the most obvious approaches to the Hole. So long as they didn't bring too many people and avoided making a spectacle out of themselves, they could linger inside as long as they wished.

As they descended into the Hole's depths, Zach and Zorian questioned Silverlake about her interest in primordials. Silverlake claimed it was not something she had ever been overly concerned with, it was just that she had been alive for a long time and even casual study could build up to something substantial when you keep chipping at the problem over several decades. She also claimed that, like them, she did not know of any primordial prisons other than the one in Cyoria.

Zorian wasn't sure he believed her, to be honest. She knew Panaxeth's prison well enough to give her confidence that she could detect changes in its dimensional boundary, but she'd only studied it casually? Zach and Zorian could only faintly detect the presence of the prison and little else, and it wasn't like their attainments in the field of dimensionalism and divination were low. Furthermore, while their search for other sites of primordial imprisonment had yet to bear fruit, they did have no less than three promising leads already... and that was with them casually directing some efforts at the problem, rather than dropping everything to pursue the issue. He was supposed to believe that Silverlake couldn't manage to find even one additional prison after spending gods know how many decades of interest in the topic? He had a feeling Silverlake was seriously underselling both her level of interest in this and her attainments in it. He even suspected that her incredible level of skill in the field of pocket dimension creation might come from pursuing this line of research.

He did not voice his suspicions, though. He could tell that, although Silverlake was putting forth a confident façade in front of them, the things they had said had deeply disturbed her and made her uneasy. If he was too pushy she might feel backed into a corner and lash out. Frankly, she had never struck him as the most stable of individuals to begin with.

They didn't have to descend far into the Hole to get access to Panaxeth's prison. Unlike the palace orb and other pocket dimensions that Zorian was familiar with, primordial prisons seemed to have larger and more complex anchors to the main reality that extended over quite a large area. In fact, considering that Zorian had once witnessed Panaxeth breaking out of his prison in the sky above Cyoria, he suspected that the anchor extended well outside the Hole itself... it was just that those parts of the anchor were too subtle for Zach and Zorian to detect them. In any case, once they had reached sufficient depth, Silverlake asked them to shut up and let her examine the prison in peace. So they did just that, sitting down on a couple of nearby rocks in silence while Silverlake did her thing.

Zorian paid close attention to the spells Silverlake was casting. Though one couldn't learn a spell just from watching someone cast it, they could get a pretty good idea of what the spell was supposed to do if they were experienced or familiar with the relevant theory. Zorian was both, so there was a lot he could tell by watching Silverlake analyze Panaxeth's prison. She used dozens of individual spells in her investigation, each one of them a lengthy and complex thing that seemed narrowly specialized for one specific function. Such unoptimized, hyperspecialized spells were probably something she had made herself, specifically to tackle the problem of analyzing a primordial's prison. Furthermore, she cast these rather unwieldy spells with practiced ease, making no mistakes whatsoever, strongly suggesting she had done them often enough for it to become rote.

'Casual interest', sure...

As time went by, Silverlake's face started to frown more often and her casting became more feverish, but she remained completely silent and focused on her task. She didn't even mutter to herself, as she was often prone to do. Finally, after more than two hours of casting, pondering and intense staring at the empty patch of air in front of her (what was that even supposed to do?), Silverlake let her arms drop to her sides, sighed and then turned towards them.

"Alright," she said. "You win. I provisionally believe your crazy story."

"Provisionally?" Zach asked curiously.

"We're clearly in a different world than we were up until a few months ago," said Silverlake. "It does not necessarily mean your specific version of events is what is happening, but I have no better explanation at the moment. So for now, I'm accepting your story as valid."

"Just to confirm, you actually detected a noticeable difference between Panaxeth's prison as it was a few months back and as it is now?" Zorian asked.

"I suppose you could say that," Silverlake said, a note of discomfort creeping into her voice.

"Why the glum face?" Zach asked, picking up on her mood. "Didn't you expect to find just that?"

"I expected to either find that the prison is some kind of poor man's knockoff of a real primordial's prison or that it was thoroughly unchanged from how it was before and that you were trying to feed me a pack of lies," Silverlake said.

"But?" Zorian prodded.

"But it's the same prison as it has always been... just seen from a different perspective," Silverlake said, lost in thought for a second. She scowled when she refocused back on them and saw them looking blankly at her. She clacked her tongue. "Bah! I can't believe I have to explain myself to a bunch of amateurs like you... Well, let's try it like this: you know how a dimensional gate looks like it's composed out of two discrete portals but is actually just one dimensional construct with two ends? The prison in front of us is like that. I can sense the changes in it, but a closer look reveals they are clearly superficial. It's the exact same object, just seen through a different lens. Panaxeth's prison exists simultaneously in both the real world and... whatever the hell this place really ends up being. This Sovereign Gate of yours couldn't duplicate primordial prison grounds, but it could make them attach themselves to this world in addition to their original one... and it's giving me a headache. I don't know how this could possibly work and I don't know *why* someone would bother with this. Why didn't this divine toy just neglect the primordial prisons entirely instead of going to all this trouble to ensure access to them even in a recreation of a real world? Argh...!"

She pulled at her hair for a second (not very hard, mind you, she seemed to do this just for dramatic emphasis) and then turned back towards the gaping abyss in front of them, staring at it in deep thought.

After a few moments of silence Zach asked the obvious question that Zorian was pondering as well.

"If the primordial prisons are objects that exist both in the real world and the time loop reality, doesn't that make them a sort of a... bridge, for the lack of a better term?" Zach asked Zorian quietly. "If so, it might be possible to use them as a sort of conduit for opening a passage between this world and the real one. Hell, releasing one of them from their prisons might not even be necessary!"

"I wouldn't place my hopes too high on such an idea," Silverlake suddenly said. Apparently she wasn't so deep in her thought that she couldn't eavesdrop on their conversation. "Primordial prisons are hard to perceive, nevermind interact with. It would take vastly more skill to use them as a spell conduit than..."

She suddenly stopped and turned around to face them, an incredulous look on her face.

"Wait, what was that about releasing one of them?"

After convincing Silverlake that something funny was going on with the world at large and that their time loop explanation was at least a little bit plausible (and smoothing out some unfortunate misunderstandings), Silverlake reluctantly agreed to continue teaching them pocket dimension creation. In addition, Zorian had managed to talk her into selling them the analysis spells she used to study Panaxeth's prison in exchange for both of the ingredients for her potion of youth. As much as she complained that such a trade was 'profoundly unfair' due to the mechanics of the time loop, she just couldn't resist getting her hands on *both* of the ingredients she needed to complete her potion of youth.

Unfortunately, convincing Silverlake that they were onto something had one major unfortunate side-effect: she was suddenly extremely interested in them. She wanted to know everything about them – where they came from, who their family was, where their allegiances lay, what their skillset was, how much money they had at their disposal, *everything*. And when they had refused to cooperate with that, she started to spy on them. And then mobilized some of her contacts (apparently she wasn't as much of a total hermit as it appeared at first glance) to gather information on them when it turned out they were too good at evading and foiling scrying attempts and other magic-oriented methods of spying. This would be very annoying even at the best of times, but what made this especially problematic was that Zach and Zorian were already doing all sorts of eye-catching things, arranging all kinds of high-value trades and throwing around ridiculous amounts of cash. This worked just fine as long as nobody was focusing on them, but the moment a bunch of nosy people were told to specifically look into what Zach Noveda and Zorian Kazinski were doing... well, suddenly they had a lot bigger reasons to be interested than one witch's curiosity. Even if Silverlake backtracked and told these people that she changed her mind and no longer cared for the information, they wouldn't stop their investigation now.

Ugh.

Caught off guard by this change in their routine and forced to temporarily lay low, Zach and Zorian turned to other things to amuse themselves with. In Zorian's case, that something was the study of divine artifacts.

Sitting around in a secret, warded house, Zorian stared at the small collection of items in front of him. There were seven of them in total: a small silver pyramid, a dark brown wooden staff, a golden bell, a pitch black disc covered in seemingly random scratches, a large green gem with several light motes trapped within, a large bronze compass and a plain-looking iron dagger. The dagger had been recovered from the ruins inside the portal palace orb, while the others had been shamelessly stolen from private collections and treasures of small countries. Although it looked unremarkable, this pile of items would likely inspire greed in even the richest of individuals living on the continent.

"You know that it's almost impossible to find something useful by studying divine artifacts, right?" Daimen said, staring intently at the gathered items. Zorian had reluctantly invited Daimen to join him in this task, seeing how he had much more experience with this sort of thing than he did. "Entire groups have dedicated their lives to studying one specific divine item and came out empty-handed in the end."

"Yes, I know," said Zorian, picking up the dagger they had found in the orb and flipping it in his hand. They still had no idea what it did, other than being supernaturally sharp. Divine artifacts were immune to divination magics so the only way to discover their uses was to either use trial and error or search through historical records to see if there are any descriptions of the item's powers in ancient texts. "But I have something most of those groups don't – a willingness to destructively study the item in question for any clues and have it come back intact at the end of each month."

Daimen made a sour face at him.

"This feels so wrong," he said uneasily. "These are priceless, irreplaceable relics. It's *sacrilege*."

"Yet you agreed to come here and participate in it," Zorian noted lightly.

"Well... I can't say I was never tempted to do something like this," Daimen sighed. "Are you sure they'll be back to normal?"

"I'm sure," Zorian confirmed, pointing at the dagger in his hands. "I already dismantled this dagger in the previous restart and it's back to normal now. However mysterious divine abilities are, the Sovereign Gate clearly has no issues in duplicating these items over and over again."

"That's both reassuring and terrifying," Daimen noted.

Zorian wondered what his brother would say if he told him that they were currently stuck inside some kind of weird primordial thing that may or may not be alive and just waiting for a chance to devour them all. Alas, as funny as it was to fantasize about his reaction to that, it wasn't worth the drama to actually go through with telling him about it.

"So, before we begin, I'm kind of curious..." Zorian began. "How did Fortov react to that illusion disc I made for you?"

The disc was something the Daimen of the previous restart had come up with. In order to help him convince Fortov to open up and talk to him, Daimen came up with the idea of a disc that would, when activated, project an illusionary scene of their talk in the previous restart. Zorian was skeptical of the idea; why would seeing such an illusion convince Fortov of anything? But Daimen insisted it would work so Zorian humored him. He tapped into his memory of the evening and constructed the most realistic illusion of the event he could before binding it to a disc that he left in Fortov's mail. Strictly speaking, that was the end of his obligations in regards to the matter, but he kind of wanted to hear what the outcome of that stunt turned out to be.

"Well, you could say it sort of worked," Daimen said with a small grin.

"Oh?" Zorian asked with a raised eyebrow.

"He's talking to me, at least," Daimen shrugged. "That's all I really wanted out of that disc, so I have no reason to complain."

“How did you explain the contents of the disc?” Zorian asked curiously.

“I didn’t,” Daimen grinned. “I used the mystery as an incentive to talk to me. I said I would explain everything in a month.”

Zorian rolled his eyes at him.

“Anyway, I also have something to talk about before we dive into all this,” Daimen said, sweeping his hands over the gathered divine artifacts. “I’m pretty sure I have narrowed down the location of the Key piece that was lost in Xlotic.”

“You have?” Zorian asked, leaning forwards with anticipation. He had to say, his brother’s help was proving itself invaluable when it came to jobs like this one. If Zach and Zorian had to locate all the missing pieces of the Key all by themselves it would have taken them much, much longer than this. “Where is it? Is it the Tower of Hylos-Na? I hope it’s—”

“It’s the Ziggurat of the Sun,” Daimen interrupted him.

Zorian leaned back into his chair with a groan. Out of all the possible options, the Ziggurat of the Sun was definitely the worst one. It was situated deep into the interior of northern Miasina, in an area that was once lush grassland, but was now located deep within the Xlotic desert. There were no major human settlements nearby, just an endless expanse of desert. Simply approaching the ziggurat required a lengthy, difficult trek through these parched, desolate lands.

And any expedition that reached the ziggurat itself would be faced with the tiny issue of the ziggurat’s current inhabitants: sulrothum, a species of giant sapient desert wasps that had taken over the structure when the deserts had claimed the whole area. Sulrothum were almost three meters long, possessed incredible strength and toughness and there were hundreds of them living within the ziggurat. As for their friendliness, well... ‘sulrothum’ was a local human word roughly translating to ‘devil wasp’. Zorian kind of doubted they would allow them to peacefully search their base for ancient magical artifacts.

“Sorry,” Daimen said. “I know how you feel, but I’m pretty sure I got it right. The imperial ring is there, provided the sulrothum haven’t already found it and taken it elsewhere.”

“Which is a distinct possibility,” Zorian noted.

“At least you have that in-built Key detector, so we’ll know if the ring is no longer there before we waste too much time on securing the place,” Daimen shrugged.

“Of course the damn ring has to be in the most difficult location possible,” Zorian grunted unhappily. “Just getting there will be an issue.”

“Actually, I think I have a solution to both that and how to reach Blantyre in a reasonable time frame,” Daimen grinned before throwing a rolled up poster at him. “Have a look and tell me what you think.”

Zorian caught the poster before it had time to hit his face, gave Daimen an unamused look because he was pretty sure his brother deliberately aimed the object at his head, and then unrolled it to take a look.

It was a propaganda poster, basically. It showed a pretty picture of a weird-looking wooden ship that was apparently commissioned by the king of Aranhala, one of the larger nations in Xlotic. It was an airship, Zorian realized.

An expensive, experimental airship designed by some of the best artificers in Aranhala as part of some kind of national vanity project. It was mostly done, the construction crew was just putting finishing touches on it currently and it was planned it would undergo a test flight in a few weeks.

“So?” Daimen said with a knowing smile on his face. “What do you think?”

Zorian stared at the poster for a second before looking Daimen straight in the eye.

“I think we have ourselves an airship to steal.”

78. Grinding Stone

Chapter 078

Grinding Stone

Airships were not held in very high regard among people who cared about such things. The idea of a flying vessel was something that had captivated mankind since time immemorial, of course, but every concrete design for such a vessel had been disappointing. After all, although magic could make a ship fly easily enough, doing so on a long-term basis was very expensive in terms of mana. Moreover, this cost increased massively if one wanted to not just fly, but fly fast and retain a healthy amount of maneuverability in the process, too. This was why very few mages employed magical flight without a pressing reason to do so, even though flight magic wasn't that complicated and many mages were capable of it.

As a result of this fundamental issue, most airships couldn't actually fly around as they pleased, but instead had to follow fixed paths that took them through mana-rich areas that could sustain them in the air. And even so, airship designers still had to ruthlessly keep the vessel's weight down during construction. This made the resulting product relatively fragile and greatly limited the vessel's usefulness. They also tended to be rather expensive to build and maintain, as the materials which went into them tended to be on the pricier side and the design of the vessel itself was something that required a whole team of skilled professionals. It also didn't help that there was no standard airship design available to the public, meaning that most airship construction teams started their projects from scratch and were often the only ones who could truly fix or modify the vessel.

Finally, there was a tiny, yet very important issue of how incredibly lethal an airship crash was compared to, say, the sinking of a sea-going ship. If anything went wrong, it was all too easy for everyone on board to die. There had been a number of high-profile airship accidents over the years, including a rather spectacular one where the Tetran airship *Gepid* plunged straight into the sea not long after starting its maiden flight. And even if one ignored the possibility of a simple malfunction, there was still the matter of the many flying magical beasts that could easily crash the airship if encountered at an inopportune time.

In light of all that, it was not hard to see why airships weren't in more widespread use. They were not economically viable for private interests and state militaries generally found flying magical creatures to be more effective as an aerial combat force. Despite that, people stubbornly kept trying to make them viable. There was something about a flying vessel that people found irresistibly captivating.

There were considerable differences between regions, however. The states of northern Miasina, for instance, were the leaders when it came to investment into airship research. Due to the vast stretches of desert that surrounded them, the nations of Xlotic saw more potential in airships than Altazian ones. Building roads and railways in the inhospitable interior of northern Miasina was exceptionally difficult, and there were few population centers big enough to justify an expensive teleport platform. A free-flying, economically-viable airship that could traverse the Xlotic desert would be a huge boon to whoever made it.

Pearl of Aranhāl, the airship Zorian wanted to steal, definitely hadn't been designed with economic viability in mind. No expenses had been spared in its construction. Although Zorian had not been able to find concrete numbers anywhere, the final price tag was rumored to be positively astronomical. The airship's capabilities, however, were said to be appropriately impressive for something that had so much money sunk into it. It was fast, maneuverable and surprisingly robust for an airship. Most importantly for Zorian, though, it boasted an experimental power core that allowed it to operate independently of ambient mana for long periods of time.

After some discussion with Zach, they decided not to make a move on the airship in this particular restart, however. Half of the restart had already passed and they were already committed on many other fronts. Besides, due to Silverlake's earlier inquiries, people were still paying close attention to them. Zorian still decided to look around a little to get a feel for what they were dealing with.

Unsurprisingly, the airship was under significant protection. Not so much against thieves, since the idea of someone outright stealing the airship was kind of ridiculous, but against spies and saboteurs. The defenses were tight enough to thwart Zorian's casual probing, but he was confident he could get through them in time. It might take several restarts, but it would happen. The bigger problem, in his opinion, was that the *Pearl of Aranhāl* required a crew of ten in order to take off and land, which made the idea of two people stealing it somewhat problematic. He would probably have to wait for Zach to be able to cast the simulacrum spell before they could make the attempt. Another problem, though a comparatively smaller one, was that some small but critical pieces of the airship hadn't been installed, and possibly not even made yet. Zorian was confident he could manufacture and install these components himself, but he would need access to the relevant blueprints first...

'Once upon a time, one of my ambitions was to examine a train to see how its engines work,' Zorian thought to himself nostalgically. 'Now I'm casually planning how to steal and analyze an experimental airship in my free time. Even taking the time loop into account, it's still amazing how far I've come since then. I wonder what my old self would have said to something like that...'

That, of course, was something impossible to answer. He shook his head and focused on more immediate matters. Currently, he was going to meet someone he hadn't spoken to for a very, very long time – Zenomir Olgai, the old language expert he had once sought out to help him figure out what happened to him. Back then, he had been murdered by the invaders not long after talking to him, so he had reflexively avoided the man ever since, suspecting him a spy. However, none of his investigations of Ibasan collaborators and cultists pointed to Zenomir being one of them. Thus, when Zenomir's name popped up while seeking out a translator that could help him with some of the documents he had acquired in Aranhāl, he decided to pay him a visit. He even intended to drop some hints about the invasion while he was there, just to see if someone would try to murder him again because of it. Who knew, maybe Zenomir was part of some super-secret section of the invaders that other members didn't normally know about.

As he approached Zenomir's office, though, he suddenly stopped when he felt a familiar presence.

A bunch of cephalic rats were lingering in the area, hidden inside the walls. The swarm quickly withdrew their telepathic probe when they noticed his mind was well shielded, but Zorian was practiced enough at mental shielding that even the faintest of mental attacks could not escape his notice.

He frowned. If cephalic rats had been loitering around Zenomir's office back when he had visited the man, it was no wonder that Zorian had ended up being a target. That only raised another question: why were the cephalic rats paying attention to Zenomir? The man was somewhat famous as an incredible polyglot and language expert, but that shouldn't be of much interest to the invaders.

After some thought, he decided to leave the cephalic rats alone for now. He knocked on Zenomir's office door and waited.

He waited for nearly fifteen minutes. Apparently he had arrived at a somewhat bad time, since the old teacher was talking to someone already. Another student, Zorian eventually realized. He took a quick peek at the student's mind to make sure he was not connected to the cephalic rats and found out that he wasn't. He was just a student that had picked Zenomir as his mentor and was now arguing with him over something. Zorian didn't linger inside his mind long enough to find out what, as he disliked invading other people's privacy with his mental powers unless it was truly necessary.

Eventually the meeting ended and Zenomir called him in. Zorian gracefully accepted the man's offer to sit down and went right to business.

"I'm here because I was told you could help me translate a highly technical document written in Aranhali Ikosian," Zorian told him. "Or at least point me towards someone who is up to the task."

"Ah yes, Aranhali," Zenomir said sagely. "They do speak a particularly distinct form of our tongue, don't they? Can you show me the sample of what you're working with?"

Zorian took out a few pages of technical writing out of his school bag and handed them to the old language expert. He wasn't worried about Zenomir recognizing them as illegally acquired. Unless he was inexplicably connected to Aranhali's airship construction team in addition to his apparent link to invaders, the text should mean little to him.

Zenomir carefully put on a pair of reading glasses and glanced through the papers in silence.

"Lots of unknown technical jargon, I see. Airship construction materials? My, what an interesting topic..." Zenomir mused, before giving Zorian a good-natured smile. "I can see why you were referred my way, though it somewhat saddens me that a student of our fine academy did not think to seek me out right away. At the very least I'd give you my initial opinion free of charge, which is probably more than you got out of whoever sent you here."

Zorian could tell that the man wasn't really angry with him for this oversight, merely giving him a friendly warning that he had failed to take advantage of his academy membership to its fullest extent. Sadly, while Zenomir was both friendly and polite, the events that transpired after Zorian had talked to him the last time around and the cephalic rats lurking in the walls had made it impossible for Zorian to really trust him. So he just nodded sagely at Zenomir's reminder and moved on.

"Let me ask you something first," Zenomir began. "Is this document that you want translated an isolated thing or are you planning on collaborating with someone from Aranhali on something?"

"The project I'm working on does involve a fair bit of interaction with Aranhali natives," Zorian reluctantly admitted.

Thankfully, Zenomir seemed to think nothing of Zorian's admission that he was going to interact heavily with people on another continent. Zorian would think this sort of thing would raise some eyebrows, but apparently not.

They spent the next ten minutes discussing what the translation job would entail. Zenomir asked him a couple of questions about the exact nature of this 'project' he was working on, but thankfully he backed off when Zorian told him it was confidential. He confirmed that this sort of translation job was well within his capabilities, though it would take a couple of days and wouldn't be exactly cheap. None of this was a problem for Zorian, though, and he told the old teacher as much before the man raised another idea.

"I'm going to be a little bold here, but perhaps simply hiring a person to translate this document might not be the best course of action," Zenomir said. "I think you should invest some time in learning the language itself. You'd be amazed how many layers of communication you lose by relying on external translation and I guarantee your partners will respect you a lot more if you can communicate with them directly."

"I'm unlikely to interact with people from Aranhali after this project is done, though," Zorian said, frowning. Plus, he was pretty sure there wouldn't be too many respectful exchanges between him and the Aranhali airship construction team, language barriers or no. "That's a lot of wasted effort for one job."

"Learning a language is never a wasted effort, young man," Zenomir lectured him. "It develops your mind and expands your horizons! Besides, it's not as if you're starting completely from scratch. Aranhali Ikosian is different from standard Ikosian, but not unintelligible."

"That's true," Zorian admitted. It was more like a heavily divergent dialect with a lot of words borrowed from the native language spoken by the people before Ikosian conquest. Much like many of the local versions of Ikosian on Altazia, really. "It would still be a lot of work for someone who isn't naturally inclined towards languages like you are, though. No offense, Professor Olgai!"

"Hmph. Wait here for a minute," Zenomir said, quickly springing up from his chair without waiting for his answer, and then entered a nearby side-room in his office and closed the door.

He stayed there for over ten minutes. Judging by the quiet sounds emanating from behind the closed door, the man was shifting around boxes and searching through stacks of paper and books in search of something. Zorian sighed. This was taking way longer than he thought it would...

Finally, the old teacher returned to his office, carrying a tall stack of books, folders and loose sheets of paper. He was carrying so much that he had to use his elbows to manipulate the door handle, which he did with the practiced grace of someone who does things like that all the time. He dumped the pile on the table in front of Zorian and pointed at it.

"Tell you what, young man," Zenomir said. "This here is a small selection of dictionaries, translation guides and random notes regarding Aranhali Icosian that I had in my store room—"

"You just happened to have Aranhali-related stuff in your store room?" Zorian asked incredulously.

"Oh, I have all sorts of things gathering dust in there," said Zenomir dismissively. "Some of the teachers are rarely in their offices, but I pretty much do most of my work here. So it's handy to have most of my resources close by. Anyway, why don't you take this and see how much of that document of yours you can translate yourself using this as a guide. If you impress me with your work, I promise I'll help you translate the rest of your project for free."

Zorian opened his mouth to point out that he'd rather just pay for translation but Zenomir wouldn't hear it.

"Free!" Zenomir repeated. "Do you hate money, young man? Don't be in such a hurry to part with it. I'm not very demanding, don't worry. Just do your best and I'm sure you'll do fine. Who knows, maybe you'll even discover you have a previously undiscovered passion for languages, eh?"

Zorian seriously doubted that, but he could see there was no use in arguing with Zenomir about this. Besides, now that he thought about it a little, it might actually be useful to get some elementary proficiency in Aranhali Icosian. He might need to interrogate the airship construction crew at some point, and that was going to be really difficult if their language was completely opaque to him. Not even mind reading helped in that case, since people's thoughts were heavily shaped by the language they spoke.

"Very well, I'll give it a try," Zorian relented.

"Excellent!" Zenomir said, beaming at him happily.

"Still, is it really okay for you to just give me all this?" Zorian pointed at the pile in front of him "Some of this stuff looks... irreplaceable."

"It's fine," said Zenomir, waving him off. "You look like a serious young man. I'm sure you'll return it all in one piece."

Zorian didn't say anything to that. He just stared at the pile of books and paper in front of him, lost in thought, for a few seconds.

"Well," Zenomir suddenly said, clapping his hands. "Is there anything else you wanted to ask? If not—"

"Actually, yes," Zorian said. "Are you a member of the Cult of the World Dragon?"

Zenomir eyebrows shot up at the question.

"I'm sorry, *what*?" he asked.

"They officially call themselves the Esoteric Order of the Celestial Dragon," Zorian said. "They are one of the newer religious organizations, one dedicated to the worship of the entity that is commonly thought to reside in the center of the world. They have a rather large presence here in Cyoria. Are you a member of the Order?"

"Ah, I think I have heard something about them once," Zenomir mused, tapping his long white beard with his hand. "But no, I am not a member. Why do you ask?"

"Are you an agent of Ulquaan Ibasa?" Zorian asked, completely ignoring the old teacher's question.

"Now wait just a minute here," Zenomir said, finally getting somewhat angry. "What kind of question is that!?"

Hmm. He was being completely honest. He was not knowingly associated with either the Ibasaans of the Cult of the World Dragon.

With a small sigh, Zorian reached deeper into Zenomir's mind, casually brushing aside the old teacher's rudimentary mental defenses, and modified his short-term memory to erase this conversation out of his mind. The whole process only lasted less than a minute, due to the relatively trivial nature of the memory edit, after which Zorian withdrew from Zenomir's mind.

The old teacher blinked a few times, gradually shrugging off the mental daze that Zorian placed on him so he could work in peace, before giving Zorian a surprised look.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Uh, you kind of dozed off for several seconds there,” Zorian said, pretending awkwardness.

“Ah. I guess old age is finally catching up to me,” Zenomir said ruefully, shaking his head. “Where were we, again?”

“Actually, I think we’re kind of done here,” Zorian said. “But first, let me ask you a somewhat strange question. Do you have any idea why someone would want to spy on you?”

“Spy on me?” Zenomir asked incredulously. “Why no, I have no idea why someone would want that. Frankly, I wish more people would be interested in my work. If someone wanted to know more about what I do, why, all they have to do is ask!”

“I’ll cut straight to the chase, then,” Zorian said. “Due to some exotic inborn abilities that I have, I happen to know that there are rats lurking in the walls around your office. And not normal rats either.”

“Ah, now that... is quite concerning,” said Zenomir. He sat down in his chair and frowned. He tapped on his beard a few more times, deep in thought. “Hmm. Rats in the walls...”

After a minute or so, Zenomir slapped his palm against the table, scaring Zorian back into attention.

“Aha!” Zenomir said triumphantly. “I’ve got it, I think. I don’t think these rats, if they are indeed spies as you suspect, are here for me. As it happens, the headmaster’s office is very close to mine. The headmaster is rarely in it, but a lot of visitors and academy documentation passes through the place.”

Zorian had to agree this did make a great deal of sense. As a place of such importance, the headmaster’s office was probably protected by heavier and more sophisticated wards and other defenses... but the corridors approaching it might have been overlooked due to cost-cutting and such. He would have to take a walk through the academy to see if there were other places that cephalic rats linger as they did here.

“Of course, this will have to be reported,” Zenomir’s shoulders suddenly sagged. “I can already sense a headache coming. So much paperwork...”

“I don’t suppose you could exclude me from the report?” Zorian asked. He would mindwipe him again if he had to, but he would rather avoid doing that.

“I might as well,” Zenomir sighed. He apparently didn’t have a single suspicious bone in his body. “No reason for both of us to suffer. Though I have to ask you to keep quiet about this, or else the academy might go after you for ruining its reputation.”

Zorian assured him that he had no intention of spreading this around, picked up the stack of books and papers the man had given him and then left. Instead of exiting the academy immediately, though, he took the extended route that saw him passing next to the headmaster’s office a couple of times.

It turned out that, yes, *all* approaches to the headmaster’s office had cephalic rats lurking in the walls. It seemed that Zenomir’s theory was very much correct.

Well. That was one mystery solved! It had been a while since he had solved one of those without raising at least one new question in return.

Somehow, it made him feel like he was finally getting close to a solution for all this.

- break -

In an unremarkable, out-of-the-way cave system situated a healthy distance away from Cyoria, Zach, Zorian and two aranea were training their magical skills.

Zach was tinkering with a large wooden chest, practicing his pocket dimension creation. His ability in this area was slowly but surely overtaking Zorian, despite him dismissing some of his simulacra and focusing more of his energies on the issue. As far as Zorian could tell, this was purely due to Zach’s massive mana reserves and the resulting ability to sustain the mana-intensive training longer than Zorian ever could. Zorian wasn’t any more talented or hard-working than Zach was, after all, and every advantage and training method he had was also something Zach had access to as well. It made perfect sense that Zach was pulling away from him in this regard, but that didn’t stop Zorian from feeling kind of jealous and annoyed with the situation. A petty part of him was tempted to start hiding some of the relevant shaping exercises and tricks he had found while combing through the various spellbooks and training manuals in order to close the gap somewhat, but he resisted the impulse. That would be stupid and self-defeating. Zach getting better was a good thing.

That aside, neither Zach nor Zorian had really progressed far in terms of pocket dimension expertise. The chest that Zach was fiddling with still functioned on essentially the same principles as the marble-storing boxes they had practiced with previously. It was the simplest form of pocket dimension, which involved expanding the available space inside a container. Essentially, it allowed a mage to produce an enclosed space that was larger on the inside than it was on the outside.

There were a lot of limitations involved with this procedure. The pocket dimension required mana to keep existing, so such an item could only be stored in areas where ambient mana was abundant enough to sustain them. Or be provided with an in-built power source of some sort. A

complicated, fiddly spell formula had to be embedded into the walls of the container, or else the space expansion would expire after less than a day, just like any other spell. Finally, the weight of the object inside did not disappear, so a chest with several tons of rock inside would still weigh several tons, no matter how small it looked.

Of course, weight concerns aside, cramming too much stuff into your pocket dimension container isn't a good idea to begin with. If the container is damaged, the pocket dimension anchored to its interior would immediately fall apart, forcing the contents back into mundane space. Typically, this meant the pocket dimension would explode, showering everything around it with high-speed shrapnel of its former contents. For this reason, it was also a good idea to make the container as sturdy and damage-resistant as possible. Zach and Zorian learned that very quickly after cramming too many marbles into a box whose bottom could not handle the weight, thus creating their very own marble-flinging cluster bomb.

The more time the two of them sank into studying pocket dimensions, the more Zorian realized how incredible the portable palace orb they recovered in Koth was. It had some kind of internal power source that could sustain it indefinitely and made it completely self-sufficient from its surroundings, it weighed no more than a regular glass orb of its size would and it contained an incredible amount of space and matter inside. Zorian was tempted to dismiss all of this as evidence of divine tampering, except that Silverlake stubbornly insisted that all of this was potentially achievable through familiar mortal magic. Yes, even the power source thing. Somehow.

Then again, she did maintain a rather large pocket dimension with some pretty potent defensive wards in an area that really shouldn't be able to support such. How was she doing that, anyway?

Well, it wasn't something that could be figured out by idle contemplation. He put the matter out of his mind for now and focused his attention to the two aranea next to him. Both of them had been sent here by the Silent Doorway Adepts at Zorian's request. Ever since he had become capable of giving them a large list of novel gate addresses and a sizeable amount of strategic information about their local region, they became much more willing to cooperate with him and humor his requests. In this case they allowed him to recruit two of their best 'retrievers'. Thieves, basically. Zorian called them Ghost and Veil, though these were only shortened versions of their real names.

Ghost and Veil were originally meant to show him how to use his mental powers to infiltrate guarded sites more easily, but he found them to be surprisingly friendly and curious for a pair of thieves and spies. They fulfilled their part of the bargain without any reservations, and were even willing to go beyond what was originally agreed upon... provided he traded some instruction and secrets of his own to them in return.

As such, they were currently gleefully practicing some of the magic he had given them on each other, steadily refining the somewhat clunky spells that had been converted from the human spellcasting system into an aranean one and thus suffered from a fair bit of inefficiencies. Zorian left them alone to their work for the most part, only involving himself if he saw them making an obvious mistake, but he made sure to survey the results of their work at the end of each day. When he finally found a way for him and Zach to leave this time loop, he intended to bundle up little improvements like this into one giant package and then gift them to the various aranean webs that had helped him over the years.

As for Zorian, he was tackling something that he had wanted to obtain for quite a while now. He was learning the aranean skill of 'going dark' – the psychic equivalent of the mind blank spell.

The skill was pretty hard to obtain, since the aranea saw it as inherently shady, meaning that most of them weren't even willing to admit they knew how to perform it, much less trade it to someone who could very well be hostile. It was only after a lot of prodding and some high-value trades that Ghost and Veil agreed to teach it to him. Even then, they made him promise in the strongest possible terms that he would use it sparingly.

They need not have worried. Zorian had heard enough horror stories about the mage equivalent of the skill to know he had to be careful about this. Mind blank was well known to be insanity-inducing if used on a long-term basis. Mages that left it active for too long became increasingly paranoid, becoming obsessed with imaginary plots and threats. They would inevitably begin to view everyone around them as a threat, alien and untrustworthy, and withdraw from society as much as possible to pursue their own inscrutable goals. There was a highly-publicized case a few years back where a very rich mage went down this path and eventually turned his isolated estate into a foreboding death-trap filled with layers upon layers of traps, golems, powerful wards and vicious guard beasts. His children were not very amused when they realized he had blown all of his wealth on that and that they wouldn't be inheriting any of the money that they had been counting on.

This 'going dark' was harder than he thought it would be, though. He knew that mind blank was a difficult, high-level spell, but he had naively thought that being psychic would negate that somehow. It was a mind-related thing, after all, so why wouldn't his innate talent work on it? But no. If anything, that only made things harder. Even mundane mages felt a surge of wrongness upon cutting their minds off from the world, suffering from vertigo, illusionary static noise and headaches before fully mastering the spell. For psychics like Zorian, though, it was a little like plucking out your own eyeballs because you knew you could grow them back later. Even though one *knew* that no permanent loss would occur, the very idea just felt wrong on a deep-seated, visceral level. It wasn't easy to make yourself do this to yourself.

He was stalling, he realized. He took a couple of deep breaths, trying to calm himself for another attempt. Okay. The 27th time was the charm...

He sank his awareness inward, carefully mapped out the borders of his consciousness and then sort of... folded his mind upon itself.

It was horrible. It can be scarcely described in words alone, but he felt like his whole world had gone dark and confined, pressing down on him. He almost dropped the attempt right there, just like he had so many times before, but he gritted his teeth and persisted.

As the borders of his consciousness contracted, getting smaller and smaller, he breathed deeper and deeper, a deep fear welling up from the depths of his soul and causing him to pause. He had an unreasonable, unexplainable feeling of being entombed alive, imprisoned in a cage made out of his own flesh and skin, and it took him an unknown amount of time to take that final step.

With one last, desperate push, his mind finally finished folding upon itself and stabilized. The sense of wrongness was still there, but muted and manageable.

Everything seemed so unnaturally quiet all of a sudden, even though nothing in his surroundings had really changed.

Well okay, that wasn't entirely true. Ghost and Veil had stopped casting spells at each other and were looking at him with interest.

"You did it!" Veil said excitedly. She was using a vocalization spell instead of resorting to telepathy, since Zorian's current status kind of prevented that. "Amazing! I thought it would take you at least another 30 tries!"

"It's not that amazing," Ghost said dourly. "It's a decidedly average progression for someone of his level of skill."

"He's a human, though," Veil objected. "I don't think it's fair to judge him by our standards."

"You're right. We should be even stricter," Ghost said. "After all, he's not nearly as reliant on his mental powers as we are."

"I'm right here," Zorian complained.

"Don't listen to this killjoy," Veil told him. "Just enjoy knowing that everything will be a lot easier from now on. The first time is always the hardest. Oh, and you should be extra careful about not shutting yourself from the Great Web for too long during these initial steps. The ability degrades the mind much faster if not done flawlessly, and your first handful of attempts probably won't be that good."

"Just like mind blank, then," Zach noted from the side, not taking his eyes off the chest he was working on. "Until you're sure you mastered the spell, it is recommended you keep it on for no more than half an hour maximum."

"Umm, sure. I'm not too familiar with human time measurements, but let's go with your friend's suggestion on that," Veil said.

Zorian nodded absent-mindedly. Frankly, he was tempted to end the effect immediately but he knew he had to acclimatize himself to it if he wanted to use it even remotely seriously. He was just about to ask the two aranea if there was anything else he had to watch out when Zach suddenly jumped up and started laughing triumphantly.

"It works!" Zach said, swinging his chest around and then raising it above his head. It was actually mildly impressive, because Zorian knew for a fact that the chest was quite heavy and not something he personally could swing around like that. "It's finished and it totally works!"

"What were you working on, anyway?" Zorian asked. Clearly Zach hadn't been working on just another expanded chest, or else he wouldn't be so happy to succeed.

"This?" Zach asked rhetorically, shaking the chest held in his arms. "Why, it's an icebox of beer holding, of course! Not only can it hold a large number of beer bottles, it also keeps them at a nice, cold temperature for perfect consumption!"

"An icebox of... wait, you made all this fuss about a simple expanded chest with a chilling field added on top?" Zorian asked unhappily.

"Oh hush, you know it's a genius idea," Zach said. "Don't be so cranky. I think the mind blank is already affecting you."

Ugh. Zorian doubted this was true, but he immediately dismissed the effect anyway. Better to be safe than sorry.

There was plenty of time to work on this later.

- break -

Eventually, after an annoyingly long time, Silverlake agreed to meet with them again. By then, the investigators she had sent after them had thoroughly disrupted their plans and a lot of the restart had already passed, so they were not as enthusiastic about the whole thing as they might have been. Zorian really hoped this could be avoided in future restarts, somehow, because there was no way they could tolerate these kinds of delays and disruptions on a persistent basis.

Surprisingly, she wanted to meet in some public space in Cyoria, not in her forest hideout. After some back-and-forth, they agreed to hold a meeting in one of Cyoria's less visited parks. There would be some minor danger of being overheard, but it was likely that anyone that did hear them would dismiss them as speaking nonsense.

"You've put me in a very unfavorable position," Silverlake told them the moment they met. "I think I believe you about this month endlessly repeating itself, as crazy as that sounds, but that means that I basically have no leverage against you whatsoever. You can promise to pay me back in all sorts of ways, but I have no means to enforce any of that. Even if I feed you truth potions and decide you sincerely mean to honor your promises, who's to say you won't ever change your minds in the future? If you decide to renege on your side of the deal, I will never know."

"So what's your decision, then?" Zorian asked. There was nothing he could say to make her feel better about that.

"What else?" she laughed. "I'll work with you and hope you're not planning to screw me over. What other choice do I have?"

"We were worried you'd ask to put us under a geas," Zach admitted.

It was a reasonable fear. Forced magical oaths were one of the things witches were infamous for using.

"Geas have limited usefulness these days," Silverlake said, shaking her head sadly. "They were feared once upon a time because mages were comparatively rare and often had a very limited selection of spells at their disposal. In those times, finding someone who could lift a geas placed on you was legitimately hard. These days you can just walk into your local mage guild branch and hire someone to get rid of it within a few days. Placing a geas on you would just create resentment. No, I'm afraid I'll have to use the carrot and the poison strategy."

"Err, isn't that supposed to be the carrot and the stick?" Zorian tried.

"We just established that I don't have much of a stick when it comes to you two, no?" Silverlake said. "So I can't really counter-attack, but I *can* make myself a poisonous pill to swallow. Incidentally, I would like to point out that I have made myself immune to all truth potions I know of and that my mind has been rigged to collapse should my mental defenses ever be violently shattered. This is something I did long before I met you two, so even attacking me first thing in the restart won't negate it. Just an interesting tidbit, you know?"

"Yeah, we know," Zach said with exasperation. "Subduing you and trying to forcefully get your secrets out of your mind would be a total chore and take way too much time, so we better ask nicely."

"Exactly," Silverlake nodded happily.

"So what's the carrot part of the deal?" Zach asked curiously.

"I am an alchemist of incredible skill and I have lived for a very long time. I know how to make many wondrous potions and know incredible secrets... none of which I can be persuaded to share with you in less than a month's time. At the very least, I am confident that you'll seek me out eventually for my secret of how to stop aging and restore your youth. I know, I know, you're in the prime of your life now and old age seems distant... but when your body starts to fail and your mind dims, I am confident you'll become interested to discover what I know about the topic." She paused dramatically for a moment. "Of course, if you were really smart, you would strike while the iron is hot and come to me while you're still young and I haven't worked out how to get these blasted eggs on my own. That way I won't think you're desperate for a solution and you'll have lots of things that interest me. You'd be able to get a much better deal that way..."

"How do you know we won't be able to figure out such a thing ourselves?" Zach asked.

"What, you think youth potions grow on trees or something?" she scoffed. "This is something that takes an absolute master of alchemy to accomplish. You may be decent enough in comparison to your average alchemist, but it takes a lot more than that to tackle this kind of problem. Besides, you seem to be paying other experts to do your alchemical research and complicated work for you. That says everything about your future alchemical expertise, really."

There was some truth in that. Zorian did have a healthy amount of interest in alchemy, but he liked spell formula better and it was impossible to focus on everything at once. Even in a time loop and with a small army of simulacra running around.

"So I guess you're not really interested in refining your eternal youth potion over multiple restarts with our help, then?" Zorian asked.

"Good heavens no, why would I want to do that?" she asked incredulously. "That would just remove what little leverage I have over you, and for what? I'm confident I'll get it right eventually. I have time, even without the time loop. I've been working on this for a very long time, what's a couple of years more?"

"I see," Zorian said. "Well, I am glad you are at least willing to work with us on this. Though I do hope your future selves will not sabotage our work with spying and delay the meeting for most of the month like you have."

"I don't know about that," Silverlake said, not in the least bit apologetic. "Your story is very crazy and requires checking. It's hard to speed that up."

"Ha, well... don't be so sure about that," Zorian said, reaching into his backpack to retrieve a handful of Kael's notebooks that the morlock boy had given him permission to share with others. "Let me tell you about the wonders of notebook transfers across restarts..."

- break -

With Silverlake's cooperation secured, the restart ended uneventfully, the only notable difference being the larger number of notebooks that Zorian was transferring into the next restart. Considering that the orb's memory bank was practically limitless in size, this was not a big deal.

The next several restarts were somewhat routine. They were learning pocket dimension expertise from Silverlake, looking deeper into Veyers' ties with the Cult of the World Dragon, figuring out the activation procedure of the Bakora Gates and the construction methods of the Ibasan ones, doing small preparations for the airship theft, experimenting with divine artifacts and sifting through the ruins inside the portable palace orb. Zorian was messing around with mental enhancements while Zach was steadily getting closer to being able to create his own simulacra.

Their various other operations, such as hiring various experts to do research and development for them, also continued at a steady pace.

Just like that, another six restarts had gone by.

79. Crime and Evading Punishment

Chapter 079 Crime and Evading Punishment

Although Aranhāl widely advertised their new airship to their own populace and neighboring countries, actually seeing the Pearl of Aranhāl took a bit of effort. It was located next to an important industrial town, but wasn't actually in it. Instead, the construction site was placed outside the settlement itself, close enough to be supplied with relative ease but far enough to foil casual visitors.

The airship was currently grounded in an oval-shaped holding structure and surrounded by extensive scaffolding. Ringing it was a collection of storehouses, barracks, watchtowers and temporary housing for workers and overseers. Finally, the entire work camp was surrounded by a warded, alteration-made stone wall that stopped minor magical creatures or petty criminals from simply waltzing into the place. Neither this, nor any of the other, more subtle defenses could stop Zach and Zorian from infiltrating the place without being seen, of course. They were currently standing on one of the observation platforms attached to the ship, observing it.

Zorian had to say, the Pearl of Aranhāl was a beautiful construct. Airships were often depicted as floating sea-going ships – an image that stemmed from the earliest known models, which really were simply modified sea-going ships. Ancient airship creators were working with a lower technological base and less developed economic infrastructure, forcing them to pick an already constructed vessel as a base for their project. Most modern airships, on the other hand, were built from the ground up as dedicated aerial vessels, so they rarely looked anything like a mundane ship. They tended to either have long cylindrical hulls covered in stabilizing fins or be some manner of a triangle. The Pearl of Aranhāl bucked the trend there, in that it had a relatively flat, rhombus-like shape. It kind of gave Zorian an impression of a giant leaf. It certainly looked like it should be fast and maneuverable, but it made Zorian somewhat skeptical of the claim it was especially robust and durable by airship standards. Well, no matter. They wanted the ship because of its speed and flight endurance, not combat ability.

In any case, the airship's name seemed particularly fitting in light of its current coloration. Its hull was painted in dazzling, pure white, with no overt markings or identifying patterns. This was meant to be only temporary, however. Aranhāl intended to decorate the ship further before unveiling it to the waiting public, but they had yet to settle down on what kind of color scheme and decorations to put there. The question seemed quite trivial to Zorian, but was apparently an intensely divisive political question that caused many bitter arguments in Aranhāl's halls of power. The current overseer was continually kicking the can down the road in regards to the issue, fearful that whoever lost the dispute would try to cut the project's budget out of spite.

"What do you say?" Zach suddenly said, rocking in place on his heels. He looked quite bored. "It's about time, no?"

"Yeah, I guess," Zorian answered. He was a bit nervous, he realized, so he may have been stalling a little. "I'll go tell my copies to set the monkeys loose."

He reached to his simulacrum through his soul, his ability to use his soul as a telepathic conduit as natural as breathing by now, and gave them a simple 'go' signal. They already knew what to do.

Golden triclopses were monkey-like magic creatures native to the area. They had bright yellow fur, two small horns on top of their heads and an extra eye in the middle of their forehead. Their third eyes gave them the ability to perceive magic in some strange, hard to understand way, which made them quite interested in magic items. Of course, being only as smart as regular animals and somewhat aggressive, their interest tended to be unhealthy for the magic items in question and the humans that owned them. Zach and Zorian had captured several groups of these beasts earlier to set loose as a distraction. They were particularly good for this because the construction team had already had a number of smaller clashes with the local triclops communities, and thus having a bunch of them making trouble in the base wasn't immediately suspicious. They had tried this already in the three previous restarts to test the waters, and they knew that the guards would first move to contain the situation before wondering if someone had sent this unusually large group of them here intentionally.

By then, of course, it would be too late.

After the golden triclopses were set loose upon the unsuspecting base, Zach and Zorian remained in their current spot for a while, waiting. It would take a while before the creatures were discovered, the severity of the problem became obvious, and before the majority of the base's guards were mobilized to deal with them. Zorian monitored the situation through his simulacrum, whose senses he could tap into with ease. His studies of the cephalic rat swarms and the god-touched hydra living in the portable palace orb had done much to improve his ability to coordinate with his simulacrum. They weren't quite a single mind yet, but he probably didn't want that to begin with.

Zach also had simulacrum present in the base. He had only managed to get them working recently, so they tended to have far more quirks and differences from the original than Zorian's own did. However, they needed those simulacrum if they wanted to steal the ship and it was pretty unlikely any of them would go insane and try to kill them, so whatever.

"There," Zorian eventually said. "Everyone who was going to get pulled to deal with the monkeys is gone. It's now or never."

"Finally," Zach said.

He didn't say anything else, instead opting to jump down from the platform. Zorian followed after him with a sigh, giving the simulacrum the signal to drop whatever they were doing and converge on the ship. Even Zach's simulacrum, since his fellow time traveler seemed to have forgotten about his copies in his hurry to get to the action. Or maybe he just expected Zorian to take care of that for him – it was actually easier for Zorian to

coordinate Zach's simulacrum than it was for Zach himself, due to his lack of easy telepathy. Though, since Zach and his simulacrum were largely identical in mind, it should be quite possible for him to use telepathy to communicate with his copies with ease, even if he wasn't a natural mind mage like Zorian. He made a mental note to talk to Zach about that later...

Zach, Zorian and their simulacrum surged forward, pushing past the shocked technicians and civilian staff and disabling any armed resistance they encountered. Zach and his simulacrum broke down the scaffolding and the anchor beams that were holding the airship locked down while Zorian and *his* simulacrum went about installing the missing airship components and ejecting anyone that remained inside the ship.

It went... surprisingly well. Zorian was a little worried, since they were making this attempt only a few days into the restart and the preparations had been made in a considerable rush. He'd had to take a potion of vigilance and miss a night of sleep entirely in order to finish constructing everything in time, so he was technically doing this while staying awake for more than 24 hours.

They only had two significant complications. One was that some of the soldiers inside the ship had barricaded themselves inside a storage room and placed high-level mental wards on themselves after they figured out how Zorian was overrunning the crew so easily. Since Zach and Zorian couldn't use anything too destructive for fear of damaging the ship, this made the resulting situation a bit of a chore to resolve in a timely manner. Thankfully, the golem bodies of Zorian's simulacrum were capable of taking considerable abuse, so Zorian simply sent them in to swarm the soldiers with no regards to countering attacks. The result were two simulacrum with seriously damaged torsos and one that was missing both of his legs, but the problem was solved and the damaged simulacrum could still crew the ship just fine... though the legless one kept whining to Zorian about his predicament.

The other was that once every simulacrum and missing part was in its place and they tried to take off, the airship wouldn't budge. It turned out that someone had installed an additional safeguard that none of the people Zorian had interrogated had been aware of, and Zorian was forced to frantically search for it while Zach repelled constant assaults on the ship from the reorganized Aranhali soldiers outside. Thankfully, Zorian eventually found the section the safeguard was in. Unfortunately, it was inside an engine regulation section, and integrated into it too deeply and too subtly for Zorian to remove it cleanly in the time they had left. Aranhali battlemages were no doubt going to start teleporting in any time soon, and then they'd be forced to abort the attempt. Thus, Zorian just torched the entire mechanism, allowing them to take off but permanently crippling some of the ship's engines.

Now the airship was in the air, rapidly distancing itself from the construction site as it flew in the direction of the Xlotic interior. However, it was considerably slower than it should have been and there was another Aranhali airship chasing after them in pursuit. Zorian had no idea how that airship had gotten on the scene so quickly. Maybe it had just happened to be in the area when they made their attempt?

In any case, the two of them were currently in the main control room, trying to figure things out. While they had done their homework before coming here and had a rough idea of what operating the Pearl of Aranhali involved, it was one thing to have a theoretical knowledge of how something worked and quite another to actually put it into practice.

"You know, this thing is harder and less exciting to pilot than I thought it would be," Zach said idly, poking and prodding the various levers and buttons on the control panel in front of him.

"I do know," Zorian told him, a little grumpily. He was rapidly becoming aware of why Aranhali plans called for a dedicated navigator that would focus fully on charting a ship's course. He was so fobbing off this job to a simulacrum the next time they did this... "Just focus on keeping the flight engines running and be glad you're not in charge of navigation like I am."

"I'm not so sure your job is that much harder than mine, considering you wrecked half the ship in order to get us in the air," Zach remarked.

"It wasn't half of the ship!" Zorian protested.

Zach laughed at him.

"So easy to rile up," Zach said mirthfully. "Anyway, whoever designed this stuff should have really been pulled aside and told to cut down a little on the mysterious dials and counters. He should have put in some kind of magic panel or an illusion projector that would give you information in a more understandable form. Would that really be so hard?"

"I think you have a skewed image of how easy that kind of thing is," Zorian remarked. "It's neither cheap nor easy, and it would make it really inconvenient to fix things if something goes wrong. Dials and counters are simple to make and fix."

"I guess," Zach conceded. "It's still annoying that we're not even able to see the Aranhali airship pursuing us. One would think that an option to see a pursuing enemy would be one of the core features put into a control room. I should be able to say... I don't know, something like 'on screen!', and have an image of the enemy projected on these windows in front of us."

He gestured towards the large, clear windows that offered a breathtaking view of the outside world. Currently they could see nothing except the clear sky and the distant horizon, which sounded a little useless but at least it assured them they were flying straight, weren't going to ram into anything and that the weather was pleasant enough to fly in. Pretty much what these windows were intended for, Zorian was sure.

"That would be kind of useful, actually," Zorian agreed. "And while the airship itself isn't nearly so convenient..."

He quickly performed three different divination spells, created a large illusionary screen in the air in front of them and then cast the final spell to integrate all of these into a semi-unified whole.

The illusionary screen rippled with prismatic colors for a second before settling into a three part screen. Two of them showed a scried image of the pursuing airship in different angles. The third one gave them a downward view from a vantage point high above the Pearl of Aranhali, allowing them to easily grasp the position of the enemy airship in relation to themselves.

"Nice," Zach praised.

The other Aranhali airship was larger and more heavily-built than them. It had a more typical cylinder shape, and had a handful of cannons sticking out of its hull. The Pearl of Aranhali, on the other hand, was entirely unarmed. Even if they did have cannons of their own, they couldn't use them, as they lacked the qualified gunners to make use of them.

Zorian wasn't feeling very threatened, though. Despite the damage to its flight engines, the Pearl of Aranhali was still slightly faster than the other airship. The design was really proving its worth there. Gradually, minute after minute, hour after hour, they were pulling away from the other airship. Additionally, Zorian had diverted one of his simulacrum to see if something could be done about the damage he had done to the ship's flight engines, and it seemed the answer was yes. In another two hours or so, their speed would shoot up and their pursuers would be left in the dust.

"Uh, not sure if you noticed it yet, but there is another airship in front of us," Zach said, pointing at a distant dot that had yet to enter into the range of their scrying screen but could be seen through the mundane window of the control room. "Do you think they're here by coincidence or...?"

Crap.

Some frantic divinations quickly revealed that the third airship was most certainly not there on accident. It was moving to intercept them, and both it and their old pursuer were making minor course adjustments in order to box them in better, apparently coordinating their moves. The strange thing was that the new airship wasn't even owned by Aranhali – it belonged to the neighboring country of Mezner. The two countries didn't exactly have the best relations with one another, so Zorian couldn't help but privately wonder what Aranhali had promised to the other side in order to get them to help out. A lot, probably.

They really, *really* didn't want to lose the Pearl of Aranhali, it seemed.

- break -

Previously, when Zach and Zorian were securing the Pearl of Aranhali and fleeing the scene with their ill-gotten gains, they had been trying to treat their enemies with as much mercy as possible. The Aranhali soldiers posted on the construction site were perfectly justified in being outraged at them, after all, so the two time travelers tried to disable their enemies non-lethally. To Zorian's knowledge, nobody had actually died during the theft itself, though some people did get seriously injured and the golden triclops might have killed someone after they had left. They even left the pursuing airship be, preferring to flee rather than destroying them, as they very well could have.

However, having been caught between two airships like this meant they could no longer afford to treat the situation with such velvet gloves.

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Guided by Zach's and Zorian's hands, the Pearl of Aranhali promptly turned around to confront the Aranhali airship that had been pursuing them. If they *had* to fight, it was better to tackle their enemies one by one than wait for them to catch up to them together.

The Aranhali airship did not fear a confrontation. It knew that the Pearl of Aranhali was unarmed, and that Zach and Zorian were running it on a skeleton crew. Thus, it simply continued onward towards them, silently accepting the challenge.

It did not fire its cannons at them, though. Instead, six holes opened up in its hull and released a dozen or so giant eagle riders towards them. The eagles were overloaded with passengers, visibly straining under the weight of men they had to carry, but they flew fast nonetheless.

Simulacrum number two stood on the outer hull of the Pearl of Aranhali, studying the scene dispassionately. His legs were glued onto the surface of the airship to keep the wind from sweeping him away, and his golem body was unbothered by the cold. After sweeping through the incoming enemy forces once, he sent his memory over to the original for study and then put them out of his mind. They weren't his problem. There were other simulacrum in charge of dealing with defense. *His* job was a bit more... proactive.

He flexed his hands and shook a little, just to make sure the previous battles hadn't left some hidden injuries on him. The golem bodies that the original had made for them had been perfected to such a degree by now that they felt completely indistinguishable from their original form. However, the advantages of the golem bodies came with a hefty downside – if they were ever damaged, it was very hard to repair them, requiring a lengthy and expensive process. Poor simulacrum number four was still legless, for instance, though number two agreed with the original that his whining got really old after a while. If a normal simulacrum had had both of his legs blown off, he would have dispersed from the strain. The guy should be grateful he even still existed, not complaining about missing limbs.

His little checkup done, he calmed his mind and focused on the task at hand: counter-attacking the Aranhali airship.

They thought themselves safe because they thought their opponents had no weapons. But they were so very wrong...

Simulacrum number two teleported to the enemy ship. Teleporting from one moving target to another was tricky thing to pull off, and was beyond most teleporters... but it was entirely doable for Zorian, and therefore for his simulacrum as well. He couldn't teleport directly into the enemy airship, but he didn't have to – he teleported on top of the enemy airship's hull, disintegrated a few panels to create an opening for himself and then

stepped inside.

He didn't even try to hide himself as he advanced through the corridors towards the airship's flight engines. He didn't have the time, and he had probably been discovered the moment he made a hole in the hull, anyway.

Three armed crewmembers quickly found him.

"Halt! Stand d-"

He was ready for them. A severing whip cut them to pieces before they could so much as fire a shot. He didn't even slow down. He simply sped up, his divination spells having successfully mapped the interior, showing him where to go to reach his destination.

The severing whip trailed after him, attached to his arm, and when he came upon another group of people he used it to cut them down as well. It was a very efficient spell – the whip, once created, was pretty cheap to maintain – but one that was rarely used due to its short range and the possibility of the caster slicing their own limbs off if they didn't have complete control over it. A bit brutal, admittedly, but the culmination of his task here involved crashing the entire airship – most of these people would end up dead in the end, no matter how you sliced it.

A hail of bullets impacted his chest but he simply ignored it, not even bothering to shield against them. His golem body was tough, able to shrug off minor attacks like those with ease. Spending mana to defend against things like that would be a waste.

When a dazzling, spinning bolt of fire swerved around the corner to slam into him, though... *that* he shielded against. The explosion was massive, blowing off all nearby walls and setting the air ablaze. If simulacrum number two had to breathe, this would have been a pretty devastating opener. Even as it was, it knocked him a little off-balance... and the mage that cast that spell soon rounded the corner to finish him off, before the aftershocks had the chance to die down.

The man moved incredibly quickly, using some strange telekinetic magic to 'skate' across the floor at high speeds. He was big and muscular, sported an impressive mustache, and wielded a large saber in his hand. Not a weapon Zorian was used to facing, as most mages avoided close-quarter fighting if they could help it.

The enemy mage immediately charged at the simulacrum using that strange skating movement magic, silent and grim. He swung the saber in his hands towards the simulacrum, its edge lighting up with an ominous red glow that made it clear he wasn't dealing with a simple steel blade.

Number two admitted he had been caught off guard a little... but only a little.

He performed a short-range teleport to get behind the man, avoiding his charge, and then fired a trio of attack spells at him. Instead of stopping and turning, however, the man skated along the walls and ceiling of the corridor, keeping all of his speed and momentum. He even used that strange saber of his to harmlessly dispel the first spell Zorian directed his way – a force lance that Zorian had sent at him in hopes of breaking his momentum by forcing him to shield. The simulacrum had to admit that was pretty impressive.

The second spell, however, was a soul magic attack – a short-range wave of ghostly force that minutely disturbed the connection of the soul with its body, causing a wave of nausea and vertigo in those affected. The spell was weak, and it could be greatly attenuated by just about any shield spell, but since the man trusted his saber over a classical defense spell he was hit by the wave at full blast. He stumbled for just a moment, but that moment of weakness was enough for Zorian to launch his third attack on him.

The severing whip struck like a viper, severing the man's head from his shoulders in one fell swoop.

Simulacrum number two stared at the dead body for a few seconds in total silence, before taking the man's saber for later examination and continuing on his way.

He still had an airship to crash.

- break -

The battle between the Pearl of Aranhali and the two opposing airships got increasingly heated as time went by. At first, the two attackers were aiming to recapture the ship mostly intact, and thus attempted to board them with soldiers and mages. However, when Zach and Zorian had sent their simulacra to wreak havoc inside the enemy airships, trying to bring them down from the inside, and then repelled several boarding attempts despite their numerical disadvantage, that attitude began to change. They started firing their cannons at them, and then began lobbing increasingly deadly artillery spells their way, forcing Zach and Zorian to spend a lot of their mana on defense.

When it became obvious that Zorian's simulacrum inside their airship could not be stopped, the Aranhali airship tried to ram them out of spite before going down... sadly, they made the Pearl of Aranhali too well, allowing Zach and Zorian to maneuver out of their way long enough for simulacrum number two to destroy the enemy airship's flight cores and send it crashing into the ground below.

Finding itself alone against them, the Mezneri airship then chose to simply flee. Unlike their Aranhali 'allies', they had no reason to pursue this to the bitter end. Zach and Zorian let them run, and simply breathed a sigh of relief before continuing on their way. Keeping a massive vessel like the Pearl of Aranhali intact in the face of double aggression had strained even them, and the airship had not gotten out of battle unscathed. Thankfully, none of the damage was critical, and further pursuers wouldn't be able to catch up to them.

Indeed, for the next few days, they had been blissfully free of any enemy going after them. The fact that they were flying over the desolate,

trackless desert that covered the interior of northern Miasina probably had a lot to do with that. The only dangers were an occasional pair of desert drakes that got too curious for their own good and tried to fly closer to check them out. It gave them quite a scare, because they had initially mistaken them for dragons when they had spotted them in the distance, but they were easy to chase off otherwise.

A bigger problem turned out to be locating an accessible Bakora Gate. They wanted to find one before continuing towards the Ziggurat of the Sun, to make it easier to gain access to the ziggurat in future restarts. Unfortunately, the maps of known Bakora Gates in the area turned out to be really outdated and unreliable. This area had been hit hard by the Cataclysm, and almost no humans lived here anymore. Some of the gates were just gone, possibly destroyed in one of the many wars that had swept through the area as the desert spread northward. Or maybe they never existed, and the mapmakers had put them there based on faulty sources. Some were buried under the sand and gravel and thus unusable for their purposes. Some were there, but not quite in the area specified by the maps – the mapmakers had only known the general area where the gate was located and made an ‘educated guess’ about the exact location instead of going there to actually check things.

Apparently mapmakers had been less concerned about quality control in the past. A *lot* less.

Still, they managed to find a suitable Bakora Gate after five days of flying around the desert. The time wasn’t entirely wasted, in any case – Zorian took advantage of his unrestricted access to the airship’s internals to inspect it in detail. He also took some of the equipment apart to see how it worked before putting it back together again, although he was forced to stop when Zach complained he would ‘break things even worse than he already had’.

In any case, once they had settled down on a Bakora Gate to use, they grounded the Pearl of Aranhil in the area before re-establishing contact with Eldemar. Zach had left one of his simulacrum there, so he could open a dimensional passage for them the same way Zorian used to do... except that he couldn’t contact his simulacrum telepathically through the soul, so they had to wait for a pre-arranged time of day instead of doing it on a whim.

There were a lot of things they had to do back in Eldemar. First of all, they had to secure the cooperation of the Silent Doorway Adepts in order to obtain the password of the Bakora Gate they had claimed. Their research into the method of operating the Bakora Gate had greatly improved the speed and reliability of the aranea opening ritual, but they still needed the web’s cooperation in order to make use of them. Thankfully, convincing the Silent Doorway Adepts to ally with them was a lot easier these days – the perfected opening ritual and the many new gate passwords they had obtained over the restarts made their words carry considerable weight. It usually took only a few days before the Silent Doorway Adepts were ready to work with them.

Secondly, they had to organize an expedition towards the Ziggurat of the Sun. Since the place was a Sulrothum stronghold, they couldn’t just fly in there as they pleased. They had a brand new airship, but Sulrothum could all fly. They had to scout the area, see if they could get Alanic on board, repair the Pearl of Aranhil and Zorian’s simulacrum-golems and then come up with a plan of approach after they had seen what they were working with.

Thus, Zach and Zorian reluctantly left their new airship out there in the desert, guarded only by a few simulacrum, while they went back to Eldemar to prepare things.

Hopefully nobody would try and take it while they were occupied elsewhere.

- break -

The room was packed. Everyone who was a part of their ‘conspiracy’, as Zach called it, was there: Kael, Taiven, Xvim, Alanic, Daimen... and Silverlake.

Silverlake had never taken part in these kinds of group meetings in the past. While they had managed to convince her the time loop was real and come to an agreement with her, she clearly didn’t trust them very much. She instructed them in pocket dimension creation and she worked with them to decipher the nature of the primordial prisons and the manner in which they were connected to the time loop reality and the real world... but she also kept trying to covertly spy on them and she was leaving coded messages to her future iterations inside her notes. Zorian couldn’t figure out what those coded messages were saying but he was sure they were there, even if Silverlake kept insisting he was just paranoid and making mountains out of molehills. She also stubbornly refused to make use of the time loop to work on her youth potion, but Zach and Zorian cared a lot less about that than she seemed to think.

In any case, the result of all this was that Zach and Zorian were both leery about trusting her too much and kept keeping her out of their greater plans and group meeting as such. However, that kind of thing couldn’t go on forever and it was becoming obvious that waiting for Silverlake to find something encouraging in the notes of her predecessors was an idle dream. They could only hope that if they extended a little more trust towards her (even though she sure hadn’t done anything to deserve that) she would eventually reciprocate.

Besides, their plans for the current restart were extensive and important enough that it didn’t feel right to exclude anyone out of the planning sessions.

It was interesting, though... Zorian had expected Silverlake to make a remark about Kael, since the morlock boy had indicated they had some kind of prior knowledge of each other when he had sent Zorian to talk to her, but Silverlake didn’t seem to notice him. It wasn’t that she was deliberately ignoring him as far as Zorian could tell; she just didn’t seem to perceive him as important or familiar. Perhaps she just didn’t connect the person with the face in front of her? Kael had no doubt been a child when they had last met, and he was a teenager now...

Regardless, while Silverlake did not recognize Kael, she definitely recognized someone else: Alanic. What was more, Alanic clearly recognized her

as well. They faced off against each other for a full five seconds after they saw one another, just... staring at each other. Not saying anything. Then they looked away and pretended nothing happened. Since they didn't say anything, Zorian pretended not to notice.

Currently, everyone was staring at Zach and Zorian with a complicated expression, momentarily struck speechless.

"That was you!?" Daimen exclaimed incredulously. "You're the ones who did that airship theft that all the newspapers are talking about!?"

"That's us, yup!" Zach said, nodding proudly. "We're awesome."

"That's..." Daimen said, grasping for words.

"Reckless," Xvim supplied.

"Stupid," Taiven offered.

"Your idea," Zorian said.

"Yeah, exact—" Daimen began, before registering what Zorian had said. "Wait, what?"

"Yup," Zorian nodded seriously. "Totally your idea."

"I assume you had a reason for doing that, then?" Alanic prompted.

"Of course," Zach laughed. "We had the *best* reason. Gather round, children, Grandpa Zach is going to tell you all a story..."

Over the next half an hour, Zach told everyone involved what the point behind the airship theft was. Zach being Zach, he focused more on describing the exciting parts of the airship battle than the strategic goal of the theft, or their reasoning, but he did eventually manage to get the point across. They needed the airship in order to locate all the Key pieces in time. Without the Pearl of Aranhil, travelling across the Xlotic desert to reach the Ziggurat of the Sun would probably require multiple restarts due to the hostile environment and a lack of human towns where they could hire teleporters at. Additionally, they eventually needed to reach Blantyre to collect one of the pieces, and traversing the vast amount of ocean that separates Blantyre from the nearest human landmass in less than a month would be nearly impossible through alternative methods.

"It's more than that, though," Zach continued. "Not only is the airship we stole absolutely critical in getting us out of this time looping reality, it is also important practice for another theft that needs to happen."

"More thefts, mister Noveda?" Xvim asked him, raising an eyebrow inquisitively.

"Well, yes," Zach said. "After all, the dagger is held inside Eldemar's royal treasury..."

"Oh heavens..." Taiven groaned, burying her face in her hands. "Zorian, are you seriously going to break into the royal vaults?"

Kael, who was sitting next to her, chuckled quietly.

"He kind of has to, doesn't he?" he said, sounding a little amused.

"Since you're mentioning this now, I'm guessing you intend to make the attempt at the royal treasury in this very restart, then?" Alanic asked.

"Yes," Zorian confirmed. "Additionally, we also intend to try and wrest the crown from Quatach-Ichl, the ancient lich fighting for the Ibasans. Potentially, we could gather all but one of the Key pieces in this very restart. I doubt we'll succeed in getting them all this time – hell, I wouldn't even be surprised if we fail to get *any* of them – but it's good practice and it should at least tell us what areas we're lacking in and what we need to work on to succeed next time."

"I see," Alanic sighed. "I will be frank – I am not very comfortable with condoning such an act of treason. Considering what is at stake here, I will not stand in your way... but you should not count on my help in this regard."

"Ha ha!" Silverlake suddenly cackled. "So righteous and serious! This is too funny! I still remember how you came to me back then, a budding little necromancer full of ambition and anger, asking for my help! It's really hard to reconcile that memory with what you ended up becoming. A necromancer and a thief became a fervent priest and a patriot, now I've really seen everything in the world..."

Alanic stiffened slightly at her words and then gave her an angry glare. Silverlake just grinned cheekily at him. Taking a deep breath, Alanic rose from his seat and gave Zach and Zorian a frosty look.

"I think it would be best for everyone if I did not participate in this meeting anymore... or any other meeting where you planned how to best rob Eldemar's royal family," Alanic said. "And while I realize more than anyone that desperation can make one do things they rather wouldn't, I have to warn you that you're making a mistake by working with this old ghoul. You're playing with fire. She will stab you in the back in a heartbeat if she thought it would benefit her."

"Ah, I love you too, my little necromancer," Silverlake said sweetly.

Alanic did not bother to respond to her, or even look at her. He simply turned around and left the room. Not quite stormed off, but it wasn't quite

far from it.

Zorian resisted the urge to bury his face in his hands. It always had to be something, didn't it?

A long, uncomfortable silence descended on the scene. Only Silverlake seemed entirely comfortable with the situation, humming happily to herself and idly examining one of the experimental potions Kael had made. The meeting was happening in one of the alchemical workshops Zorian had made for the white-haired boy, so there were quite a few of them lying around.

"So," Silverlake eventually began. "You were saying something about an ancient lich?"

80. Enemies

Chapter 080

Enemies

Although the Xlotic desert was usually depicted as an endless sea of sand, with only the occasionally broken up rocky outcroppings or secluded oases, its actual landscape was far more complex than that. There was plenty of sand, yes, but also vast fields of rock, barren hills and mountain ranges, remnants of dried-up lakes and riverbeds, and old Iksian ruins scattered all over the place. And that was just the more mundane landmarks. Zorian had heard that there was a forest composed out of stony, seemingly fossilized trees in the deep desert, blooming with life and greenery during the rare times it rained in the area before reverting back to its seemingly lifeless appearance after a few weeks. Then there were the so-called ‘water volcanos’ – massive geysers of boiling water that occasionally erupted from the Dungeon in some regions, flooding the area around them for a brief while.

The area around the Ziggurat of the Sun wasn’t as unusual as those two examples, but it was still an unusual place. First of all, this was once a famous temple complex of the Iksian Empire, and a great many ruins were scattered around the area – ruins of temples, lesser ziggurats, military forts, private estates and so on. Many of these ruins had been claimed by the local sulrothum, but many more had been overrun by various desert-adapted monsters, which had moved into them and had dug themselves in too thoroughly for anyone to dislodge them. Secondly, there was a seasonal river passing through the area – although it only persisted for part of a year, it was enough to make the area relatively vibrant compared to its immediate surroundings. Finally, the local underworld was particularly extensive and featured a large underground lake that no doubt contributed to making the land far livelier than it realistically should have been this deep in the Xlotic interior.

Zach and Zorian were currently traveling through this land on foot, warily observing their surroundings. Their journey had been relatively free of dangers thus far, but that could change in a flash if they weren’t careful. The heat was also slowly starting to get to them. Their comfort spells had done a fine job of warding off sunstroke and the worst of the desert heat, but this sort of magic was not all-powerful and Xlotic was quite an extreme environment.

It made Zorian wish they had just arrived here in their pretty new airship. Unfortunately, that hadn’t been an option. They were coming here to try and negotiate with the sulrothum for the right of passage, and the devil wasps would no doubt react badly to the sight of an incoming airship. Most likely they would just attack the vessel immediately, ruining any chance of successful negotiations.

Well, if Zorian was being honest with himself, the negotiations were not very likely to be successful anyway. Although sulrothum were known to have peaceful interactions with humans on occasion, they had a reputation of being an extremely fierce and violent species, and there was a long history of bloody conflict between them and humanity. On top of that, sulrothum were incapable of producing the necessary sounds to mimic human speech, and humans could not speak sulrothum either, making communication between the two species difficult.

Even though the odds of a peaceful outcome were low, though, Zorian still felt they had to try. No doubt he and Zach could forcibly take the ziggurat from the sulrothum if they really applied themselves, but there were hundreds of these things living there and this was their home. This was where they kept their children, their food stockpiles and water reserves, their workshops and trade goods... they were not going to give the place up easily. They might even decide to fight to the death, which would force Zorian to deal with sulrothum children and non-combatants somehow. He’d rather avoid that headache if at all possible.

“This should be enough, no?” Zach suddenly said. He hopped onto a nearby rocky outcropping and quickly scanned their surroundings. “I think we’re far enough into their territory. Any further and they might attack us on principle. Though really, I still think we’re going about this the wrong way. Sulrothum are famed for their savagery, no? I bet smacking them around a bit until they’re ready to talk would produce better results than just approaching them peacefully. Show them we’re serious, you know?”

“You might yet get your wish,” Zorian said, performing a brief sweep of the area with his mind sense, soul perception and his plain two eyes. There was some sort of snake hiding beneath a nearby patch of thorny bushes, but it was absolutely terrified of them and had no intention of attacking them, so Zorian ignored it. “If the wasps attack us immediately or refuse to even entertain our offer, we’ll go with your plan.”

“Ha. Great,” Zach grinned, before retrieving a water bottle from his backpack and emptying it on top of his head. He sighed in relief. “Ahh, I needed that...”

After some thought, Zorian decided to follow his example and did the same.

It did make him feel a lot better, he had to admit.

A minute or so of comfortable silence ensued.

“Shall we?” Zorian eventually asked.

“Yes,” Zach nodded. “Fire away.”

Zorian performed one of the many spells that produced a signal flare in some fashion – in this case, a brilliant red star that released a high-pitched ‘scream’ as it flew through the air – and fired it straight into the sky above him, announcing their presence to everyone for miles around.

They didn’t have to wait long. Not even fifteen minutes after Zorian had fired the flare, a trio of black dots appeared on the horizon. Their features

were kind of hard to discern because they were approaching them from a direction that let the sun illuminate their backs, but Zorian was pretty sure he was looking at an incoming sulrothum patrol.

Soon, this suspicion was proven correct.

They were louder than Zorian thought they would be. The drone of their wings, beating several times a second to keep their large bodies aloft, was audible from a considerable distance. It kind of made Zorian wonder why they even bothered to try and mask their approach when anyone who wasn't deaf could hear them coming. Regardless, as the sulrothum patrol got closer, Zach and Zorian shifted their posture in preparation for a possible attack. They didn't think the sulrothum would just attack them with no provocation – if nothing else, they'd have brought more tribe members if they were going to be hostile right off the bat – but it was best to be prepared for everything.

Their landing was anything but graceful. Instead of gradually slowing down, the sulrothum dropped to the ground with reckless speed, impacting the gravel-covered earth in front of Zach and Zorian with considerable force and kicking up dust and loose stones in every direction. The shockwave even reached the place where Zach and Zorian were standing, though the weather shields they had protecting them simply deflected these stray irritants to the side with no action required on their part.

Well. The meeting had barely even begun and already Zorian was starting to dislike the damn wasps.

In any case, with the sulrothum right in front of them, Zorian could finally take a good look at one. He had seen the descriptions and illustrations of them in the books, naturally, but that sort of thing really couldn't compare to seeing something in person. They were big – smaller than the three meter long giants that the books described, but not that much smaller – but also very spindly and fragile-looking. That impression was misleading, he knew – sulrothum were said to be strong enough to tear a man limb from limb with their bare hands and tough as coffin nails. Black, glossy chitin covered their wasp-like forms, and their faces were very much insect-like – alien and inscrutable. Their eyes, as black as their bodies and multifaceted like those of most insects, gave away nothing of their inner thoughts. They had a pair of short antennae on top of their heads, though, and these twitched madly in their general direction, revealing their agitation. Zorian had trouble interpreting their thoughts and emotions, alien as they were to his sensibilities, but he could tell that the trio was feeling twitchy and paranoid, ready to either attack them or flee at the slightest sign of aggression.

All three of them carried spears. They were appropriately sized for a creature of sulrothum size and strength, which meant they were pretty gigantic by human standards. The size and weight alone made those spears a significant danger, even though they looked somewhat crudely made. In addition to these close-quarters weapons, each sulrothum also carried a handful of smaller spears strapped to their backs. These were the notorious 'heavy javelins' that sulrothum used as their ranged attack method. Generally, every sulrothum raid opened with them hurling a storm of these javelins at their targets before closing in to clash with their foes face-to-face. Sulrothum bodies were strong and durable, and they did not fear close-quarters combat... but even so, they did not balk at softening up their targets a little before closing in.

Somehow, the spears and javelins made the sulrothum trio far more threatening than they should appear. Objectively speaking, the three devil wasps in front of them did not pose a significant threat to Zach and Zorian, but seeing them clutching those spears in their hands was a stark reminder that they were dealing with creatures that were not just sapient, but *tool-users* as well. As a rule, sapient monsters did not employ tools much – other than lizardmen and a few other species, most of them basically lived like animals. Their innate abilities were potent enough that technology largely seemed pointless to them. Why use a spear when your claws are sharper? Why build a house when the cold and the rain hardly hurt you? Sulrothum, though, went to the trouble of creating tools and homes that made use of their natural advantages and made them more potent than they would otherwise be. They shouldn't take them too lightly.

"Hello," Zorian greeted with as much friendliness as he could manage, when standing in front of a trio of giant, sapient, aggressive wasps. "Do you understand me?"

He really hoped they did. Sulrothum tribes usually made sure they had at least a couple of members that could understand the local human language, but this tribe lived quite a distance away from any major human power so it was possible they felt no need to bother. If they were ignorant of any human tongue, or only understood a dialect that Zorian himself did not speak, they were in trouble. Telepathic communication between entities that did not speak a common language was a crude and often unpleasant thing, doubly so if the people involved were as different in their perception of the world as humans and sulrothum were.

The three sulrothum erupted into a storm of chattering, punctuated by an occasional buzz of their wings and mad flailing of their antennae. However, they did not bother to face each other to do so, their attention on Zach and Zorian never wavering and their spears pointed firmly in their direction. Finally, the sulrothum on the left stepped forth towards them before twirling his spear theatrically and stabbing into the ground. He thrust all four of his hands towards them, palms open, in a gesture that was probably supposed to prove that he really was unarmed.

Then he made a series of hand gestures before leaning back and expectantly waiting for a response.

Zorian frowned. Was this how the sulrothum usually communicated with humans? It would make sense, he supposed. Most mages weren't as proficient in mind magic as Zorian, and Ikosian spellcasting language already employed a lot of hand gestures so this method of communication wouldn't be totally alien for a lot of people. Plus, sulrothum hands were remarkably similar to human ones, despite being giant wasps.

"Well that's a bit of a problem," Zach commented lightly.

Zorian ignored him.

"I do not understand that," Zorian said, speaking loudly and slowly. "Please think your responses at me in human language. I will pick it up from

your thoughts.”

The sulrothum froze for a moment before flattening his antennae over his forehead and hissing at him, sounding remarkably like an angry housecat.

“I think you got him a little angry,” Zach supplied helpfully from the side.

Yeah, thanks Zach. Real helpful of you.

The sulrothum reached to his side and grasped one of the several items tied to his waist – a small bundle of herbs and bones, wrapped in snake leather. All three had a couple of trinkets like that hanging off their bodies, but until now Zorian had not put too much thought into that. In any case, the sulrothum proceeded to wave the bundle in front of him, as if trying to ward himself against Zorian’s magic. Sadly for him, the bundle didn’t really do anything as far as Zorian could tell.

Zorian was mystified at the action before it occurred to him that this might be the equivalent of one of those silly ‘folk charms’ that old grannies and street sellers sometimes peddled to children, travelers and the like.

“I mean you no harm. I really don’t,” Zorian said, as soothingly as he could manage. It didn’t seem to help. The sulrothum in front of him just waved his little charm harder and the other two sulrothum were starting to get more agitated as well. “And really, your thoughts are safe! I can only see what you think in human terms, nothing else!”

This was effectively true. While Zorian could indeed see into the sulrothum mind, even their emotions were a pain to puzzle out, much less their surface thoughts. If he wanted to be able to read their minds, he would have to invest months or years of work to do so, much like he did with aranea. They didn’t have time for that.

The sulrothum in front of him was silent for a few seconds. Then, seemingly realizing that his ‘magic charm’ was not being effective, he stashed it back on his belt and shifted his posture into a more confident stance.

[Speak,] the sulrothum ‘said’ in his mind.

“Fine,” Zorian nodded. “First, let me introduce ourselves. I am Zorian and the person next to me is Zach. May I know who I’m talking to?”

[No,] the sulrothum replied.

Ugh.

[I will not give you my name, sorcerer,] the devil wasp clarified after a few seconds. [Everyone knows that names have power and that your kind can use them against us.]

What? This was news to Zorian...

Well, whatever. He would just think of the sulrothum in front of him as ‘Buzzkill’ for now, then.

“We seek passage through your territory and wish to present gifts to your leaders,” Zorian said. He didn’t mention anything about searching the ziggurat yet, since simply getting inside would give them useful information. At the very least they would find out if the Key piece was actually there if they could get in, due to the detection ability of their markers.

[Out of the question,] Buzzkill said resolutely. [You are not of the tribe.]

“Do you not accept guests in your home?” Zorian frowned. “I know we are different, but surely there is some kind of tradition of hospitality in your tribe?”

Buzzkill’s hands twitched into the beginning of a gesture, before he caught himself and laboriously started forming thoughts for Zorian to detect. The language he spoke was a strange dialect of Ikosian, possibly an archaic version of some local dialect, but Zorian had gotten relatively proficient in Xlotic dialects by now, and could puzzle out his meanings easily enough. It helped that they weren’t having some particularly high-minded discussion here.

[A wise one does not simply let strangers walk into his home,] Buzzkill stated. [We would need to make sure you are friends of the tribe. Signs would have to be consulted and proper rituals observed.]

“I... see,” Zorian said uncertainly. “And how long would that last?”

[Many days,] Buzzkill said. Zorian could be wrong, but he thought he detected a note of schadenfreude in his thoughts.

Zorian was silent for a while, considering the situation. A few more questions to Buzzkill regarding this whole process of ‘consulting the signs’ and whatnot did not yield anything except vague explanations and refusals to elaborate. It was all very secret and not to be spoken about with outsiders, apparently.

His questioning was eventually interrupted by an incoming telepathic message, however – one coming from Zach. He may not be psychic like Zorian was, but telepathy was not beyond the reach of normal mages – it was just rarely used because it required a great deal of training to use, even if one knew the relevant spells, and because of trust concerns. Now, thanks to the extensive training of his mental defenses over the last

dozen or so restarts, Zach had lost some of his paranoia regarding mind magic, allowing them to silently exchange thoughts when the situation called for it.

Who knew, maybe one day Zach would actually let him perform a detailed examination of his mind to see if Red Robe had left any more surprises in there...

[I'm guessing things aren't going too well?] Zach asked.

[Hard to say,] Zorian said. [Strictly speaking, he didn't say no, just that it would require a lot of time and effort, and probably bribes, for us to be granted entry into their territory... but I don't know.]

[Huh. Alright,] Zach said.

"Hey, big guy!" Zach suddenly spoke out loud, causing all three sulrothum to turn their heads towards him. "Be honest. You don't *really* intend to let us meet your leaders, do you?"

Buzzkill shook his wings a few times contemptuously, before laboriously forming words in his mind again.

[It is not my place to decide that,] he said. [But I think not. We are wise to your ploys. Your kind is dangerous and scheming, and you forever lust after this place. It was once yours, and you have never come to terms with how it changed hands.]

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Any further discussion was rendered obsolete when Zach and Zorian noticed a swarm of black dots on the horizon. There were at least 20 of them and they were coming straight towards them.

[I advise you to turn and leave this place,] Buzzkill said, sounding much more confident now. [You are not welcome here.]

Silently, Zach and Zorian seemed to have come to an agreement. They both immediately launched offensive spells at the sulrothum in front of them.

The three sulrothum reacted quickly, probably having expected hostilities to break out soon. Buzzkill wrenched his spear out of the ground and charged straight at them with a loud, screeching battle cry while the two sulrothum in the back reached towards the javelins strapped at their back. Neither of them accomplished their goal – a massive wave of telekinetic force and cutting wind erupted from Zach, smashing straight into them and sending them away like bowling pins. A human would have been reduced to bloody chunks if caught in that kind of attack head on, but the three sulrothum survived mostly intact.

Before they could reorganize, Zorian fired a pair of force javelins at them, each one carrying a different amount of damaging force in itself. The purpose of this battle wasn't so much to kill the three sulrothum – they could have done that in the initial salvo if they so wished – but rather to puzzle out the limits of their protective abilities and intimidate the tribe somewhat so that they were more likely to negotiate when they come in force later. With that in mind, Zach and Zorian proceeded to throw the three sulrothum around like rag dolls, breaking their wings and limbs in the process and making sure that the incoming sulrothum forces could see the overwhelming power they represented.

Eventually the incoming sulrothum swarm finally arrived at the scene and it was time to leave. Zach and Zorian tanked one of the javelin salvos from the group, just to show they could, and then teleported away.

But they would be back, and they would bring an army with them next time.

- break -

"Alright, now that everyone is here, we can officially begin," Zorian said, giving everyone present a cursory look. "I know that some of you have certain... misgivings about some of the people present, but it means a lot to me and Zach that you were willing to come here regardless."

He gave Alanic and Silverlake a look while saying that, as they were pretty much the people this was directed at.

After Alanic had abruptly left the meeting last time, the meeting had been wrapped up soon afterwards. It felt wrong to just continue the discussion without someone as critical as Alanic being present, so they mostly spent the meeting bringing Silverlake up to speed in regards to their plans and activities.

"I don't know what you're talking about, brat. Personally, I thought the last meeting was a fun little reunion," Silverlake said. "It's not my fault Alanic decided to be a baby for no reason. Really, one would think a grown man like him would be at peace with his own past by now. Not to mention..."

"Silverlake, please," Zorian interrupted her with a long-suffering sigh. "We're here to talk about Quatach-Ichl and how to tackle him, okay? Let's leave these kinds of personal discussions for some other time."

Preferably never. He shot Alanic a grateful look for not rising to her bait and sparking another confrontation. Alanic did not visibly react, simply pretending as if Silverlake did not exist.

"Indeed," Xvim said, tapping his finger at the table speculatively. "I assume you have some sort of a plan, already?"

"Only a basic outline," Zorian said. "We definitely need to surprise him, and it should preferably be done near the very end of the restart. Quatach-Ichl's movements become increasingly predictable as the date of the invasion approaches and most of the Ibasan resources are already committed somewhere by that point, meaning that Quatach-Ichl will have trouble marshaling most of his underlings to defend him or send them in pursuit of us if we can recover his crown. As for the actual execution of the ambush... well, we first wanted to try catching him with a soul-severing bullet, since that could end the fight immediately if it works."

"Soul-severing... that's the coin trick you used to disable him in the past, yes?" Xvim asked.

"I still can't believe that actually worked," Kael sighed. "I had to reread that part of your notes three times to make sure I caught that correctly. I don't know what my previous self was thinking, sending you against an ancient lich armed with that. It shouldn't have worked."

"It was a pretty lucky win," Zorian admitted. "It only worked because Quatach-Ichl did not see me as a threat and thus decided to catch an object thrown at him in his hand instead of simply deflecting it away or shielding against it. I doubt I could engineer such a situation artificially and there is no way a coin is getting through his defenses during combat circumstances."

"Yeah, no way," Zach agreed. "I've tried to nail him with items in the past. No chance of him overlooking something like that while you're fighting him. He often actually sends thrown items right back at you with a casual gesture. He is quite proficient with unstructured telekinesis."

"I'm not sure I understand how this maneuver is possible," Xvim admitted. "Unusual circumstances aside, you employed an elementary piece of soul magic to shut down a lich. Liches are famous for being fiendishly hard to deal with, so why did a thousand-year-old one fall so easily?"

"Because it wasn't Kael's little spell that exiled the lich's soul back to his phylactery," Silverlake said. "It was his own soul defenses that did that. You may think that being vulnerable to a cheap trick like this is a weakness, but imagine for a moment what would happen if that coin the brat used was a fancy soul jar or the like."

"His soul would get captured and his phylactery would be useless," Xvim said. "I see. So liches like him make their defenses incredibly sensitive, so that even the slightest soul disturbance causes their souls to snap back to their phylactery."

"Precisely," Alanic said. "Losing a body and everything you had on your person is a blow to be sure, but it pales to the possibility of having your soul captured."

"Most people don't carry a one-of-a-kind divine artifact like the crown of the first emperor," Zach noted.

"I'm sure Quatach-Ichl feels he can recover the crown from whoever claimed it off his... err, corpse," Zorian said. "Considering his level of power, he's not too far from the truth."

"Besides, what good are awesome magical items like that if you're not allowed to make use of them for fear of losing them?" Silverlake said. "I'd wear a fancy magical crown too, if I had one. Always wanted to try playing a princess as a little girl..."

"Unsolicited childhood fantasies aside, I'd like to remind you two that all liches are automatically powerful soul mages, and can adjust their soul defenses quite easily and rapidly," said Alanic. "If you hope to banish Quatach-Ichl's soul back to his phylactery, you only have one attempt per restart to do so. After that the lich will be expecting such a ploy and will likely take necessary precautions against it."

"What about going one step further and making an actual soul jar in order to capture Quatach-Ichl's soul?" Kael asked. "I mean, the last time Zorian tried this, he only had me to help and I'm... kind of a beginner at this. With Alanic and Silverlake here... well, they're clearly both very capable soul mages, so perhaps they could make something more potent than that?"

Alanic and Silverlake shared a long, complex look before they both refocused on Kael again.

"No," Alanic sighed, shaking his head sadly. "You are drastically overestimating our skills. Aside from having your phylactery destroyed, the biggest danger to a lich is having your soul captured. They spend a great deal of their energies making sure that can't happen under any circumstances. An old, experienced lich like Quatach-Ichl..."

"The only realistic way of dealing with him is destroying his phylactery," Silverlake finished for him. "Nothing else would work."

"I see," Kael said in a subdued manner.

"There is a reason why so many mages aim for lich-hood," Silverlake noted. "As far as methods of immortality go, having your very own resurrection point is hard to beat."

"Being undead is no true immortality, merely a twisted reflection of one," Alanic stated.

Silverlake harrumphed at him, but said nothing. Instead, she turned towards Zach and Zorian and gave them a speculative look.

"What?" Zach asked.

"Did you two ever think about just... soulkilling Quatach-Ichl? You know, that trick the third time traveler used on the aranea and such? It would neatly solve this problem, not just in this restart, but in all subsequent ones as well."

"We did," Zach nodded slowly. "The conclusion was that we have to be very careful with that. The headaches we had with Veyers had taught us

that a person behind heavy wards is essentially untraceable. If we soulkill Quatach-Ichl and it turns out he begins the restart behind some heavy wards or a place that nobody knows about, the crown might become completely unrecoverable.”

“Hmm,” Silverlake hummed. “You should really try to track down his movements and bases some of these days...”

“I’m going to have to agree with her on this,” Alanic said. “I know you say you’re stretched enough as it is, but even a mere chance of ridding the world of such an ancient lich would be worth throwing some effort in that direction. This is probably the best chance of anyone tracking down his phylactery in the foreseeable future.”

“That’s easier to say than to actually put into practice,” Zach said, shaking his head.

A small silence descended at the scene, only broken up when Silverlake decided to clear her throat and attract everyone’s attention to herself.

“In any case, I’ve done some digging in my personal records after you’ve explained the situation to me... I think I have something that might help you take down Quatach-Ichl,” she said, pulling out a weathered old scroll out of her bag.

“Oh?” Zach said eagerly. “Do tell.”

“It’s a trap field that prevents souls from escaping out of the area,” Silverlake said, throwing the scroll in his direction. Zach caught it, fumbling slightly with the catch due to not expecting the move. “For undead like Quatach-Ichl, it stops them from leaving until they shut down the ward. If you can lure him into the field, it should give him trouble for a time at the very least. I heard he moves a lot around the battlefield and loves to retreat to come back later. This ward is not nearly as obvious as an anti-teleportation field, but effectively has the same effect as one on undead.”

Huh. That did sound very useful against Quatach-Ichl.

“Anyway, I would be of little use to you in the actual battle against a powerful lich like Quatach-Ichl, but I can help you set up the battlefield beforehand,” Silverlake continued. “Aside from the spell I just gave you, I also have a few other surprises, though none are as effective as that one. And while Zorian is arguably a better warder than I am, he doesn’t have experience with these particular spells.”

“I’m probably going to take you up on that offer,” Zorian said. This restart was going to get pretty busy as their preparations approached completion, so any chance to offload some of his responsibilities on someone else was useful. “Every little bit of help is useful. As for Xvim and Alanic, I am hoping you two will help us battle Quatach-Ichl if the ambush fails.”

“Which it probably will,” Zach noted.

“Hush, child,” Silverlake chided him. “Don’t you know you will curse this whole endeavor with such talk?”

“Just being realistic,” Zach shrugged. “I tangled with Quatach-Ichl the most out of anyone here, so I feel I have the right to be a little pessimistic. Anyway, I actually have a suggestion of my own. I think I have an idea about something we can do to better prepare for the eventual battle against Quatach-Ichl.”

“And what would that be, mister Noveda?” Xvim asked.

“A practice fight!” Zach said with a cheerful grin. “I’ll play the role of Quatach-Ichl and you will all cooperate and try to subdue me. Admittedly, I am not an ancient lich of unfathomable power and experience, but I did recently become capable of creating my own simulacrum, so there is no danger of me getting hurt in the fighting. You can think of me as a discount Quatach-Ichl, I guess.”

Zorian flinched a little at his description. This was such a bad idea...

“Zach,” he protested. “There is no warding scheme in existence that would be able to handle the level of destruction involved in such—”

“I think it’s a great idea,” Alanic suddenly said. Zorian gave him an incredulous look. “I would like to also invite Silverlake to participate in these exercises. Even if she doesn’t intend to participate in the actual battle, these sort of mock fights would surely help her get a better perspective on what she is dealing with and help her fine-tune her preparations...”

Oh come on!

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Silverlake said, scowling at him.

This sparked a loud fight between them, the two of them slinging barbs and thinly-veiled insults at each other while Zorian’s mood steadily worsened.

[I hope you’re happy with yourself] Zorian sent to Zach telepathically.

[It’s going to be great, you’ll see.] Zach sent him back, completely unapologetic.

Zorian looked at Alanic and Silverlake, who were still trying to out-talk each other, and then at Xvim, who looked like he wanted to attack both of them to make them shut up. Kael had decided to flat-out vacate the room at some point, which was probably smart of him. He was too weak to participate in the sort of ‘practice fight’ Zach was suggesting and staying behind might mean he would get pulled into the argument between Alanic and Silverlake.

“Yeah,” Zorian muttered to himself. “Great.”

- break -

In the end, despite Zorian cautioning against it, the group decided to hold the battle practice that Zach suggested. Alanic obviously supported the idea, and he managed to goad Silverlake into supporting it too in the end. Xvim, though annoyed with the way Alanic and Silverlake were acting, felt it was a sensible idea... and was probably curious about the level of magical skill that Zach and Zorian truly had, anyway.

Thankfully, the practice fight was not going to happen for a few more days, leaving Zorian time to tangle with other issues. Mainly, this meant making preparations for the attack on the Ziggurat of the Sun. Golems had to be made, terrain scouted and information on sulrothum gathered. Thankfully, Alanic had agreed to help them out during the fighting, despite his disagreements with them over the inclusion of Silverlake into the time looping ‘conspiracy’. Fighting pagan monsters that had seized a religious monument of the faith, Alanic said, was a worthy task for a battle priest like him. Unfortunately, having him gather a small army and having them assist in the endeavor, like he had done in some of the previous restarts, was apparently not possible. Those people had been willing to participate in secret operations on Eldemarian soil, but bringing them to the deepest stretches of the Xlotic desert to fight the sulrothum was bound to backfire. They would demand explanations and refuse to cooperate.

No, if Zach and Zorian wanted to have real people assisting them in their attack on the ziggurat, they needed to hire mercenaries and factions in Xlotic itself – preferably in the region closest to the Ziggurat of the Sun. As a bonus, such locals likely had first-hand information about sulrothum and their battle tactics, having been fighting them for decades now.

At the moment, Zach and Zorian were sitting around an open air table in one of Cyoria’s fancier taverns and discussing the issue. Zorian was slowly sipping his fruit juice, while Zach had ordered the biggest keg of beer that Zorian had ever seen served in this kind of establishment. Zorian had initially thought that the keg was undrinkable in any sort of reasonable time-frame, but Zach was making a valiant effort to prove him wrong on that account.

The contrast between the two probably looked quite funny, because the other patrons occasionally gave them funny glances and shook their heads in amusement.

“Anyway,” Zorian said, “the idea of consulting and hiring the locals for the fight against the sulrothum is good, but I’m running into issues of language again. I acquired a decent grasp of various Xlotic dialects by now, and Daimen and his connections help substantially, but this just isn’t enough when I’m trying to actually hire guides, scholars, mercenaries and whatnot. I think we may need to find an actual translator to help us out. I wonder if we can talk Zenomir into going on a trip to Xlotic with us...”

“Bah. Why bring an old man like that when we can bring a hot girl instead?” Zach asked. “Neolu is native to the region, and I bet she’d love to ditch school and go wander the world with us. Actually, I don’t have to wonder – I *know* she’d like that because I used to do that sometimes. Just... tell her I’m a time traveler and bring her along with me as I wandered the continent. Sometimes I’d bring others along too, but most people aren’t willing to accept the whole ‘time traveler’ explanation as readily as she...”

“Ah, I remember her,” Zorian said. “And you say she’s really easy to convince about time travel?”

“Yeah, definitely,” Zach nodded. “She asks for proof, of course, but that’s easy to give. I already know more than enough to convince her to join us. Though admittedly she might be a little more reluctant to run off with two boys than just one. I, uh... used to phrase my offer more like a romantic getaway than a business transaction.”

Zorian sighed in exasperation. Then again, if he had been stuck in a time loop like Zach had been, with no obvious danger pressing down on him, wouldn’t he do the same thing? He’d probably take advantage of the time loop to go after a girl or two...

“Why don’t we first try to talk to her about this before we take it for granted that she’d want to go along with this,” Zorian told him.

“At the very least she probably won’t mind getting us in contact with her family,” Zach said with a shrug. “Her family is rich and in a bit of a political crisis right now, so it should be possible to acquire their cooperation in exchange for helping them out with a problem or two. Finding us a translator or two is the least they could do for us.”

“A bit of a political crisis?” Zorian asked slowly.

“It’s a long story,” Zach said dismissively. He took a large gulp from his massive keg of beer and took a deep breath. He was going to get completely drunk again before this was all done, wasn’t he? “I’ll tell you later, if Neolu herself doesn’t tell you.”

“Hello there. Do you mind if I join you for a few minutes?” a voice suddenly asked from the side.

Zach and Zorian were very surprised to hear this request. They had set up a privacy ward around their table, which was a clear sign to everyone that they did not want to be disturbed. They turned their attention to the source of the request, which turned out to be an older man in an expensive-looking suit. He wasn’t one of the tavern workers and neither Zach nor Zorian had ever seen him before, so it was unusual for him to approach them like this.

Despite this, Zorian did not think for a moment that the man was just a curious tavern patron.

After all, if the man was just your average person, he would be able to sense the man’s mind. And he couldn’t. The man was completely blank to his mind sense, as if he didn’t exist at all.

Mind blank was not an easy spell to cast, and being under its effects immediately placed the man in the upper tier selection of mages.

Zorian silently communicated this to Zach through telepathy, after which they shared an uneasy look between themselves.

“Sure,” Zach eventually said. “Have a seat.”

The man smiled at them confidently, as if he had always known they would have accepted his request. He took an empty chair from a nearby table and dragged it off to join them around theirs.

Zorian scrutinized him, trying to see if something in his features would jog his memory. He was a pretty striking person, though, so it was unlikely he would have forgotten him if he had dealt with him in the past. He had very proud posture, like someone who had been born with a silver spoon in his mouth, and his clothes and immaculate appearance reinforced it. His skin was darker than was common in this corner of Altazia, suggesting southern origins. Perhaps he was someone from Xlotic whose attention they somehow attracted? It wouldn’t be impossible for a powerful mage from Xlotic to eventually make their way to Eldemar.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” the man said politely. “I guess I should introduce myself. I am Saruwata Merenptah and I’m afraid I’m here to discuss something a bit... unpleasant. You see, I have recently noticed that you have been gathering information about me and interfering with my activities, so I have decided to come here and see if there is any way we could discuss this in a civilized manner and maybe come to a peaceful solution. I do not consider myself an unreasonable man.”

What an exotic name... it definitely sounded Xlotic, but he was pretty sure that kind of name was obscure even there. He definitely didn’t remember about interacting with any person named like that, and he had a pretty good memory thanks to his mental powers. The rest of his story, though... what the hell was he talking about? He gave Zach a questioning look, but his fellow time traveler shook his head in the negative. Zorian turned back to the man and gave him a serious look.

“I’m afraid you made some kind of mistake, mister Merenptah,” Zorian said.

“No, I don’t think I have,” Saruwata said confidently. “My name may be confusing you somewhat. I rarely use my old name when interacting with the public, so most people have forgotten it. Just the way I like it, to be honest.”

Zorian frowned.

“How do you expect us to know who you are if you hide your identity like that?” Zach asked, his tone somewhat unfriendly.

Zorian didn’t blame him; perhaps it was because of the man’s unflinching confidence, appearing as if he was holding all the cards and the outcome of this meeting was already predetermined, or because of the mind blank he put on himself, but he was really starting to dislike this ‘Saruwata Merenptah’. He also noticed that the man’s soul was flawlessly stable, with not even the tiniest ripples marring its surface as they spoke, which meant he was a soul mage of the highest order. Not even Alanic could keep his soul so featureless.

“Ha ha!” the man abruptly laughed. His soul still remained completely calm, despite his obvious amusement. “So you’re saying you’re targeting so many people that telling you I’m one of your victims isn’t enough to narrow things down? Interesting, interesting...”

Zach scowled. “Mister Merenptah, I’m starting to think you’re asking for a beating.”

“If I tell you I’ve been around for a while, will this help?” the man said, grinning from ear to ear.

Master mage. Incredibly proficient in soul magic. Xlotic in origin. Someone they were targeting. Very old... older than he looks? Fake appearance? Obscure name... possibly an archaic one? Old enough to go out of fashion?

Fuck...

Zorian swallowed heavily.

“Quatach-Ichl?” he asked.

The man’s grin never wavered. Instead, a flash of sickly green light passed over his face for a moment, revealing a familiar pitch-black skull of a millennia-old lich. Then the moment passed and his face was the same flesh-and-blood mask he had been wearing up until now.

“I’m so pleased to deal with intelligent people,” Quatach-Ichl said, leaning back in his chair. “It makes things so much easier. So... do you think you’re ready to talk?”

81. A Civil Conversation

Chapter 081 A Civil Conversation

The tavern was a bright, lively place. Not very crowded, which was why Zach and Zorian had chosen it, but there were plenty of people talking, drinking, eating and walking around. Some of them gave their table a glance from time to time, but that was just idle curiosity and they went about minding their own business soon afterwards. Nobody really paid attention to them, nor to the new arrival that had joined them at their table.

They didn't even realize they were in the presence of a millennia-old lich that was currently plotting to destroy the whole city.

Then again, that was to be expected. Quatach-Ichl's disguise was practically flawless. Even Zach and Zorian had been fooled until he had revealed himself, so how could a bunch of random bystanders notice something was wrong? Even now, with the lich within a hand's reach of Zorian, he was struggling to notice any obvious tells that the man in front of him was actually a walking skeleton instead of a real flesh-and-blood creature.

Seconds ticked by in total silence, the two sides silently staring at each other. Zorian would have liked to claim that he was furiously thinking about the implications of this sudden visit and devising the proper way to tackle it, but the truth was that he was thoroughly shocked and was having trouble formulating any kind of coherent train of thought at the moment. He could hardly believe that Quatach-Ichl had casually walked up to them in a busy tavern and started talking to them like there was nothing wrong. What the hell was he even thinking!? This was surprisingly impulsive behavior for someone who was supposed to be more than a thousand years old.

Fortunately, Zach was more adept at retaining his presence of mind in these kinds of unexpected situations. The benefit of greater experience granted to him by the literal decades he had spent in the time loop, Zorian supposed.

“You look better than I would have expected you to look,” Zach commented.

“How so?” Quatach-Ichl asked curiously. He made a couple of gestures at the passing waiter, ordering something for himself. Zorian wasn’t sure what, but the waiter seemed to have understood him and responded with a casual nod in return.

Why was a lich like Quatach-Ichl ordering drinks, even though he doesn’t need to drink? Probably for the sake of appearances, but still. *Could* he even drink? Was his disguise good enough to allow that?

“You look surprisingly... fleshy,” Zach clarified, taking a sip from the massive mug of beer in front of him.

“Ah, that,” Quatach-Ichl said. “Truthfully, this is how I usually look. The skeleton form is something I reserve for battles and intimidation purposes.”

Having spied on the lich a few times in the previous restarts, Zorian knew this wasn’t quite true. Quatach-Ichl also habitually appeared as a skeleton when interacting with the Ibasan forces and other people involved in the invasion... though perhaps he counted that under ‘intimidation’.

“It’s pretty bold to just approach your enemies like this,” Zach commented.

“Are you going to attack me in the middle of this tavern?” Quatach-Ichl countered.

“I’m seriously considering it,” Zach said, his face twisted into a small frown.

“No, you’re not,” Quatach-Ichl said, giving them a knowing smile. “Putting aside the morality of involving all these defenseless bystanders in our dispute, starting a fight here would be just as bad for you as it would be for me. The ruling powers of this country would be just as interested in your activities as they would be in my own – probably even more so, since you two would be easier to blackmail and take control of than me.”

He was right, of course. The two of them had come here without disguises, in their real identities. If they were to fight the Ibasan lich here, the authorities would track them down within a matter of hours, and the level of skill they would be forced to show during the fight would intrigue and alarm just about everyone involved. Once they started to look into Zach and Zorian, all sorts of interesting things would come out. Even if the two of them won the fight with Quatach-Ichl and somehow managed to avoid any dead bystanders or property damage along the way, the restart would be effectively over. At that point they could just as well end the restart and start over.

Well, the truth was that the smartest thing to do would probably be to just end the restart immediately. Having this ‘conversation’ with Quatach-Ichl was equivalent to playing with fire. Not even the ability to end the restart on a whim could perfectly guarantee their safety. Sudomir could detect when Zorian started messing with his soul marker, so Quatach-Ichl could doubtlessly do it too. With him so close to them, and having come here prepared for anything, it was entirely possible they might not be able to activate the marker in time before he made his move. Plus, an unscrupulous, ancient mage like him would no doubt have a whole host of subtle tricks in his arsenal, and they would possibly not even realize they were being attacked until it was too late.

Despite that, Zorian had to admit he was curious. He wanted to take the risk and hear what Quatach-Ichl had to say. This was a potential disaster, but also a potential opportunity. It was the first time they’d had the chance to engage in any kind of meaningful conversation with Quatach-Ichl, and Zorian had a feeling this kind of thing was not an easy thing to replicate between restarts.

“What you say is true, but it seems to me that you’d still be the bigger loser if we fight,” Zorian said. “If your actions become known to—”

"You could have easily made that happen by now," Quatach-Ichl said calmly, cutting him off. "I don't know how much knowledge you have about what I'm trying to do, but I'm guessing quite a bit. You could have easily made your findings public by now, but you didn't. Instead you limited yourselves to raiding our supply caches and striking at the more careless members of our little conspiracy."

Zorian frowned. He supposed this was what Quatach-Ichl had been referring to when he said they had been 'interfering with his activities'. However, the fact of the matter was that Zach and Zorian habitually did that kind of thing in every single restart, more in order to acquire additional funding than anything else, and it had never caused them to run afoul of Quatach-Ichl as a result. Minor complications like that didn't usually arouse his attention. So the true reason Quatach-Ichl had managed to find them must be located elsewhere, and Zorian could think of two main possibilities. For one thing, this was the first time they'd gone after Quatach-Ichl directly, and maybe the ancient lich could detect that somehow. The second possibility was that Silverlake had overestimated her ability again and tried to gather information on Quatach-Ichl herself, with predictable results.

He was leaning towards the second possibility.

"So you saw we moved against your group and noticed we could have probably done even more damage if we really tried and thought to yourself 'man, I really need to have a friendly chat with those guys'?" Zach asked.

"Why not?" Quatach-Ichl challenged. "We may be enemies, but so what? Enemies talk to each other all the time. Half of the world's diplomats would be out of jobs otherwise. Well, all of them, if you're a cynical old bastard like myself and see all international interactions as fundamentally hostile, but you know what I'm saying. The point is that you could have reported your findings to the authorities, but decided not to. And I could have easily gone after some of the people close to you in retaliation for the raids you've done on my allies, but chose to have this discussion with you instead."

Both Zach and Zorian glared at him lightly in response to that thinly-veiled threat at the end. Quatach-Ichl pretended not to notice the look.

"Anyway, what I'm saying is... we may be enemies, but we aren't *irreconcilable* enemies," Quatach-Ichl concluded. "Surely we can reach some kind of agreement here?"

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to disagree with you there," Zach said. "You want to destroy Cyoria, gather the souls of everyone who dies and feed them all to wraiths, release a primordial to rampage around the region and trigger another round of Splinter Wars. Unless you're willing to drop this whole invasion thing and go back to your island, we pretty much *are* irreconcilable enemies. Don't mistake our current passivity for willingness to quietly watch by the sidelines while you execute your mad schemes."

"Aha. So I was right, you do know quite a lot..." Quatach-Ichl said slowly, neither alarmed nor angry at Zach's statement. "However, if you'll forgive me for being a little blunt... why do you care?"

Zach raised an eyebrow at him

"I've looked into you a bit before coming here," the ancient lich continued. "Neither of you are all that closely connected to the city itself. You are a scion of a dead house that has been taken advantage of, and Zorian is just a talented outsider attending school here. I'm really not sure why people of your caliber would waste time on basic magic classes like that, but there are all kinds of people in this world, I suppose. Personally, I'd have gone crazy in a matter of weeks if I had to impersonate a complete beginner at magic for several years but... eh, I'm getting a little off-track. The point is, each of you has only a handful of people here that you really care about. We could easily arrange for them to be outside on the day of the invasion. Do you really care that much, in your heart of hearts, about all the random people that are going to die?"

If Quatach-Ichl had asked Zorian that at the start of the time loop, before he had largely come to terms with his place in the world, got to know all the people around him and witnessed in excruciating detail just what the invasion of Cyoria actually looked like... maybe he really would have answered 'no' in his head, like Quatach-Ichl clearly expected him to.

But now...

He remembered the image of Nocka and the other shifter children, naked and in cages, reaching out to him and screaming for help. It was closely followed by the memories of all the people who helped him in all these restarts, and who would likely die in the invasion if he did nothing to stop it, as well as all the different scenes of slaughter and looting he had witnessed over the restarts. He decided that yes, he very much did care. And he was pretty sure Zach did too.

"Don't you?" Zorian challenged.

"Not really, no," Quatach-Ichl said seriously. "I come from an age where it was quite normal to round up all the mages and combat-capable men in a conquered town and mount their severed heads on pikes just outside the city walls as a warning to all who would dare defy you. I find modern sentimentality in regards to war casualties insincere, hypocritical and faintly disgusting."

"Ah," said Zorian with distaste. He supposed this only made sense. Quatach-Ichl was more than a millennium old, and came from a different, more bloodthirsty time. For all that he was considered 'tough but fair' by his own soldiers, the army he once led against the Old Alliance was famed for their brutality towards the conquered populace. It was said to be one of the main reasons his side had lost the war against Eldemar.

"What's with that look on your face?" Quatach-Ichl said, rolling his eyes at him. "Be honest, now... if you were really such a moral and upstanding citizen, why would you go to so much trouble to hide your true level of power and all the various projects you seem to be financing? Why would

you move against me on your own instead of coordinating your actions with the law enforcement and the military? Whomever you are connected to, it clearly isn't Eldemar's government. So I ask again: why do you care so much about what happens to Cyoria?"

Huh. That was interesting. It was obvious that Quatach-Ichl had come to them mostly to fish for information rather than because he truly believed he could come to some sort of agreement with them, but up until now Zorian didn't know what exactly he was after. Now, he was starting to suspect that Quatach-Ichl was mainly concerned with puzzling out the identity of the forces standing behind them.

In reality, Zach and Zorian were rogue agents, supported by no one... but there was no way Quatach-Ichl would think that. It would be virtually impossible for two teenagers like them to have reached the heights they did on their own, no matter how talented. Since Quatach-Ichl had failed to find their backers when he investigated them, he could only conclude that they were very well hidden.

The existence of a secret faction that he had not been aware of was doubtlessly bothering the old lich, making him hesitate to move against them until he knew more.

Zorian quickly sent a telepathic message to Zach, warning him not to let it slip that there was nobody backing them up. Quatach-Ichl would probably not believe them even if they openly admitted their lack of support, but it was best not to push their luck like that.

"We already told you, you just don't want to listen: because of the many, *many* casualties that would result from your planned attack on the city," Zach said. "And that's just the start of the suffering. The wars that would no doubt follow in the wake of the attack would—"

"Oh come on, you can't blame me for that," Quatach-Ichl complained. "I mean, I can understand you blaming me for the destruction of the city, but another splinter war is *inevitable*. Surely you understand that? This peace we have right now? It's just a short breather so the countries involved can recover from the damage the Weeping did to their command structure. Well, I personally think every peace is just preparation for war, but this peace especially so. Another round of wars is going to happen soon, regardless of whether Cyoria is attacked or not – I'm just trying to nudge the whole thing in a direction that best suits the interests of Ulquaan Ibasa. Same as your own country of Eldemar and everyone else involved, really."

"I'm not entirely convinced that another war is inevitable," Zorian remarked. Although there was obviously a lot of truth in that, since he had heard that sentiment expressed by various people he had interacted with over the restarts. "But even if that is true, there is a big difference between you and most of those countries. Their plans eventually end in something stable. You just want to keep everyone fighting forever so they cannot threaten your island."

"What? No, I don't. Who told you that?" Quatach-Ichl protested, actually sounding mildly incredulous.

"You don't?" Zorian asked curiously. Truthfully, he was being deliberately provocative. He had no idea what Quatach-Ichl really wanted, but what he said just now was one of the guesses discussed by his subordinates and various members of the Cult of the World Dragon.

"It's a stupid idea," Quatach-Ichl said, shaking his head in exasperation. "The leaders of your nations can be remarkably stupid sometimes, but they're not *that* stupid. If we keep stirring shit up time and time again, sooner or later they will all decide to set aside their differences for long enough to wipe us out before getting back to killing each other."

"Huh. So your actual goal is...?" Zorian tried.

"Heh. I guess it's not that big of a secret anyway," Quatach-Ichl said, smiling at him in a patronizing manner. "I want to mess up Eldemar and Sulamnon and make Falkinea win the war."

What?

"What?" Zach protested. "Falkinea? Why them?"

"Who else?" Quatach-Ichl asked, his tone making it clear it was a rhetorical question. "Eldemar and Sulamnon would never seriously entertain peace with us – anyone who thinks they would is either an idiot or a traitor. Falkinea though... they are the weakest of the Big Three in terms of military, and their heartland is very far from Ulquaan Ibasa. If they win and subdue Eldemar and Sulamnon, they will doubtlessly be quite disinterested in some fool's campaign to deal with Ulquaan Ibasa. Keeping their former enemies suppressed should take most of Falkinea's strength. They will have little power or inclination for other major undertakings."

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Zorian was about to ask why he thought Sulamnon would fail to take advantage of Eldemar's weakness instead when he remembered Sudomir's plan with wraith bombs. He had intended to make an example of Sulamnon to prove he was serious about using his wraith bombs on defenseless towns, wasn't he? Had Quatach-Ichl given him that idea? From the man's memories, he knew that Sudomir himself did not think so, but Zorian wouldn't put it past Quatach-Ichl to have subtly led the man onto the idea without him realizing it.

The conversation temporarily died down because the waiter had come to their table to deliver the drinks Quatach-Ichl had ordered. To Zorian's surprise, the lich had ordered three mugs of beer to be brought to the table instead of just one – one for each of them. Zorian simply pushed his mug to the side and ignored it, but Zach calmly poured the contents of the new, smaller mug into the giant one already in front of him, which had been steadily getting emptier as they talked. This was no time to get drunk, Zach...

As for Quatach-Ichl, he simply left his own mug untouched on the table in front of him. He didn't have so much as a sip out of it – Zorian suspected that despite looking like a flesh-and-blood person, he couldn't really drink and eat food like one. It was probably an ectoplasmic body of some sort, similar to the ones employed by the simulacrum spell.

Since nobody wanted to discuss the invasion of Cyoria and similar topics in front of the waiter, a brief silence descended upon the table. Zorian made use of it to consider their interaction with Quatach-Ichl thus far. Sadly, the only conclusion he had was that it was all very strange. He really couldn't see through the ancient lich's plots.

Zorian had been watching their adversary like a hawk, but Quatach-Ichl never tried anything underhanded or gave any indication he wanted to drug them or target them with some subtle soul magic spell or whatever. He also never got visibly angry with them, even though this conversation probably wasn't going the way he wanted it to, and even after Zorian 'subtly' scanned the beer he had ordered to make sure it was safe.

No, their interaction with Quatach-Ichl had been entirely peaceful thus far. Aside from clearly fishing for information about them and throwing in a 'subtle' threat or two in his statements, he seemed to really want to just talk.

Hmm...

"Well, I can see this is not going anywhere, so let's put all that aside for now," Quatach-Ichl said after the waiter left and a couple of seconds passed. "Instead, let me raise another issue – you have been looking into me in these past few days."

"Big deal," Zach scoffed. "Clearly you have been looking into us, too."

"As a response to your own actions, yes," Quatach-Ichl said with a small smile. "But you misunderstand. I'm not being outraged at you trying to get to know your enemy – I'm just wondering if there is more to it than that. Sure, you could have been simply looking for a personal weakness or a more effective tactic of dealing with me, but maybe... you actually wanted something from me?"

"You think we were trying to establish contact with you?" Zorian asked incredulously.

"It happens all the time," Quatach-Ichl shrugged. "People regularly come to me for help."

"They come to a sinister bag of old bones like you, begging for help?" Zach asked incredulously.

"Of course," Quatach-Ichl said with a big grin, not the least bit insulted by Zach's choice of words. "I'm a millennia-old archmage. I have survived several world shaking events, and even participated in some of them. People seek me out for all kinds of reasons. Some want lost or restricted magics that are almost impossible to get otherwise, some want to borrow my strength and expertise, and some are simply curious historians trying to get first-hand accounts of bygone eras. I usually help the latter ones for free, being a man of culture and generosity that I am, but others have to make it worth my time. Don't let that intimidate you, though – I don't deal in souls or demand people's firstborn sons or whatever you read about liches in all those slanderous books your government keeps shoving down your throats. I'm an honorable lich, only ruthless to my enemies, and I pride myself on my fair and honest dealing with others."

"I see," Zach said, tapping his finger on the table thoughtfully. He then leaned forward conspiratorially and said, "As a matter of fact, we do have something we want from you."

"Oh?" said Quatach-Ichl, leaning forward as well. "Do tell."

Zach opened his mouth and then paused for a second, no doubt purely for the sake of drama.

"We want the crown you're wearing," he whispered in a low voice.

For the first time since the meeting had begun, Quatach-Ichl seemed genuinely surprised. Zorian didn't blame him. He was pretty shocked Zach had decided to bring that up, too. He didn't say anything, though. Hopefully his trust in his fellow time traveler wasn't misplaced and Zach actually knew what he was doing instead of simply being a little tipsy and ignoring the possible consequences.

In any case, the surprise on Quatach-Ichl's face didn't last long. He soon began laughing instead, leaning back in his chair and shaking his head.

"Oh, you two... I knew it was a good idea to come here," the lich eventually said, having managed to compose himself again. "You're not even joking, are you? I say, sometimes I wish I could go back to being as young and brash as this... do you even know what this crown is?"

"Of course," Zach said. "It's one of the artifacts of the first Ikosian emperor."

"Good eye," Quatach-Ichl said, giving them a thoughtful look. "It's been quite a while since someone had recognized it for what it is. Most people think I'm just a megalomaniac for wearing a fancy crown all the time and leave it at that. How did you know? I thought you had never actually seen me before today, but I guess your investigation of me has been a lot more thorough than I suspected..."

"In truth, we knew you were in the possession of one of the imperial artifacts before we had even started investigating you," Zach said.

"Oh?" Quatach-Ichl asked in interest.

"It's because of this," said Zach, retrieving the portable palace orb from his jacket pocket.

He extended the orb towards Quatach-Ichl, letting him inspect it in detail.

The old lich stared at the orb for more than 20 seconds in total silence, gazing into it with a serious face.

“The imperial orb...” he finally said. “I thought it was lost.”

“It was,” Zach nodded, yanking the orb back and shoving it back into his pocket. “And now it has been found again.”

“So it has,” Quatach-Ichl agreed. “However, I don’t understand how it is related to the crown I’m wearing. Unless you’re saying the orb can detect the other imperial artifacts?”

“That’s precisely what I’m saying.” Zach nodded. “Well, to be more precise, the owner of *any* of the imperial artifacts can detect all the others. If one can access their hidden functions, that is.”

What an impressive pack of lies. Not that Zorian cared too much about Zach lying to the murderous old lich in front of them, but it was kind of impressive that Zach could think up something so misleading, yet technically true. After all, the Key pieces did have hidden functions, and if one could access them, then they clearly had a marker as well...

“Truly impressive,” Quatach-Ichl praised. “I always knew there was more to the crown than I had managed to uncover, but the hidden abilities had always eluded me. I don’t suppose the orb is for sale?”

“Is your crown for sale?” Zach replied, countering a question with a question.

“Not for all the money in the world,” Quatach-Ichl said.

“Well then,” Zach shrugged. “You have your answer, then, don’t you?”

“And yet... I feel there is a reason you showed me that orb,” Quatach-Ichl speculated.

“How about a trade?” Zach tried. “You tell us what your crown does and in return we tell you what the orb does. Very simple and innocuous, and we both get to satisfy our curiosity without having to part with our precious priceless artifacts. How about it?”

“Very simple and innocuous, indeed,” Quatach-Ichl deadpanned. “But the thing is, I already know what the orb does. It’s just a particularly large pocket dimension, no?”

“No, no,” Zach said, shaking his head. “It does more than that.”

“It does? I see...” Quatach-Ichl said thoughtfully. “I think I’m still going to refuse that offer, though. I have a feeling that I would still end as the loser in that exchange. Give me something more to work with. Say... the location of one of the other artifacts you uncovered?”

“Sure,” Zach said, agreeing with the suggestion immediately. Of course he did. At the end of the day, the very nature of the time loop made this kind of information exchange inherently biased in their favor. Everything they said to Quatach-Ichl today, he would forget when the time loop reset itself. “Shall we go first, or do you want the honor?”

“It might as well be me,” Quatach-Ichl shrugged. He didn’t seem terribly concerned about revealing such an important personal secret. “It’s not such a big secret, anyway. I actually use it as a form of intimidation sometimes. You see... the crown is one massive mana battery.”

There was a second of silence following that statement.

“What?” Zorian said incredulously. “That’s it? Just a mana battery?”

“Ha!” Quatach-Ichl grinned. “I knew you’d react like that! It never gets old. However, when I say it’s a mana battery, I don’t mean it stockpiles ambient mana like the mana batteries modern mages make. I mean it stockpiles the personal mana of the wearer... and the mana inside it never gets un-attuned. It effectively makes my maximum mana reserves ten times larger than they naturally are.”

“T-Ten times!?” Zorian couldn’t help but blurt out. By the gods... and he thought *Zach* was a total mana monster.

Although Zach was more reserved, one could see on his face that he was also boggling at the utterly ridiculous amount of personal mana that Quatach-Ichl apparently had at his disposal.

The ancient lich seemed very pleased by their reaction.

“Of course, that is without considering the divine blessing I’ve received in the past, which doubled my already impressive mana reserves,” Quatach-Ichl continued. “Measuring of one’s mana reserves was in a rather primitive state at the time I had begun my mage career, so I don’t really know what sort of magnitude I would have according to the standards of modern mages, but I think I was about... magnitude 25? Something along those lines, I believe. The divine blessing then doubled my maximum without hurting my shaping skills in the slightest, so my natural mana reserves were huge even before I got ahold of this lovely little crown. So when I said my mana reserves are effectively ten times their normal size due to the crown? It’s actually even more impressive than it sounds.”

How... interesting. Zorian shared a long look with Zach. That explanation about the divine blessing that doubled his mana reserves... didn’t that

sound rather familiar?

“So...” Quatach-Ichl eventually said with a grin. “Do you still think making an enemy out of me is a good idea?”

“This blessing you spoke about...” Zorian tried.

“Aha, no,” Quatach-Ichl said, raising his finger to stop him. “I honored my side of the bargain. Now it’s time for you to honor yours.”

“Fine, fine,” Zach sighed. “Aside from being a massive portable pocket dimension, the imperial orb is also a nigh-infinite memory bank, capable of storing a massive amount of personal memories and mental blueprints inside it.”

Quatach-Ichl considered it for a moment.

“Considering the scarcity of writing supplies in those times... yes, I can see how that kind of function would be invaluable. Not that impressive today, although the remaining records inside the orb, if any, would be incredibly valuable. To historians, if nothing else. How much did you find inside?”

“No comment,” Zach immediately said. The memory bank was completely empty, of course, as it could only be used inside the time loop, but Quatach-Ichl didn’t need to know that.

“Fair enough,” Quatach-Ichl conceded.

“As for the location of one of the other imperial artifacts...” Zach said. “Well, you can find the dagger inside Eldemar’s royal vault. You’re already attacking the country in question, so you should have no qualms about breaking into its royal vaults as well.”

“They have one of the imperial artifacts and they’re letting it gather dust inside the treasury,” Quatach-Ichl said, shaking his head sadly. “How typical.”

There was a brief and uncomfortable silence as both Zach and Zorian waited for the lich to say something more, but he never did. Instead he simply observed them silently, saying nothing.

“So, this blessing you spoke about...” Zorian tried again.

“It’s going to cost you,” Quatach-Ichl immediately warned.

“Well, what do you want?” Zorian asked him bluntly.

“Since you’re asking questions about the divines, I think it would only be appropriate if you offered something divine yourself,” Quatach-Ichl smiled.

Zorian thought about it for a second before pulling out the mysterious dagger they had found in the imperial orb and handing it to Quatach-Ichl. Giving the ancient lich a divine artifact of unknown powers in exchange for this kind of information would be monumentally stupid in any other circumstances, but he really wanted the proper answer to his question and the dagger would be back in his hands in the next restart anyway.

Quatach-Ichl gingerly accepted the dagger and immediately started casting spells on it, scaring Zorian quite a bit. This was the first time Quatach-Ichl had performed any sort of magic after approaching them, and Zorian watched him like a hawk to make sure he didn’t slip in something unsavory between all those divination spells he was casting at the dagger.

“It’s a divine artifact,” Quatach-Ichl eventually concluded.

“Yes,” Zorian confirmed. “Divine for divine, no?”

“What does it do?” he asked.

Zorian was pleased that not even a millennia-old lich like him could just casually figure out divinely-bestowed powers.

“I don’t know,” he admitted to the lich. “It’s just something we recovered from an old ruin.”

“So it could be totally useless or amazingly powerful,” Quatach-Ichl concluded, turning the dagger carefully in his hands and studying the lines and glyphs etched into its surface. Zorian knew he would find out nothing through that, though. They appeared to be purely decorative and said little about the dagger itself.

“No divine artifact is useless,” Zorian insisted.

“You’re wrong,” Quatach-Ichl said, shaking his head. “Gods were very impulsive, whimsical creatures. They made all sorts of pointless items purely as a joke back in their heyday, it’s just that most of them broke down or got thrown away as the years went by.”

“Divine artifacts can break down?” Zach asked curiously.

“Of course,” Quatach-Ichl nodded seriously. “Most of the surviving divine artifacts are not unbreakable because this is some inherent trait of a

divine artifact – they are unbreakable because they wouldn’t have lasted for centuries if they weren’t.”

“Still, based on what you just said, the very fact this dagger lasted up until this day means it’s probably at least a little bit useful,” Zorian said.

“There is some truth to that,” Quatach-Ichl acknowledged. He looked Zorian straight in the eye. “Are you sure you want to trade this, though? You could be losing a real treasure, you know?”

“I’m sure,” Zorian said firmly. “Just make sure to give me an extra-detailed explanation if you’re so worried about taking advantage of me.”

“Ha! Decisive. I like that,” Quatach-Ichl said. “Well, since you’re not afraid to take a risk, I guess it would be pretty pathetic of me to shy away from it.”

With a dramatic flourish, Quatach-Ichl twirled the dagger expertly in his hand, showing impressive manual dexterity, and then... pushed the dagger straight into his chest.

The dagger sank into him like he was made out of water, right through the clothes, and then it was gone like it never existed. Quatach-Ichl also looked completely unharmed by the action.

He folded his hands over his chest and smiled at them.

“What exactly did you want to know?” he asked.

“You said this divine blessing of yours doubled your maximum mana reserves,” Zorian said. “Was that a typical size of increase for such blessings?”

“Hm?” Quatach-Ichl hummed, seemingly surprised at the question. “Well... that’s an interesting question, but I’m afraid I can’t answer that. People with divine blessings were rare, even in times when the gods still roamed the earth, and they tended not to advertise their identity and capabilities. If you think secrecy among top mages is bad today, you don’t want to know what the ancient archmages were like. So many legacies got lost because the old fools refused to let anyone see their work... but I digress. I suspect that the sort of blessing I received is relatively typical of its sort. Making someone’s mana reserves twice as big utterly dwarfs any sort of ‘natural’ increase one can obtain through other means, thus firmly cementing the god as actually godly, but it isn’t completely over the top. Plus, doubling something is a nice, simple-to-understand change.”

“Do you know how it actually works?” Zorian asked.

“In very general terms,” the ancient lich said. “It’s a sort of stabilization frame made out of divine energy, encircling the soul. Somehow, this allows the target to store and regenerate more mana without hurting their shaping skills. Nearly undetectable through classical magic, just like all divine works, but the fact it interacts with one’s soul means that skilled necromancers can eventually learn how to perceive it through soul perception.”

A stabilization frame? Was it perhaps... in the shape of an icosahedron? Did Quatach-Ichl design his gate stabilization frame based on the faint outline of the soul stabilization frame that encircled his soul? Zorian thought about hinting at it somehow and observing the lich’s reaction before deciding that was probably going too far.

“Is there any way to receive such a divine blessing other than getting it from a god?” Zach asked with a frown.

“Technically yes,” Quatach-Ichl said. “The angels are said to be able to bestow such blessings to this very day. However, they are extremely stingy with them and are said to only bestow them upon their most pious and capable servants. I rather doubt they would be impressed with either of you two. So in reality, no, there really isn’t any way for you to receive such a blessing. It’s a privilege that only ancient monsters like me and a few fanatical dogs of the church can wield.”

They asked a few more questions in regards to the soul stabilization frame and how it could be detected, probably rousing some of Quatach-Ichl’s interest in the process, but eventually the old lich decided he’d had enough of their questions and turned to leave.

“Well,” he said, rising from his seat. “I enjoyed this talk and you’ve given me a lot to think about, but I think this is a good time to stop.”

“Yes,” Zorian agreed. It was getting tiresome constantly being on his guard around the ancient lich, making sure he didn’t say the wrong thing or miss some sinister plot unfolding in the background.

“If you want to talk more, feel free to contact me through this,” Quatach-Ichl said, handing them a simple paper calling card, plain white and undecorated. The only thing on it was an address in Cyoria, typed in bold, black letters.

Zorian silently pocketed the calling card.

“I have a feeling we’ll see each other again, soon,” the old lich said with a grin, before turning around and calmly walking out of the tavern.

A long silence followed in his wake, neither Zach nor Zorian saying anything for a full minute, just listening to background noise of the tavern and playing the entire encounter repeatedly in their heads.

“I guess the most pressing question now is: what do we do?” Zorian asked. “Do we do the smart thing and immediately end this ticking time bomb of a restart... or do we play with fire and try to take advantage of this somehow?”

“I don’t know,” Zach sighed, pushing away his giant mug to the side. In the end he never did manage to completely finish it, though Zorian felt that was more due to the circumstances than a literal inability to do so. “It’s hard to think straight about this right now. I’ve got so many bad experiences with that damn bag of bones... I got trashed by him so many times, got so many of my plans ruined when he just swooped in and started wrecking the place... but if you forced me to give you an answer right now?”

Zorian sighed. He already knew what the answer was going to be.

“I always did like fire,” Zach said with a grin.

82. Ancient Circles

Chapter 082 Ancient Circles

Aranhal, the unfortunate nation that had lost its airship prototype to Zach and Zorian, had been affected deeply by the theft. It was a huge blow to their prestige to lose their prized creation in such a dramatic manner, possibly more so than a mere technical failure would have been. If the design itself was flawed or the builders had assembled the vessel incorrectly and it crashed during its maiden flight, that would have been kind of embarrassing... but mostly for the project itself and the factions that supported it. Having a bunch of thieves break into the construction site and steal it away, though? That reflected badly on the whole country. It didn't help that Aranhal couldn't suppress the information that they had engaged the thieves in an airship battle and lost. The airship they had lost in the ensuing battle couldn't be simply swept under the rug, after all. Many people ended up losing their positions over this scandal, information gathering groups in the entire region were going crazy trying to figure out which group was responsible for the feat and rumors were flying that a massive audit of Aranhal's government agencies and armed forces was in the works...

Zach and Zorian, the causes of the entire furor, were only dimly aware of all this. They kept an eye on the news and reports coming from the region, but it didn't seem like Aranhal was getting any closer to tracking them down, so they gradually lost interest. Zorian did find it kind of interesting how many otherwise obscure groups and individuals were roused into action as a result of their theft, though. Perhaps it would be a good idea to stir up some similarly great outrage back in Altazia, just to see if something particularly interesting would show itself in its wake...

That was a thought for some other time, though. At the moment, Zach and Zorian were simply relaxing on their new airship as it flew over the empty, sun-scorched desert. They weren't going anywhere in particular – they were just meandering from one random place to another, testing the ship's flight systems and enjoying the view. As an added bonus, aimlessly flying around the Xlotic desert was a pretty good way of foiling any attempt to eavesdrop on them. No matter what kind of exotic methods of tracking them down and spying on them Quatach-Ichl had at his disposal, they probably couldn't reach across continents and reach them here.

"Wow, the view from here is amazing! And look, those four tower-like rock formations over there? Those are Retam's Fangs, where the prince of Ixam and the rebel queen Hanfa swore an alliance to unite their forces and repel the Ikosian forces encroaching upon their land. Even though they failed in the end, I always thought their story of forbidden lovers fighting a doomed battle against insurmountable odds was *so* romantic..."

Zorian glanced to his side, where Neolu was leaning over the airship railing and animatedly babbling about anything that caught her eye. Bringing her along with them when they boarded the airship kind of interfered with the idea of maximum security, but Quatach-Ichl already had plenty of people to choose from if he wanted to kidnap someone to question about Zach and Zorian, so whatever. He was more amazed that she was willing to go along with them, to be honest. A couple of acquaintances come up to you one day and tell you that they're time travelers and want you to join them for a joyride in their stolen airship and you just... accept the offer?

"I'm hardly an expert on ancient Ikosian history, but wasn't that alliance a matter of pure pragmatism? And didn't the prince of Ixam have his father's permission to broker a deal with the rebels?" Zorian asked curiously. "What exactly makes this a case of 'forbidden love'?"

Neolu gave him an unamused look.

"Err, never mind," Zorian said quickly. He didn't want to start an argument about a silly topic like that. "Forbidden love it is."

Neolu's expression brightened immediately, and she clapped her hands happily.

"We should come down and look around!" she said enthusiastically. "I hear nobody has been here for nearly a decade, since it's so deep in the desert now. I want to take a souvenir or two. Ooh, my sisters will be so jealous when I show them..."

Zorian really didn't understand her. She readily accepted their claims about the existence of the time loop – although she was indeed more wary of the story when it was both Zach and Zorian talking to her about it rather than just Zach – but the way she spoke and behaved made Zorian wonder how much she really believed them. She didn't seem to care at all about the impending end of the month that would rob her of everything she achieved here.

In any case, they had no reason to refuse her request. It wasn't like they were pressed for time, or even going anywhere in particular, so stopping by for some sightseeing and to pick up some pretty rocks was okay. Besides, Zorian believed that once Neolu experienced the scorching heat of the desert outside the airship, she would quickly decide to cut their visit short.

Two hours later, he realized he may have underestimated Neolu somewhat. Being a Xlotic native, she seemed to possess a much higher comfort threshold for hot, dry climates than he or Zach did. She was also far more athletic than he had given her credit for, because she was jumping about and maneuvering herself across the rock landscape with far more grace than he would have expected from a teenage girl wearing a dress.

Maybe it was some kind of a bloodline? House Iljatir, like many magical Houses, was rather secretive about its family magic and special abilities, but they probably had them.

"Hey, Zach," Zorian called out. His fellow time traveler, who was just in the process of carving 'Zach was here' into one of the stone formations, turned to him with a questioning look. "What is House Iljatir's special thing?"

"I don't know," said Zach. "Something divination-based. Neolu got all apologetic when I asked and said she wasn't allowed to tell me and I didn't push. I didn't think it mattered."

"Something divination-based, huh?" Zorian mused thoughtfully. Hmm. Depending on what exactly that represented, maybe she had an actual reason for trusting them so easily...

"Yeah," confirmed Zach, either not realizing or not caring that Zorian was mostly talking to himself when he repeated his words. "Those three blue circles she has imprinted on her cheeks and forehead? They're supposed to represent eyes."

"Oh. I was kind of wondering about that," Zorian said.

"You could have just asked her," Zach said, shaking his head and turning back to finish his inscription. "She's a really easy person to talk to, you know? Even if you ask something she can't tell you, she probably won't get mad at you."

After mulling it over for a few seconds, Zorian decided to do just that. He approached the cheery girl that joined them on this trip and waved at her to get her attention. She seemed to be in the process of trying to capture one of the small blue lizards that made their home in this place, though, and was so focused on her task that she did not notice him. The little creatures were totally harmless, but very fast after soaking in the sun for hours on end and quite tricky to catch.

"Neolu?" he asked.

She jumped a little in surprise at his sudden interruption, before refocusing on him. Her eyes, blue like the markings on her cheeks and forehead, stared at him uncomprehendingly for a second before an idea seemed to occur to her.

"Catch one for me!" she commanded, pointing at one of the distant blue lizards with her finger. The lizard instantly reacted to her sudden move, darting so fast into a nearby crevice that it looked like it teleported.

Zorian raised his eyes at her, his mouth stretching into an amused smile.

"Err, please?" she added with a nervous smile of her own.

"Fine," Zorian sighed. After a second of consideration, he decided to go for the simplest option – he reached into the mind of the nearest lizard and manipulated it into coming over on its own. Once it approached close enough, he simply scooped it up and handed it to the girl next to him, who immediately started to coo and fawn over it. Didn't girls usually find reptiles creepy and disgusting?

"Look at you, so gorgeously blue and gloriously spiky," Neolu said, turning the lizard over so she could see him from all sides. The lizard looked decidedly unamused with her manhandling, and would have started biting her fingers by now had Zorian not been constantly calming it down. Neolu gave him a curious look. "How did you do that?"

"Mind magic," he answered honestly. Using mind magic against animals was not illegal, and didn't typically scare people.

"Oh. That's kind of cheating," she frowned. She stared at the little lizard in her hand for a few seconds before sighing dramatically. "I kind of want to keep it, but... no, that would be wrong. I don't have anywhere to keep it, I don't know what it eats, and it would probably be lonely without its fellows."

She lowered the lizard back to the ground and Zorian released his mental hold on it. Surprisingly, the little lizard didn't immediately run away after that. Instead, it opted to give them confused looks and it shuffled in place uncertainly.

"Go along little guy, you can go home now," Neolu said. "Don't forget me, okay?"

The lizard blinked at her in confusion, probably wondering why the big creature didn't eat it when it had the chance, before turning around and darting away into the distance.

"Sorry about that. I get a little weird sometimes," Neolu said, turning back towards him. "I guess you wanted to tell me something? Is it time to leave?"

"No, I was actually just going to ask you about something," Zorian said. "You don't have to answer if you don't want to, but I'm kind of curious... how come you accepted our story so easily?"

"Shouldn't you already know the answer for this?" she said curiously. "You're the ancient time traveler who has seen it all, right?"

"I'm not that ancient, actually," Zorian said, shaking his head. "I spent about seven years in this time loop, not counting the time dilation rooms."

"Time dilation rooms?" Neolu asked curiously. "What are those?"

"It's a long story. Ask me some other time, okay?" Zorian said. "The point is that I have *not* seen it all – not even close. Truthfully, this is the first time I've had any significant interaction with you."

"Boo! Am I so boring?" she pouted.

“Not at all,” Zorian said hastily. “It’s just...”

“It’s fine, it’s fine...” said Neolu. “I’m just teasing. Well, mostly. You say I accepted your story really easily, so that means you tried to convince many other people thus far. Depending on how far down the list I am, I might actually be offended...”

“It was mostly Zach who tried to convince all our classmates and anyone who would listen, so that statement is based mostly around what he told me of his experiences,” Zorian said. “He said most people reacted really badly to his claim of being trapped in an ever-repeating month. Especially in the beginning, before he honed his skills to downright implausible levels and memorized which secret and prediction this or that person found convincing. You though... you always accepted his story very easily. Even in this restart, where you know we stole an airship and both of us approached you instead of just Zach...”

“Why would it matter that you both approached me about this?” Neolu asked with a frown.

“Err...” Zorian fumbled.

“Oh. Oh! I get it,” Neolu giggled. “I guess I can see it, he can be kind of cute...” She suddenly stopped and gave Zorian a panicked look. “I mean, not that you’re not, but you’re a bit too quiet and passive for my taste and— gods, I should have just pretended to be scandalized about this, shouldn’t I? Okay, okay, shutting up now...”

“You know, you still haven’t answered my question,” Zorian pointed out, amused.

“What? Oh, about me being easy to convince...” Neolu said, giving him a short, nervous laugh. “Right, I don’t really have an answer to that. I guess you’re expecting some big mystery here but there isn’t any. I’m just kind of foolish, I guess. We know each other, I could tell that you had no malicious intentions towards me and you provided all the proof I asked of you... even if you were delusional or lying, I probably wouldn’t have been in any harm.”

Zorian gave her a speculative look. The way she phrased her statement gave the impression she trusted a mere hunch about their good character to keep her safe, but the surety in her voice made Zorian think there was something a lot more concrete involved there. Perhaps something... divination-based?

“And if I asked you how you were so sure we had no malicious intentions towards you?” he asked curiously.

“Woman’s intuition,” she said cheerfully, her voice sounding like she had been just waiting for a chance to use that response.

“Well, regardless of the reason, I thank you for your trust,” Zorian said.

“No problem!” Neolu said, giving him an appreciative look for not pushing her on the issue. “Was there anything else you wanted to ask?”

“Yes, actually,” Zorian said. “This may be too personal, but why did a girl from Xlotic decide to go all the way to Cyoria to attend a magic academy? It’s a somewhat curious thing to do, you know?”

“Ah...” Neolu sighed, her good mood suddenly deflating somewhat. But only somewhat. “That. Well, my mother is actually from Eldemar. She used to tell me stories of her homeland when I was little, and I always wanted to visit the place. So I begged my father to let me come and he couldn’t say no to me. That’s the reason I usually tell people when they ask me that question. And, I mean, it’s kind of true! I really did want to visit. And Cyoria is really interesting and I’m not really sorry for being there...”

“But?” Zorian prompted.

“But if it was for that, I probably wouldn’t have gone so far as to sign up for school here,” Neolu said. “I would have simply visited for a few months. The truth is my father has made some pretty serious enemies back in Nelentar, and there were concerns they would go after his family to get to him. Especially after me, because... um, father doesn’t really trust my judgment much.”

How... very surprising. Then again, most people would say that Zorian’s parents were in the right and that Zorian was being unreasonable when he clashed with them, so maybe he should be more open-minded about Neolu’s reasons for acting the way she did.

“In the end, it was decided I would be sent to Eldemar,” Neolu continued. “That way I would be out of danger, I get to fulfill my long-time wish to visit my mother’s homeland and the whole thing can be explained back home as my father spoiling his daughter a little too much. Three birds with one stone, no?”

“Indeed,” Zorian agreed. Though he personally found it sad that Neolu’s father sent his daughter to Cyoria to keep her safe, only to have the city invaded by Ibassans in the end. That didn’t exactly go according to plan...

“Anyway! I actually think the whole thing turned out really well in the end, so I have no regrets. You don’t have to feel sorry about me,” Neolu said. “Though to be honest, I’ll probably be glad when I’m done with the academy and can come back home. I... kind of miss my family. You probably don’t understand, being able to see yours any time you want and all.”

“Err, yeah... you’re probably right about that,” Zorian said slowly. He didn’t bother clarifying that it was not quite for the reasons she was thinking of.

They wandered the rocky landscape for a while after that, after which all three of them returned to the airship and continued their aimless wandering through the desert. Neolu somehow talked him into helping her take away a large green rock from the site, even though it was pretty much worthless as far as Zorian could tell, and he couldn't possibly fathom what she intended to do with it, and she was inordinately happy about that. She spent about half an hour humming to herself and inspecting the rock in great detail before eventually seeking him out again.

"Zorian, can I ask you something?" she asked him, then immediately continued with her follow-up question without waiting for his answer. "This time loop of yours... it's going to end someday, right?"

"Yes?" Zorian said, unsure what she was getting at.

"So one day, this month will run its course as it always does... and I will live on and remember instead of endlessly forgetting?" she prompted further. "And you will remember this day and act accordingly?"

"I... that's the idea," Zorian said, faltering slightly. They never told her that there was a good chance they would be destroyed in the end, having failed to leave the time loop before it collapsed. He didn't really want to tell her about that if he didn't have to, either.

"What do you intend to do when that happens?" she asked, biting her lip. "About me, I mean."

"About you?" Zorian asked, caught a little off-guard by the direction this was going in. "Well, it depends on what you *want* us to do, I guess."

"I don't know what I want," she admitted. "I just know I had fun today and I don't want to forget it all."

Ah... and here he thought the realization she would lose everything at the end of the month hadn't affected her in the slightest. Maybe the implications of the time loop just hadn't hit her up until now? Unfortunately, there was very little he could do to comfort her in regards to that. Aside from lying, of course.

"But," she continued, "since that is not possible, I have a somewhat selfish request out of you and Zach: when we meet again at the end, don't pretend this never happened. You don't have to tell me about the time loop, but don't be a stranger. I know I'm probably not the most exciting person you've met over the years, but you're not allowed to forget me, okay?"

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Zorian gave her a strange look.

"Well... okay," he said slowly.

"Yay! New friends!" she exclaimed, causing Zorian to sigh a little. She really reminded him of a little kid in some respects. Or Novelty.

He really missed that silly little spider sometimes...

"I hope you realize we won't be stealing this airship in the final version of this month," Zorian said. "So this particular memory is... probably never going to be recreated."

Neolu seemed to give it a serious thought.

"That's probably for the best," she eventually decided. "From what the papers are saying, you killed a lot of people when you destroyed that pursuing airship. That wasn't very nice."

"I... really don't understand you," Zorian admitted, shaking his head. "You know that, but you're still here. And you want to be friends with us."

"All those people will be alive when time resets again, so it's fine," Neolu said with small shrug. "But hey! Even without the airship, you can still open doors between continents, no? That's how we reached your airship in the first place. So you can take me to see all these places anyway!"

Zorian opened his mouth to point out that revealing they could perform intercontinental travel spells was still a huge deal, but in the end he just shut his mouth and remained quiet. Considering Neolu's peculiar personality, she was probably one of the few people who could handle such a revelation without totally freaking out.

"I guess you're right," he eventually conceded.

Besides, what was incredible cosmic power for if not for taking a girl out on a casual vacation into uninhabited desert filled with crumbling ruins and bloodthirsty monsters?

Maybe Zach was becoming a bad influence on him...

- break -

In the end, it was not hard at all to talk Neolu into helping them find the translators and contacts they needed to operate more freely in the Xlotic region. Most of these were going to be in her home country of Nelentar, since that was where she could wield her family influence the most and where her knowledge of local knowledge and customs was most pronounced, but that was still plenty useful. With such a solid starting point, it

wouldn't be hard to extend their net wider throughout the region.

They ended up dropping her off in Nelentar with a pair of simulacra while they returned back on the airship to discuss something else. Namely, the Quatach-Ichl situation.

"It's been a few days now," Zorian said. "We've both had time to calm down and think about it. Do you still think we should take a risk and try to broker some kind of deal with Quatach-Ichl?"

"Well, yeah," Zach said. "I mean, what's not to like? It would be trivially simple to give him divine artifacts, or even pieces of the Key like the imperial orb, in exchange for rare magic and knowledge. Then we can do it again in the subsequent restart with him none the wiser. I feel a dark spark of joy at the very thought of such a scenario. If there is anyone that I don't feel the slightest bit guilty doing that to, it's him."

"I'm not sure how far we can take that, though," Zorian said nervously. "He's bound to notice something is wrong at some point. Especially if we trade for magical instructions – if Xvim and Alanic could notice when we were displaying their own techniques, Quatach-Ichl can surely do the same. And I'm fairly sure he would react far more violently to the idea of someone stealing his secrets."

"It doesn't matter," Zach said, shaking his head. "It just means we have to be smart about this. We ask him about pocket dimensions in one restart, then about soul magic in the next, then about dimensional gates and so forth. We try our best to get the most we can out of each interaction, and only when we have exhausted a full list of topics do we consider revisiting some of them. If we're pursuing a different topic each time, he shouldn't be able to notice anything is wrong."

"Yes, I've considered that idea too," Zorian mused. "But that rests on the idea that the lich is actually trustworthy."

"He did come to talk to us instead of simply trying to assassinate us or kidnapping people we hang around with to blackmail us," Zach pointed out.

"It's hard to tell how much of that is his real attitude and how much he was simply afraid of rousing some kind of sleeping dragon, though," Zorian pointed out. "He clearly thinks there is some kind of secret force supporting us. If he knew we were on our own, I have a feeling he would have been much more domineering."

"Well, *that* problem has an obvious answer, at least," Zach laughed. "We just need to make sure he never finds out!"

Zorian supposed he was right about that. It didn't make Zorian feel any better about the idea, though.

Reaching into his pocket, Zorian retrieved a piece of paper and unfolded it. It held a simple address in Cyoria, transcribed from the calling card that Quatach-Ichl had given them. He had thrown the original into a public trash can an age ago, of course. Even though it looked perfectly normal and he couldn't actually find anything wrong with it, it was better to be safe than sorry.

"What are you thinking of?" Zach asked after a few seconds.

"I'm just wondering how much of Quatach-Ichl's attitude that day was real and how much of it was a carefully crafted mask," Zorian said. "He did come there in what was effectively an ectoplasmic disguise and maintained perfect control over his soul throughout the entire meeting. For all we know, every word and expression could have been carefully calculated to leave a specific impression."

"Eh, I don't think so," Zach immediately said, shaking his head. "I did have short interactions with him from time to time in various restarts, you know. None as extensive as the one that day, but it adds up. And the Quatach-Ichl we met that day was very much like what I remember of him in the past. He had that same uncaring, informal manner of speech that looks so out of place on a terrifying old-as-dirt lich and the casual way he threatened us, more like he was stating facts than trying to be menacing... it sounded very much like what I was used to. No doubt there was some level of deception and social manipulation going there, but I don't think he was faking most of it. Like that move with the dagger near the end of the meeting – plunging an unknown divine artifact into his ectoplasmic form may have been intended to send us some kind of message, though I struggle to figure out what it was, but more likely than not it was just him having a bit of a theatrical streak."

"I did get the impression that he likes to brag, yeah," Zorian agreed thoughtfully. "He seemed to delight in drawing attention to his abilities, great age and other advantages. Like his insane mana reserves, for instance."

"Ugh, don't remind me," Zach grumbled. "I guess now I know how people felt about me all this time. But yeah, I think he's pretty much what he advertises himself as: an old, incredibly powerful lich with little concern about appearing humble or dignified. I think it's partly because of his great age. I read once that, contrary to what most people think, ancient peoples tended to be a lot more rude and forthright than modern ones. A lot of immortals throughout history found it hard to keep up with changing social mores. For instance, not that long ago people had very little concept of privacy and thought nothing of having sex in the same room as their children. Public torture and executions were considered to be almost akin to a free entertainment show you could visit rather than something horrifying. And you heard yourself what Quatach-Ichl thought about the proper treatment of conquered populace. In all likelihood, the way Quatach-Ichl behaves is a sort of compromise between what he feels is reasonable based on the ancient environment he was raised in and what he thinks he can get away with in the modern era."

That was an interesting point. Zorian couldn't help but remember that one time he decided to describe the process of butchering animals to some of his classmates in Cyoria who had never been outside the city. He was surprised and amused when he realized how horrified they were at his description of how the animals were killed and processed. It seemed so silly and hypocritical to him, since he was pretty sure they ate meat just fine and would continue to do so in the future.

And that was between people belonging to the same general age and culture. Quatach-Ichl probably experienced this sort of thing magnified a

hundredfold. Perhaps when Zach and Zorian told him about how wrong it was to kill all these people in Cyoria, he thought of them the same way Zorian did about those squeamish kids that couldn't handle how their meals were prepared behind the scenes.

"You know surprisingly much about the topic," Zorian pointed.

"Back when I didn't know when this time loop was going to end, I looked around for any information I thought might be applicable to my situation," Zach shrugged. "I was kind of going crazy from the endless repetitions and I thought maybe the books about immortals and their ilk would be of help. Unfortunately, it turned out our situations weren't very comparable. It turns out most ageless people think the world is changing too much and too fast for their tastes, not that everything is too cyclical or boring or whatever."

"I see," Zorian said, leaning back. "So, just so we're clear: we're really doing this?"

"I think we should," Zach confirmed. "It's dangerous, yeah, but the gains would be so very sweet. Doubly so because we're effectively stealing knowledge from that bag of old bones..."

"The situation in this restart is not very good for what we talked about, though," Zorian pointed out. "The restart is more than halfway done by this point. If we're going to try and get the most out of any individual topic within the span of a single restart, we should wait for the next one to start."

"I don't think it would be wise to just ignore Quatach-Ichl in this restart, though," Zach frowned. "He will probably decide to move against us if he thinks he cannot turn us to his side somehow."

"Yes, but I had another idea about that," Zorian said. "What if... we recruited his help in breaking into the Eldemar's royal vault?"

Zach gave him a surprised look.

"That's a pretty interesting idea, but how would we possibly divide the spoils?" Zach asked. "I mean, both sides will want to claim the dagger in the end..."

"Well, no doubt Quatach-Ichl will try to betray us in the end in order to claim the dagger for himself," Zorian said. "But..."

"But that's fine, because we *want* to fight him in the end," Zach surmised.

"Yes," Zorian confirmed. "After all... how else can we get ahold of his crown?"

He just wondered how they were going to explain all this to Alanic. If he hated the idea of them raiding Eldemar's royal vaults and working with Silverlake, he was going to be positively *thrilled* with their latest idea...

- break -

After a considerable amount of preparations, it was time for Zach and Zorian to assault the Ziggurat of the Sun and try to claim the imperial ring that was supposed to reside somewhere inside. Their forces for the task were relatively modest – aside from two of them and their simulacrum, they also had Alanic, about 20 mercenary mages from the Xlotic region and a small army of golems that Zorian had made specifically for the occasion.

They did not choose to arrive in the Pearl of Aranhil. The airship was ill suited to fight masses of flying opponents like sulrothum, and it would get immediately recognized for what it was by the mercenaries, which would cause all sort of issues down the line. They had enough trouble convincing these people to cooperate with them in this seemingly crazy operation as it was.

Instead, they brought the whole group to their destination – a sulrothum outpost not far from the ziggurat that Zorian's simulacrum had secretly infiltrated and taken over a few hours earlier – through the usage of dimensional gates. The display of such high-level magic did much to quell the mercenaries' concerns, which was a nice side-effect that neither Zach nor Zorian had really counted on. They would have to remember in the future that implausible displays of magic did not just alarm people, but could sometimes actually set them at ease.

After organizing themselves a little, the entire group was split into two. The first one, composed out of all of the mercenaries, most of the golems and one simulacrum of Zach and Zorian each, was ordered to march out of the sulrothum outpost and launch an obvious, frontal assault on the structure. This was, of course, little more than a distraction... but a distraction that the sulrothum probably wouldn't be able to ignore.

According to the military personnel and sulrothum experts Zach and Zorian had talked to in the past few days, humans usually dealt with sulrothum strongholds by bombarding them through artillery magic from extreme range. Unfortunately, neither Zach nor Zorian were all that proficient with artillery magic. It was a magical discipline designed for sieges and outright warfare, and typically involved titanic amounts of mana being shaped by multiple mages acting in concert with one another. Zach knew a bit about it, since his monstrous mana reserves allowed him to cast some simple ones all by himself if he really needed to, but Zorian only had a theoretical grasp of the field. Fortunately, the 20 mercenaries they hired *were* proficient with artillery spells and had experience in anti-sulrothum tactics to boot.

The devil wasps had no choice but to come out of their base and confront them. Even if they suspected the attack was a distraction, they had to assign at least some of their forces to disrupt the bombardment.

After a few minutes, three more pairs of simulacra, each group holding a Zach and a Zorian, departed from the outpost under a magical cloak. Their job was to find their way into the ziggurat and find where the imperial ring was located.

Meanwhile, the original Zach and Zorian, Alanic and the two most powerful golems patiently waited for their moment...

- break -

Simulacrum number one nervously watched the cloud of giant black wasps on the horizon. It was his job – as well as the job of Zach's simulacrum and the many golems the original made for this day – to defend the artillery mages from being harassed by the sulrothum so they could work in peace. In general, their whole group was supposed to make itself as threatening as possible so the sulrothum would have to send the majority of their forces out of the ziggurat, thus leaving it open and easily infiltrated by the simulacrum teams. He was fine with that. However, how was he supposed to do that when the damn devil wasps refused to attack and just kept flying back and forth out of their attack range?

"What the hell are they doing?" the simulacrum asked the Zach-simulacrum beside him. "They can clearly see that we're setting up an artillery magic position here. Do they think we're bluffing or something?"

"No, I think they're waiting for something," Zach-simulacrum said. "An order from their leaders, maybe? I think—"

A loud roar resounded in the distance and a huge serpentine form erupted out of the sand, directly beneath the area the sulrothum swarm was flying at. No, not serpentine... worm-like. A huge brown sand worm raised its head towards the sky, its toothy maw unfolded like a hellish, fleshy flower. As for the devil wasps, they seemed to be... cheering?

"Damn it, they managed to tame a fully grown sandworm?" The leader of the mercenaries whined. "That's going to be a nightmare to fight."

Simulacrum number one had to agree. Although he could easily detect incoming sandworm attacks due to his mind sense, it was hard to deal with attacks that came from underground. Especially since the sandworm was huge, meaning they had little chance of stopping its attacks and could only move out of the way whenever they detected it coming.

"I have an idea," Zach-simulacrum said, quickly performing an alteration spell that hardened the sand beneath them into a stone platform and then raising it high into the sky.

"There," Zach-simulacrum said, smiling. "It's a bit expensive to maintain, but now the stupid thing can no longer reach us. For all their huge size, sandworms are useless against things that can fly."

He had barely finished speaking when the sandworm suddenly shook, almost like a dog trying to dry itself off, and a series of translucent, glowing yellow wings grew out of its sides. They were long and paper-thin, reminiscent of dragonfly wings, and looked comically inappropriate for lifting a creature like that into the air... but as the creature's many golden wings started slowly undulating like oars on a boat, the sandworm slowly lifted itself into the sky and then reoriented itself towards them.

Zach-simulacrum immediately deflated.

"Now this just isn't fair," he complained.

Simulacrum number one looked at the flying sandworm, which was currently flying towards them while accompanied by a swarm of devil wasps and decided he couldn't agree more.

- break -

Zorian stood in the ruins of the sulrothum outpost they arrived in, observing the state of the battle. In the distance, Zach's simulacrum was desperately trying to keep the giant, flying sandworm busy while Zorian's own simulacrum protected the mercenaries from the sulrothum swarm. Curiously, when Zorian's simulacrum tried to influence the sandworm's mind, he found it completely impossible to infiltrate. Usually he could at least make some headway when making such an attempt, even if the creature was heavily magic resistant, but the sandworm's consciousness seemed to be protected by a mental equivalent of a stone wall – incredibly solid and unyielding. That was probably worth checking out in more detail in future restarts.

In truth, he thought that part of the battle was going really well. Yes, the mercenary group failed to get off all but one artillery spell and was constantly getting pushed back, but it served its job as a distraction marvelously. The sulrothum even sent another swarm of warriors at them at one point, trying to take them out sooner, which caused simulacrum number one to rant expletives at him over their soul link for a full minute or so, but was pretty convenient for the plan as a whole.

No, the problem was that the simulacrum pairs sent to infiltrate the ziggurat weren't doing so well. Somehow the sulrothum discovered all three of them the moment they got close enough to the main structure, which probably meant there was some kind of subtle alarm ward protecting it. One of the teams then died trying to charge the front entrance, the other sacrificed itself to provide the third one a chance to punch a new entrance through one of the outer walls of the ziggurat, and the third one managed to get inside but was currently blocked in one of the corridors and would likely get swarmed by the defenders soon.

On top of that, the sulrothum figured out where the original forces first appeared and decided to send a group of warriors to check it out. That was how the outpost ended up in its current, ruined state.

"Although we haven't found the ring, yet, it's now or never. I'm commanding the simulacrum that managed to get inside to open a gate for us. We're going in."

“Understood,” Alanic said solemnly.

“Finally,” Zach said, cracking his knuckles.

Zorian took a deep breath and waited, tapping into the soul link he had with his simulacrum and paying close attention to his simulacrum inside the ziggurat. Opening a dimensional gate was a lengthy process requiring a lot of concentration, which meant it took some time and effort for the simulacrum to find himself in the position where he was able to do so. Finally, after using up all fifteen of his remaining grenades in one massive attack and having Zach’s simulacrum charge forward and sacrifice itself to get him some space, the simulacrum managed to successfully open a dimensional passage between itself and the original.

Zorian sent his two remaining golems through the dimensional gate to clear the way, and then he, Zach and Alanic all rushed inside.

There, they found a mangled artificial body of Zorian’s simulacrum that ended up sacrificing his fleeting life to finish the spell in time. Rather than interrupt the gate-opening spell and save himself, the simulacrum chose to ignore the incoming attack from one of the sulrothum warriors and kept casting the spell till the very end.

Curiously, now that the two battle golems Zorian sent as a vanguard had cleared the entire corridor, there were no more sulrothum coming. That final grenade attack and the arrival of a new batch of invaders seemed to have caused them to temporarily withdraw and regroup.

“Let’s go,” Zorian said, pointing towards the corridor on the left.

“Any particular reason to go in that direction?” Zach asked. “I mean, that seems to be the place where most of the devil wasps are coming from...”

“Yeah, it is,” Zorian admitted. “I don’t know where the ring is, but I’m operating under the idea that our luck is horrible and thus our target is obviously in the most dangerous part of the ziggurat.”

“Oh,” Zach said. “Yeah, that does make sense.”

Zorian turned to Alanic walking next to them, who was ignoring their banter in favor of scanning the walls for some reason. Probably looking for some clues as to where they are – all of the walls still retained detailed carvings of various religious scenes. Most of them were from Ikosian era, but some of them had been crudely ‘repurposed’ by the sulrothum, who did their best to modify the carvings into something that fitted better with their own religious beliefs. Alanic was very unamused by their efforts, if his deepening frown was of any indication.

“Alanic, we’re going to have to rely on you. Zach and I have been using our simulacra to fight for a while now, and we need some time to recover our mana reserves a little,” Zorian told him. “Do you think you can—”

Two sulrothum warriors suddenly charged out of the corner in front of them, both of them carrying spears and decorations that looked far fancier and better constructed than what they had encountered thus far. They were probably elite warriors of the colony, and they screeched out a challenge and charged at them the moment they saw them.

Alanic’s expression didn’t change in the slightest. He simply waved his battle staff lightly and two tiny, highly compressed balls of fire flew forwards at incredible speeds. They impacted the warriors’ faces, burning a hole straight through them, and the two sulrothum died on the spot.

“Don’t worry,” Alanic said. “Leave it all to me.”

He had barely finished speaking when a literal horde of sulrothum converged all of a sudden.

The entire corridor erupted into burning flames.

- break -

After much bitter fighting and several temporary retreats, the group finally managed to achieve its goal. One of the battle golems was rendered inert, the other was missing one of its arms and had three spears sticking out of it and slowing it down, Alanic had received a nasty-looking wound across his chest and Zach was almost out of mana.

But they had found it. They had found the imperial ring.

Unfortunately, they found it because the person wearing it decided to come to them. Apparently they caused such a commotion that the sulrothum high priest decided to confront them personally, accompanied by his highly-trained, well-equipped honor guard. He was a particularly large sulrothum, equipped with menacing-looking bone armor and holding what was unmistakably a spell staff. He was clearly a mage, and if the low-level magical aura he was emanating was of any indication, probably a soul mage to boot.

He was also decorated with an absolutely ridiculous amount of little trinkets and various jewelry, one of which was the imperial ring that he had on one of his hands. If Zorian didn’t have the marker’s function to detect pieces of the Key, he would have never spotted it among all that junk the high priest was wearing.

They couldn’t fight him. Maybe when they were in their top form, but not now. However, Zorian just couldn’t bring himself to flee without at least trying to pull off one last thing...

He summoned most of his remaining mana and launched a massive mental attack on the high priest. Just for a moment, he smashed aside his mental defenses, suppressed his will and forced him to perform one simple action.

In one smooth movement, the high priest ripped the imperial ring off his finger and threw it at Zorian, who immediately caught it in his free hand.

Then the effect was broken and the sulrothum high priest looked dumbfounded at what he had just done.

“Zach, get us out of here now!” Zorian urged him.

Just before they teleported away, leaving their poor damaged battle golem behind as a distraction, they heard a shrill, outraged scream from the high priest at the unfairness of it all.

Zorian nodded sagely in his heart. Yes, sometimes the world really was extremely unfair.

83. Scorpion

Chapter 083

Scorpion

Zach and Zorian were sitting in one of the many empty rooms in the Noveda mansion. This wasn't something that often happened. Despite this being his home, Zach didn't like to spend too much time in the place. Very few people lived there, relative to its size, which gave the mansion an empty, almost abandoned atmosphere that Zach found uncomfortable. Even before the time loop, he liked to spend most of his day outside, visiting friends and wasting time.

Zorian kind of wondered about these friends of Zach. He had never really seen Zach interact with any of them through the restarts. From what Zach told him, though, most of them were in the same situation as Benisek – kind of friendly with pre-time loop Zach, but not really *that* close to him and very ill-suited for dealing with the implications of an endlessly repeating month. Much like Zorian pretty much stopped interacting with Benisek, Zach seemed to have totally stopped bothering with these casual friends he had once had. It was a bit sad, though maybe Zach intended to continue interacting with them more heavily once he was out of the time loop...

Regardless, the reason for their uncharacteristic presence in the Noveda mansion was simple: the place still had a well-crafted, perfectly functional warding scheme and the two of them didn't feel like traveling outside of Cyoria and creating a temporary base just to have this discussion. Thus, they simply retreated into one of the private study rooms that could be found in the estate and hoped this would be enough to foil any spying attempts by Quatach-Ichl or others.

The room was pretty nice. It was small but luxurious, with heavily decorated wooden furniture, several marble statues, magical lighting and temperature control and bookshelves lining every single wall. The center of the room contained a table and some chairs, and sitting in the center of that table was the object that Zach and Zorian had gathered to discuss.

The ring. One of the pieces of the Key that they had to bring to the Guardian of the Threshold in order to reopen the time loop exit and one of the artifacts associated with the first emperor of Ikosia. It was made out of solid silver and largely featureless, with no notable decorations or gems. A few faint lines and sigils covered its surface, only visible upon close scrutiny. It did not seem very imperial, unlike the crown that Quatach-Ichl was wearing or the palace orb.

If they had not possessed the tracking function of the marker on their side, it would have been very hard to pick it out as special from the rest of the small trinkets that the sulrothum high priest had been carrying. Just like the palace orb, it seemed completely immune to divinations of any sort.

They already knew what it did. Maybe it was because they already had plenty of experience with the palace orb, but figuring out how the ring functioned only took a visit to the Guardian of the Threshold and half a day of tinkering with it. It was just that the end result was... not as useful as they had hoped.

"Interesting thing, isn't it?" Zach said, picking the ring up and making it spin on its edge like a top. "Heh. Of course, it's more useful for me than it is for you... but that may be a good thing. At least we won't have to struggle with the question of who to assign it to in the future, like we do with the palace orb!"

Zorian clacked his tongue at the analysis. The ring had an intriguing main function: it somehow granted the wearer an ability to use soul perception through it. As far as Zorian knew, there was no other item with a similar function, which made the ring quite interesting and unique... but also very useless for people like him who had already unlocked soul perception through other means.

Zach, of course, was another story. Due to the safeguards on his marker, unlocking his soul perception was anything but easy. Most methods to do so required one to be brought to the very edge of death and tampered deeply with the user's soul to achieve their goal. The soul perception potion Silverlake made for Zorian did the same, which was why they had not bothered to have Zach try it out thus far. They just didn't think it would work and didn't want to cut a restart short for now. The soul perception ring basically negated any need for such dangerous unlocking, giving Zach a way to practice soul magic easily.

Frankly, Zorian suspected the ring was created specifically with the goal of solving this kind of issue. Since it was extremely difficult for a controller with an intact marker to unlock their soul perception through classical means, it made sense for Shutur-Tarana to prepare a workaround for his successor.

"It's a bit inconvenient that the ring is so hard to get to, though," Zorian remarked. "The ring only grants you soul perception while you wear it. No ring, no soul perception. If you started each restart with the ring on you, like the controller was probably supposed to, then that would be a minor issue. As it is, it will take us a week at minimum to get ahold of it in each restart, and that's after optimizing things..."

"Yes, that does suck," Zach agreed. "I definitely intend to try and figure out a way to gain soul perception 'the right way', so that I don't need to depend on it, but this is still good. I doubt finding an alternative will be easy and we know from your example that simply unlocking soul perception is just the first step in the process and that a lot of training is needed to use it – with this, I can get started on that right away."

"I guess that's true," Zorian nodded. A part of him was annoyed that Zach got to skip a large chunk of the work Zorian had to do to gain his soul perception ability, but he knew that was just his jealousy talking and that this was objectively a good thing. "It still feels to me like the ring is relatively underwhelming, at least compared to the other two examples we know about. Even its time loop related skill is not that exciting."

Like all Key pieces, the soul perception ring had an ability that could only be accessed inside the time loop by the current controller. Specifically, the ring could place a tracking marker on target souls, allowing the ring bearer to track their movements with ease. According to the Guardian of the Threshold, the markers persisted across restarts, allowing them to know exactly where people started their restarts and what their usual routines were.

Or at least that's the effect they *would have had* if Zach and Zorian had started the restart with the ring. Since they hadn't, the value of the tracking markers was greatly reduced.

In any case, Zach and Zorian had tested the ability on various animals and random bystanders and found that the marker placement was fast and stealthy, that the ring could keep track of marked entities across intercontinental distances, and that divination wards didn't seem to hamper the effect in any way.

This sounded pretty amazing, and it was, but the markers had a serious flaw. Namely, anyone skilled in soul magic could detect when they were placed on them. This meant that Quatach-Ichl was effectively immune to it, as was Sudomir, Silverlake and a whole plethora of other potential targets.

"They can't *all* be amazing," Zach shrugged. "And truthfully, I think the real issue is less with the usefulness of the ring and more with how late we got ahold of it. If I had the ring with me right from the very start, it would have been an absolutely priceless treasure. The tracking ability alone would have saved me a ton of work and some dying. Currently, we're both so good at divinations, memory reading, stealth spells, various tracking magics and things like teleportation that the ring is no longer very impressive to us. But that's just us being awesome, not the ring being underwhelming."

Zorian hummed thoughtfully. There was a lot of truth in that.

"Besides, it may be a good idea to place these tracking markers on all of the high ranking cultists and Ibasans to see if they're doing something we don't know about," Zach said.

"That would take quite a bit of effort, though," Zorian pointed out. "The ring just gives you the distance and direction of your target, and only one at a time as well. You'd have to constantly pay attention to the ring, cycling through all of the tracking markers and matching the information you receive to places on the map to see where they actually are in actually useful terms. Then you'd have to go out personally to check up on any interesting movements to see the details of what is going on, or send a simulacrum, and—"

"You've done more complicated projects before, Zorian," Zach said, waving him off.

Zorian raised an eyebrow at him.

"You... do realize it's you who will be doing this, right?" he asked Zach. "After all, you're the one who's going to be wearing the ring. What with you needing its soul perception granting abilities..."

The look on Zach's face when he realized he just dumped a huge amount of work in his own lap was truly priceless.

- break -

Although Zach and Zorian had successfully retrieved the imperial ring from the Ziggurat of the Sun and found out what it did, there was no time for celebration. Quatach-Ichl's surprise visit had completely changed the dynamics of their current restart, and they had to prepare. One of these preparations was gathering everyone's research notes and the like. Normally this would be done just before the very end of the restart, but since there was so much chance of things going wrong this time around, Zorian decided to speed things up a little.

At the moment, this meant visiting Kael in his basement alchemy lab to see how his projects were progressing. This would be normally rather mundane, but nothing seemed to be entirely mundane in this particular restart. Apparently Silverlake had figured out who Kael was at some point in the restart and had talked to him a few times already. Sadly for Silverlake, Kael had given her a chilly reception. Their previous interaction seemed to have left a bad impression on Kael, something that did not surprise Zorian in the very least, so he was not at all eager to reacquaint himself with her. The fact that she showed unhealthy interest in his daughter Kana, due to her witch roots, probably didn't help. Sadly for Kael, though, that didn't deter Silverlake in the slightest, and she decided to barge in on this meeting to give them both her personal opinion on what Kael had been doing all this time.

"It's terrible," she stated without preamble.

Zorian had pretty much expected that. Kael probably did too, but he was too much personally invested into his project to just ignore the provocation.

"It's not terrible," Kael said in a clipped tone, not even bothering to look at her. "There, now it's your word against mine. What now?"

"Now I win, because I'm a wise, experienced witch and you aren't," Silverlake said smugly. "Really, I don't understand why you're so angry with me. Are you really still so angry about the way I spoke to you back when we first met? Don't be so petty! They're just words. I guess I was a little harsh, but can you blame me? Fria totally broke the rules when she took you under her wing and taught you all these things. A harsh word or two is really nothing compared to what I *could* have done... bah, kids these days don't know what's good for them!"

"It's not terrible," Kael repeated, completely ignoring her attempts to pick on their shared past. "In fact, the potions and the research I have

produced over the restarts are so good that they produce an uproar among Cyoria's medical and alchemical community if I release them too carelessly."

"Well I'm not saying it's *worthless*," Silverlake clarified. "But considering the amount of resources you had at your disposal and the sheer advantage given to you by the time loop... it's *underwhelming*. It's *terrible*. So many missed opportunities. So much lost potential."

Zorian did not try to inject himself into their bickering, but Silverlake's statement made him frown. No doubt Kael's methods could be better than they were, but what exactly was she talking about? In his personal opinion, Kael's work was pretty incredible.

Back at the beginning, when Kael had told him he wanted to research things with the help of the time loop, Zorian had agreed to help, but didn't really think Kael's work would have any wider impact. He knew this would be a tremendous personal boon for Kael, of course, allowing him to figure out the best recipes and production methods for known potions. The sort of thing that established alchemists don't share with anyone except their apprentices. But affecting the medical field as a whole? He knew that Kael was something of a young genius that had been specifically recruited by the academy because the folk healing remedies he had been producing to support himself and his daughter were good enough to get some influential people to take notice, but still. Alchemy was a very profitable occupation and many alchemy-based Houses and organizations had experienced, well-funded researchers on their payroll. What could one beginner alchemist, working in his basement, do that they could not?

Indeed, at first Kael focused primarily on improving his personal alchemical technique. He experimented with replacing expensive alchemical components with cheaper ones, with increasing potency of the standard cures, with cutting down the production time and skipping certain steps... small things, but they added up. They added up in ways that Zorian honestly hadn't expected. It turned out this sort of production optimization was rarely done on such a small, personal scale by the big alchemical groups. They usually produced their potions in large batches, so figuring out the best recipes and production procedures by a single alchemist working on an individual potion or two was of very limited usefulness to them. Plus, if something could be done by a lone alchemist with a relatively cheap setup, it was much easier for it to be stolen by outsiders or leaked by angry former employees and so on. Thus, they rarely invested too much into that kind of research.

Granted, there were no doubt plenty of individual alchemists that worked exclusively with small scale setups, and they had done plenty of research on their own... but they rarely shared these insights with anyone who wasn't family or a chosen successor, and many times ended up taking them to their grave. The fact that Kael had done years of research, funded by considerable resources and in cooperation with many individual alchemists and Healers that Zach and Zorian had helped him contact, and was entirely willing to release it to the public... it was a lot more important than Zorian realized.

This wasn't all, of course. Thanks to the support Zorian had given him, Kael was eventually able to be much more ambitious in his projects. Though he still pursued simple refinement of the production process, he had already picked most of the low-lying fruit in that regard. Now he was going after things like trying to combine several medical potions into one, experimental self-diagnosis potions that allowed a person to feel the state of their body with great clarity, and attempted cures for diseases that didn't have any accessible cures on the market. Of course, Zorian had a feeling this last one was what Kael really wanted to focus on. The death of his wife and mentor during the Weeping had clearly left a great mark on him, and seemed to serve as his primary motivation to try so hard in his alchemical pursuits. But these sort of ambitious projects were quite hard, and Kael was having very limited success there. Especially since, in every single restart, Kael had to re-familiarize himself with what he had been working on before he began building upon it.

"Missed opportunities, huh?" Kael said, leveling Silverlake with an unamused glare. "So what would you have done in my place, then?"

"For starters, I would have been *far* more liberal and unrestrained with human experimentation," Silverlake told him immediately.

Both Kael and Zorian flinched at this.

"Oh, look at you two babies!" Silverlake cackled. "You're living in a time loop, are you not? When are you going to do human experimentation if not now? You are surrounded by perfect test subjects! Any damage you do will be conveniently wiped out at the end of the month and you have the unprecedented ability to test various versions of a medical potion on the exact same patient without your previous attempts affecting the later ones and muddying the waters in regards to which one is really better. Really, it's practically criminal that you're not taking advantage of this..."

"First of all, I don't care that I'm trapped inside a time loop and people won't really suffer and die – I did not go down this path to hurt people," Kael told her firmly. "Secondly, even if I didn't balk at this on ethical grounds, it's still a terrible idea. The other alchemists and healers aren't stupid. Any potion developed through unchecked human experimentation will be obvious as such – people will surely realize that I couldn't have possibly developed such a potion without going through an inordinate amount of test subjects and send the authorities to check up on me."

"At which point they will find absolutely nothing, because you did everything in the time loop, erasing all the evidence," Silverlake said. "They're just accusations. Just keep insisting you're a genius and you figured it all out in a dream or something equally absurd. You're way too skittish. I think you'll find that a lot of powerful people won't care that you've done everything nicely and according to law. So long as you make too many waves they will want you under control or gone."

Kael was silent for a few seconds.

"You might be right," Kael conceded after a while. "But I don't care. I already said my main problem is with the ethics of the whole thing, not whether or not I can get away with it in the end."

Silverlake glanced at Zorian.

"No way," Zorian said, shaking his head. He had seen just how messed up 'unrestrained' human testing can get while trawling through Sudomir's memories. While Silverlake *probably* had a lot tamer things in mind than that, he'd rather not risk it.

Silverlake ignored him, tapping her chin with her finger and muttering something that sounded suspiciously like 'if you want to do something right, you've got to do it yourself'. This being Silverlake, though, Zorian had no idea if she was being serious or was just trying to piss him off.

"Well, never mind that, then," Silverlake shrugged. "Second idea, then. Did you two ever contemplate recruiting governments for help? They already have existing logistics and infrastructure, and the amount of resources even a minor statelet has at its disposal is vast."

"Yes, but we decided against it in the end," Zorian said. "Governments do things very slowly. Getting them to commit to anything worthwhile would take far more than a month, unless I was willing to use mind magic to speed things up. Which I'm not."

"Ah, but I wasn't suggesting you try to negotiate a deal with them or beg for handouts," Silverlake said with a grin. "All you have to do is 'leak' your potion formulas, research notes and other secrets to various governments and their research teams. Make it seem like they originate from their rivals and bitter enemies to light a fire under their ass and then simply stand back and watch what they do with it all. No need to convince them of anything – just dump things into their lap and swoop in at the end of the month to steal all their work."

That... might actually work.

"Huh," Zorian said. "You do raise a good point there."

"You shouldn't have said that," Kael said. "She'll be absolutely insufferable from now on."

Silverlake just cackled in obvious satisfaction.

"Well then," she said. "Do you want to hear the rest of my ideas?"

- break -

Once all of the preparations had been done, Zach and Zorian went to the address Quatach-Ichl had given them to contact him.

They had already discreetly checked the place out earlier and knew the place was actually just a small, seemingly-innocuous corner store. The ancient lich had never given them any secret phrases or contact methods, so they were a little mystified as to what they were supposed to do when they arrived there. Just call for Quatach-Ichl by name? However, it turned out that they need not have worried. The man behind the counter seemed to immediately know who they were and what they were at the moment he saw them. He pointed them towards a door to the storage room, which wasn't actually a storage room, where Quatach-Ichl had already been waiting for them. His black, metallic-looking skeleton just sat there on a chair in one corner of the room, tapping his fingers against his leg bone and observing them as they approached.

Well. That was kind of creepy. How the hell had the lich known they were coming? Surely he hadn't spent the whole day here, just in case they decided to drop by...?

"Wow, you were waiting for us all this time?" Zach said loudly, bluntly drawing attention to the fact. "We must really mean a lot to you."

"I left a spare body in here and 'jumped in', so to speak, when I was informed you were coming over," Quatach-Ichl said, rising from his chair and making a few casual gestures in the air. A cloud of ectoplasm rapidly condensed around the black bones and then solidified into a familiar fleshy guise. He smiled at them lightly. "Still... I will admit I was rather looking forward to this. After speaking to you that day, I couldn't help but check up on some things and I must say you're even more unusual than I thought."

"Oh?" Zach prompted.

"For instance, there is no evidence that you are anything other than regular human teenagers," Quatach-Ichl said. "I thought, before seeing you up-close, that you may be shapeshifters or possessor entities wearing teenage bodies. Having seen how perfectly your souls slot into your forms, I can effectively rule that out. I have also managed to get a better glimpse at what you are doing and I have to say... you are even more capable than I thought you were. It is really curious that you have managed to amass so much magical skill, money and contacts while being so young... and even more importantly, while evading the notice of people who keep an eye out for such things."

"Well, those people clearly aren't very good at their job because *someone* managed to organize an entire invasion right under their noses," Zach deadpanned. "In comparison to that, overlooking a couple of precocious teens is a minor matter, don't you think?"

"Ha! There is a lot of truth in what you're saying," Quatach-Ichl laughed. "The security around here is terrible. Still, the only reason we have been able to pull this off is that we have many of the local authorities infiltrated and that I secretly take care of... problematic elements. We are not completely undetected in the way you two appear to be. Furthermore, we are operating in 'impossible' fashion, using magics that nobody is aware are possible, and we have only recently ramped up our activities to their present level."

"So have we," Zach pointed out. "If you've been observing our activities as closely as you claim to have, you've surely realized we only started to ramp up after seeing you do the same."

"That's a curious way to put it," Quatach-Ichl said, cocking his head to the side in a questioning manner. "As far as I can tell, you didn't just ramp up your activities... it's more like you hardly even *existed* up until a few weeks ago. And many things you're pursuing have no conceivable

connection to stopping us.”

There was a brief silence as both sides quietly studied each other and their reactions.

“Well,” Zorian said eventually. “I hope you don’t expect an answer from us in that regard.”

“Oh no, of course not,” Quatach-Ichl said, shaking his head. “I’m just thinking out loud, that’s all. So. I presume you have an offer for me, yes?”

“Yes,” Zach nodded. “We want you to help us break into Eldemar’s royal treasury and retrieve the imperial artifact stored there.”

Quatach-Ichl gave them an incredulous look.

“Alright, you’ve got me there,” he said after a second. “I honestly didn’t expect that at all.”

What followed was an exhaustive, two hour long session of questions and answers where Zach and Zorian tried to prove to the ancient lich that they weren’t crazy for trying to pull this off. They showed Quatach-Ichl the various building plans and other information that they had gathered about the royal treasury in the past, pointing out that they already did most of the work and just needed his help with overcoming a few final hurdles.

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They weren’t lying, either. They actually already knew how to bypass most of the defenses without being detected, it was just that the final stretch of defenses was extremely closely guarded and was basically impossible to breach in secret. As far as they could tell, any opening of the treasury was automatically a big deal and sent an alarm to people in charge of defending it. This was even true for when the royals were going in. It was just that the official openings were always announced well in advance, so the guards knew to ignore the alarm in those occasions. Thus, Zach and Zorian needed to fight their way in after a certain point, stay inside long enough to find and claim the dagger, and then escape without getting trapped inside. This was beyond them at the moment, but if they had help from someone on the level of Quatach-Ichl, it might be enough for them to succeed.

Quatach-Ichl initially thought the idea of assaulting the royal treasury was stupid and bound to fail. He even accused them of trying to get him to sabotage his own invasion plot by drawing attention to himself in this manner. However, greed was a powerful motivator and once Quatach-Ichl realized that the break-in had a large chance of actually being successful, he started to seriously consider it.

There was a big problem with the negotiations, of course. Both sides wanted the imperial dagger. Sure, the royal treasury no doubt held all kinds of valuable treasures and documents, but very few of them were priceless in the same way that the dagger was. Quatach-Ichl had lived for more than a thousand years, and had all the money and mundane wealth he could possibly wish for. Some of the other artifacts stored inside could potentially be interesting, but it wasn’t a sure thing and they wouldn’t have time to sift through them all to pick the cream of the crop. No matter what they offered, Quatach-Ichl wouldn’t budge in the slightest. As far as he was concerned, they could have anything else in the treasury, so long as he got the one thing he truly cared about – the imperial dagger itself.

Truthfully, this was all according to plan. Zach and Zorian always knew Quatach-Ichl wouldn’t agree on a deal that would involve him giving up an imperial artifact. In fact, Zorian strongly suspected that Quatach-Ichl would immediately attack them once they were outside to claim the imperial orb from them as well. However, so long as they managed to break into the royal treasury proper, they did not care much. Even if they failed to wrest the dagger and the crown away from the lich in the aftermath, the whole thing would still have been worth it. This was because getting into the inside of the treasury would give them a chance to analyze the main wardstone that protected the entire complex, hopefully letting them outright bypass the defenses in the future.

Thus, they eventually ‘reluctantly’ agreed to let Quatach-Ichl claim the dagger in exchange for the first-claim right on everything else they encountered inside.

Quatach-Ichl gave them a strange look after that, not saying anything for a while, before suddenly turning more jovial and praising them for their ‘sensible attitude’. Half an hour later they hammered out a deal and agreed to meet in two days in Eldemar City...

- break -

Zach and Zorian were calmly walking through the treasury corridor, escorted by four stony-faced guards. They ignored the guards and employees they occasionally encountered along the way, behaving like their presence was completely natural. Three times they encountered invisible detection fields that would have announced their presence to ward supervisors deeper inside the treasury complex, and it took less than two minutes for Zorian to subvert each one into letting them pass without alerting anyone. After a while, they encountered an actual security checkpoint with a couple of mages and gun-wielding soldiers. Zach just casually greeted the group while Zorian flashed an access badge in front of their faces without saying anything. The guards gave them questioning, uncertain looks but didn’t bar their path. There was no official visit to the treasury scheduled, but the group was escorted by guards and had the symbol of royal authority. The group continued on.

Quatach-Ichl trailed after those two, observing everything curiously. After they put some distance between themselves and the security checkpoint, he decided to speak up.

“The mystery grows,” he commented, glancing at the four guards marching beside them. “These guards you have dominated into helping us have very few giveaways that they are being manipulated into doing this. No jerky movements, no hesitation... other than being a little overly serious,

there is no clue they are being controlled by another. I had no idea you were such a capable mind mage. If you had such abilities, wouldn't it be easier to manipulate someone with legitimate access to this place into secretly retrieving the dagger for you?"

"Impractical," Zorian said simply. He didn't want to explain that his ability to control people was really quite limited. He may be a powerful mind mage, but he never invested much effort into figuring out how to execute those kinds of long-term compulsions. Even the aranea considered that kind of 'deep mind editing' to be sinister and repellent, to say nothing of himself. His specialty was telepathic combat and memory reading, not enslavement.

"You know, Ulquaan Ibasa has much more relaxed laws regarding mind magic than any country on the continent," Quatach-Ichl lightly commented.

"Are you seriously trying to recruit me at a time like this?" Zorian asked incredulously.

"I'm just pointing out you'd get a lot more appreciation for your skills if you emigrated there," Quatach-Ichl shrugged.

Zorian said nothing in response. They soon reached the point of no return – the doorway that could not be opened without throwing the entire treasury into high alert.

Even opening the door was not easy. It was incredibly sturdy, as were the walls it was attached to – they could not be battered down with raw force or blown off their hinges. Two keys were required in order to open it, neither of which could be safely acquired, and using them required the presence of the Chief Treasurer, who had to lower the local wards in order for the keys to work. Even if everything was done correctly, the treasury opening alarm would still sound, and defenders would swarm over to see what was going on if no opening had been scheduled for the day.

There were other entrances to the royal treasury, including a 'secret' one that could be accessed through the dungeon, but all were defended just as heavily.

At the moment, the only solution Zach and Zorian had for this door was to outright attack the local wards until they shut down and then use the copies of the two keys they had produced earlier to open the door. Which kind of worked, but the local wards were no joke. Bringing them down was a very time consuming process for the two of them, leaving them low on mana and beset by every defender in the building.

"We're going to need your help here, as discussed," Zorian told the ancient lich.

Quatach-Ichl simply nodded absent-mindedly, studying the door in front of him

Then they began. All three of them started assaulting the warding scheme, subverting, negating and pushing back the defensive field. Zach and Zorian were both very good at defeating wards by now, but Quatach-Ichl completely blew them out of the competition there... and not just because of his monstrous mana reserves, either. His skill at dismantling magical defenses was incredible. In retrospect, it probably wasn't that unusual. The lich had been alive for more than a thousand years. He probably had deep knowledge and sophistication about every form of magic there was.

The warding scheme did not take their aggression passively. It was the type of ward that actively struck back against attackers and it pushed back against them endlessly. Waves of telekinetic pressure and temperature extremes assaulted them, strange rainbow light tried to put them to sleep and nearby decorative wall tiles exploded into clouds of miniature razors. They were undaunted. Zach and Zorian had known those defenses were there before they had even started, and all three of them were capable of easily defending themselves from attacks on this level.

By now, the entire treasury was in high alert and the first defenders were starting to approach them at high speed. Zach was about to direct some of his energies into dealing with them when Quatach-Ichl casually swept his arm backwards and fired one of those jagged red beams he was so fond of using onto the ceiling behind them. He must have hit something critical because the entire section of the corridor immediately caved in, showering everything in a thick cloud of dust and gravel and cutting them off from the approaching first wave of defenders.

"Pointless distractions," Quatach-Ichl said curtly. "Just focus on the wards."

The wards didn't last long after that. Once they were gone, Zach and Zorian inserted the keys into the door, which started to slowly open with a heavy grinding sound. There was no way to speed this up, but they didn't have to wait for it to fully open. The moment a small crack was produced between the door and the wall, Quatach-Ichl used some strange dimensional spell to twist the resulting opening into a man-sized portal. Zorian decided he really needed to learn that spell. Being able to effectively squeeze through even the tiniest opening was pretty neat.

Once they were through, they were faced with another problem. A pair of huge, hulking golems made out of some kind of glossy black material barred their path. They both held strange shotgun-like guns that fired metallic webs instead of bullets and they were incredibly resilient. They were clearly intended to keep intruders busy rather than actually kill them, so Zorian didn't think it was a good idea to try and tangle with them.

He deployed the palace orb, retrieved a pair of huge golems out of it and sent them to keep the treasury golems busy while they continued on.

"Interesting golem design," Quatach-Ichl commented. "I don't recognize the manufacturer."

After a second of thinking, Zorian decided he felt like bragging a little.

"I made them," he admitted.

"Oh? A man of many talents, I see," Quatach-Ichl said. "I must admit I always thought golem making was just a squeamish man's necromancy, but recent advances in the field are pretty impressive. Perhaps I might commission some work from you in the future."

The actual treasury wasn't just one giant room filled with gold coins and priceless magical artifacts, like Zorian had idly imagined. Instead it consisted of numerous individual vaults, each with its own reinforced door that had to be battered down to claim the contents inside. Nothing was clearly labeled, which meant that finding anything specific was a total chore unless you knew exactly where to go. Since Zach and Zorian had a marker that let them sense the dagger's location, though, it wasn't long before they managed to track it down. Quatach-Ichl claimed it immediately for himself, giving them a challenging look. The two of them had no intention of fighting the lich for the dagger, though. Or at least not in this place.

In any case, this dagger wasn't the only thing they wanted out of this place. They also wanted to locate the main ward stone of this place and it wouldn't hurt to also smash up a few more vaults to see if there was something particularly interesting inside. They both made a handful of simulacrum and sent them to scatter all over the place... but were caught a little off-guard when Quatach-Ichl proceeded to create enough simulacrum to accompany each one of theirs.

Apparently he did not trust them to have even their simulacrum out of sight. Or maybe he was just that curious about what they were up to. Either way, they decided not to make a big deal out of it and simply went about their work.

Eventually, they managed to find the main wardstone. It was hidden under the metal floor and shielded from most divinations, but Zorian managed to track it down anyway. He didn't have enough time to study it in great detail, and it couldn't be moved without destroying it, but even that brief examination gave him plenty of ideas for the future. The treasury wardstone was a real work of art, and Zorian definitely intended to come here again to take a few more looks at it.

As for the vaults, they held all sorts of wealth, rare materials and mysterious items... but it was really hard to figure out what was truly useful to them and what wasn't in the short amount of time they had. They ended up piling everything they recovered into the palace orb for later study and just forgot about them for now.

"That orb is much bigger and more convenient than I thought it would be," Quatach-Ichl's simulacrum mused idly beside. "I think I may have underestimated its usefulness just a little."

Quatach-Ichl actually had his own pocket dimension containers, but they were apparently a lot less expansive than their own, which meant he had to be much more selective about what to take from the place than they were.

Of course, the Eldemarian guards and military were anything but idle while they were doing that. It was less than five minutes before they managed to break through the collapsed corridor and four giant golems wrestling each other in the middle of a corridor, and then the fighting began.

In all honesty, they had probably stayed too long inside the treasury. Too many forces had rushed to the place, making it very hard for them to fight their way out and escape. They couldn't simply open a gate to outside with the simulacrum trick, because apparently the treasury wards were thorough enough to shut that idea down. The ward stone was too tough to be destroyed in any reasonable amount of time. If it were just Zach and Zorian, this may very well have been the end of this particular restart.

However, they had Quatach-Ichl on their side, and he had apparently already prepared a contingency for this kind of situation.

The only warning Zach and Zorian received about what was about to happen was when the sounds of distant screams and detonations started resounding in the distance, as if the treasury defenders were fighting another enemy outside as well as them. Before they could ask Quatach-Ichl what was happening, a nearby wall collapsed as a huge sphere of black metallic bones slammed directly into it and crushed it under its weight.

The sphere quickly uncoiled into a large, crocodilian skeleton that swept through nearby space with its tail, sending treasury defenders flying away like wooden toys. Fireballs, force blades, disintegration beams and a wide variety of grenades rained down on it immediately afterwards. Some of them were even doing damage.

But it was too little, too late. Before their attacks could deal anything more than superficial scratches, it noticed Quatach-Ichl and immediately barreled towards him.

"Please tell me that's a friend," Zach said.

"Ha! You can say it's a pet of sorts," Quatach-Ichl laughed. "Jump on it when it gets close and make sure you hold on. If you let go, you're on your own. There is no way I'm coming back for you."

If someone had told Zorian a few years earlier that he would be riding through the streets of Eldemar on the back of a giant skeletal crocodile-thing, after having robbed the royal treasury in the company of a thousand-year-old lich... well, he would have told them that they have an overactive imagination. Yet, that was exactly what had happened. Zach, Zorian and Quatach-Ichl managed to fight their way out of the treasury while riding the lich's 'pet' and simply kept rushing forward. By the end the poor crocodile thing ended up falling apart, having sacrificed itself to save them from one last coordinated spell barrage by the Eldemarian military, but by then they had already left the radius of the city wards and teleported away.

Now for the hardest part: dealing with Quatach-Ichl...

Zach, Zorian and Quatach-Ichl were hiding inside a small cave under a random field. It had been more than half a day since they had broken into the royal treasury, and they had the exact same problem that Zach and Zorian had had when they had made their attempt at the treasury in the past – somehow, the Eldemar forces were tracking them down everywhere they went.

[How annoying.] Zach commented to Zorian telepathically. [I was specifically paying attention for something like this and I never noticed any sort of tracking mark being placed on us or on any of our possessions.]

[I can't detect anything being done to our souls, either.] Zorian replied. [It's really frustrating. How exactly can they track us so unerringly? They clearly don't know our actual identities, just like they hadn't known in the previous restart we've done this, so it must be something like a tracking mark or magical tether. We're both experienced with detecting those kind of things, so why can't we find it?]

Quatach-Ichl, who was currently sitting on the floor of the cave in complete silence, looked like he was engaged in some kind of intense meditation. Zorian could tell through his soul perception, however, that Quatach-Ichl seemed to be doing some rather intense personal soul searching. He could tell because the lich's soul was usually perfectly calm and controlled, but now it churned and pulsed as if caught in a storm. Presumably the lich thought the tracking method had been placed on their souls and was trying to locate it. Zorian had done the same with no results, so he didn't get his hopes up that Quatach-Ichl would find anything this way, but it was worth a shot. At least he wasn't flipping out and trying to kill them for dragging him into this mess.

Maybe if they—

“It's a tether made out of divine energies,” Quatach-Ichl suddenly said, rising from the floor of the cave and dusting himself off.

“Divine energies?” Zorian repeated incredulously.

“Like the ones that make up my soul stabilization frame and power divine artifacts,” Quatach-Ichl said. “There must be an item somewhere in that building that automatically connects to the soul of any being that comes within a certain distance of it. How insidious. If I didn't have so much experience sensing the piece of divine magic in my own soul, I would have never been able to detect it.”

Damn it, divine magics were so unfair. No wonder they hadn't been able to find the way the Eldemar authorities were tracking them...

“Can you sever it?” Zach asked.

Quatach-Ichl shook his head. “Perceiving divine energies is one thing. Affecting them is another. I have no way to get rid of the tether, although I can tell it's not permanent. It will eventually weaken and fade away.”

“Eventually being...?” Zach tried.

“A couple of weeks at least,” Quatach-Ichl said calmly.

“You are too calm,” Zorian pointed out. “Clearly you have already found a solution.”

“Yes,” Quatach-Ichl said smugly. “The tether may be made out of divine energies, but it ultimately has the same weakness that all such magical tethers have – a maximum distance it can support before it snaps. If we go outside the range of the item we are tethered to, the magic will break and we'll be free to enjoy our ill-gotten gains.”

“Ah,” Zach said. “Wow, this is easier than we thought, then!”

“Of course, being made by a divine artifact, the tether no doubt has a downright absurd maximum range it can support... and Eldemar's authorities will probably take the anchor item out of the treasury to keep us in range of the effect if they notice us trying to break the tether this way. So not only do we have to travel extremely far away from here, we must do it so quickly that Eldemar's authorities cannot keep up with us.”

Zach and Zorian looked at each other before turning back to the grinning lich. He probably thought he had them – that they had no method of traversing vast distances quickly enough and that he would be able to squeeze some kind of concession out of them in exchange for helping them break the tethers on their own souls.

Well... he was wrong.

“I don't see the issue here,” Zorian shrugged.

“No?” Quatach-Ichl asked. “I'm not sure you understand... just teleporting around a little isn't—”

“No, we get it,” interjected Zach. “It's just that, no matter how ridiculous the range of this tether is, going to Xlotic is probably enough to make it snap. And if not that, then we can just continue on to Koth instead.”

Quatach-Ichl stared at them with an uncertain look on his face.

“Do you want to come with us?” Zorian asked innocently. “It probably isn't so easy for you to put so much distance between yourself and Eldemar on such a short notice.”

“Yeah, you've helped us a lot tonight, so it's only right for us to do something for you too,” Zach nodded, playing along.

They didn't actually expect Quatach-Ichl to agree to their suggestion. After all, going with them involved stepping through a dimensional portal without knowing where it really led. That wasn't something you did unless you thoroughly trusted the other person, and Quatach-Ichl didn't even trust them enough to leave their simulacrum wandering around unsupervised.

They opened a portal to Xlotic, and Quatach-Ichl followed after them, surprisingly calm. He did not comment at all on the fact they knew how to cast something as rare and difficult as a dimensional gate, or the fact they arranged for said gate to open to another continent on a moment's notice. He simply observed everything around them, his eyes sweeping over the desert horizon with a thoughtful expression.

"Cities to rubble, fields to dust..." he murmured quietly. "What a depressing sight."

Hum. Zorian had never really thought about it before, but Quatach-Ichl was probably the only living person that had seen Xlotic as it had been before the Cataclysm.

In any case, Quatach-Ichl then closed his eyes and once more started sensing his soul for the tether. He opened his eyes ten minutes later and nodded to them.

"It's gone now," he said. His voice was devoid of any trace of joy or satisfaction, though, which set off some alarms in Zorian's mind. "Apparently Xlotic is far enough that the tether ended up breaking when we crossed over here through the gate. Or maybe once the gate closed behind us. Can the tether maintain connection through a dimensional gate, even if the people are far outside its range in terms of actual distance? Interesting stuff. Too bad this is hard to reproduce and study. And too bad none of this is real, no?"

Zorian couldn't stop himself from flinching a little at that statement. Quatach-Ichl narrowed his eyes at the movement.

"I thought so," he said, voice serious. He started to slowly circle around them, eyes never breaking contact with them. Like a predator. Zach and Zorian assumed fighting stances, but did not make any aggressive moves. "I should have figured it out earlier. I really should have. The fact everyone got cut off from the spirit planes all of a sudden should have been a massive warning as to what was happening, but it sounded so incredulous that human beings could cause something so grand in scope and effect. When I found that the aranea beneath Cyoria had suddenly dropped dead one day, I was just happy an obstacle had disappeared and did not think about it as hard as I should. It was only when I talked to you that things started to become clear... but I, in my arrogance, refused to see the truth."

"We have no idea what you're talking about, bag of bones," Zach growled at him.

"It all clicked when you just casually opened a dimensional gate to another continent," Quatach-Ichl continued, ignoring his claim. "There had been something about your attitude that had bothered me right from the start, when I first talked to you in that tavern, but it is only now that it starts to make sense. You showed up out of nowhere, loaded with money and skills that make no sense in light of your past and age... like two adult mages badly pretending to be a couple of teenagers. You are fine with giving up divine artifacts in exchange for information and throw huge amounts of money on speculative research... as if material possessions don't matter to you, only knowledge. You don't like me killing people, but you have no problems butchering Eldemar treasury guards to get what you want... like those guards were never actually real to begin with."

Quatach-Ichl stopped his circling. Silence descended on the whole scene for several seconds, with nobody saying anything. Though everything was still and quiet, tension invisibly started to ratchet up.

"This whole thing... is some kind of giant illusion, isn't it?" Quatach-Ichl finally concluded. They said nothing, and the lich took their silence as a confirmation of his idea. "I should have seen it sooner, but I was too full of myself. How could I, mighty Quatach-Ichl, be snared into some kind of illusion like that? I instinctively rejected the truth until it was staring at me right in the face. But now... now I'm going to have some answers. Some *real* answers!"

He attacked, his organic guise melting away to reveal the black skeleton wreathed in green light that lurked beneath the skin.

They were ready for him.

Quatach-Ichl immediately went for soul magic this time, not even bothering with disintegrators and energy spells. Presumably because, while he wasn't actually certain how this 'illusion' he was caught in worked, he had already noticed Zach and Zorian did not seem to value physical things much and thus suspected these weren't their real bodies. If he wanted to defeat them, he needed to aim for their souls.

Well... he was kind of right about that, but Zach and Zorian had come here prepared. Their souls were fortified with defensive wards and they were not as defenseless and terrified in the face of soul magic as they once were.

Pulses of ghostly light assaulted them, but they warded them off with some effort. They responded with more mundane attack spells like incineration rays, ground liquefaction spells, destructive black blades of spatial force and so on. Quatach-Ichl defended himself with haste, force fields and animated sand creatures, but responded solely with soul magic attacks.

After a few exchanges, Zach and Zorian decided to reveal the next layer of their preparations – the trap wards they had placed on the area beforehand. The truth was, Quatach-Ichl really was kind of stupid for following them here through an unknown portal, because this was one of the several places where Zach and Zorian had prepared a trap for him. Granted, they had thought they would have to force him here through the gate, but this way worked too.

However, Quatach-Ichl had evidently prepared himself too. Before the wards could fully activate, the ancient lich removed one of his 'decorative' bracelets and crushed it.

Four cubical constructs made out of black bones materialized around Quatach-Ichl, emerging from some kind of hidden pocket dimension the lich kept around him. Each of them had four skulls embedded into their sides, their eye sockets burning with a dim green flame. Through his soul perception, Zorian could detect that each skull held a trapped soul inside of it. Powerful ones too – they had probably been harvested from talented and experienced mages, not some random bystander.

The skull cubes pulsed, seemingly synchronizing with each other, and started unfolding into their own warding scheme, beginning to overpower the ones Zorian and Silverlake prepared in this place.

Well. Time to go all-out, then. Zorian deployed the palace orb and summoned Alanic, Silverlake and Xvim, who had been patiently waiting there for just this moment.

The fight quickly heated up, spells flying left and right. Quatach-Ichl was forced to give up on using exclusively soul magic to attack them. Soul magic had never been especially suitable for actual fights, which was why Quatach-Ichl didn't usually use soul magic as his first resort. Now, faced with five dangerous enemies, he could no longer afford to use such suboptimal tactics.

Zorian expected Quatach-Ichl to retreat at this point. He could no doubt tell he had no chance of winning this fight, and those skull cubes floating in the sky were effectively negating the trap wards that Zorian and Silverlake placed on the area to keep him from simply teleporting or flying away.

But Quatach-Ichl didn't do that. He kept fighting like a man possessed, throwing vast amounts of mana into every single spell. Finally, after a particularly well-executed haste spell, Quatach-Ichl managed to produce a wind gust spell sufficiently powerful to lift them off their feet and scatter them. Normally they would have glued their feet to the ground to prevent that, but the sand of the Xlotic desert simply wasn't hard enough to let them do that – something they hadn't realized until it was too late.

Quatach-Ichl immediately followed it up with a huge pulse of soul magic that aimed to stop everyone in the vicinity. Zorian fortified his soul immediately before it hit... and then realized it was just a distraction.

Before anyone could recover from the wind blast, Quatach-Ichl hasted himself again and thrust his hand towards Xvim, hitting him with two spells in quick succession. The first was a powerful dispel which stripped the man of all his personal defense spells... including his mind blank. The second was some kind of mind magic spell.

Shit...

Zorian didn't hesitate. He immediately used his telepathy to plunge into Xvim's currently unprotected mind and started a mental tug of war with Quatach-Ichl, trying to eject the lich from his mentor's mind.

The spell Quatach-Ichl had cast was some kind of memory probe, he quickly realized. Powerful, but very crude and destructive by Zorian's standards. It probably hadn't done any permanent damage to Xvim yet, but it probably would if this continued for long. Thankfully, although Quatach-Ichl appeared to be very good at mind magic, he was still using a structured spell and didn't have that much experience in actual telepathic combat. Soon, the lich decided to retreat from Xvim's mind on his own.

Alanic recovering and trying to melt him down with a massive fire spell probably had a lot to do with that. Not even Zorian could trawl through someone's memories and pay attention to a fight at the same time.

In any case, Zorian suspected that Quatach-Ichl had gotten what he wanted out of Xvim's mind in the end. His body appearance was hard to read, but he looked like he was a little... rattled.

"Wait!" Quatach-Ichl said. "Stop!"

They didn't stop, of course. Not until he suddenly took his crown off his head and threw it on the ground in front of them. And then did the same with the imperial dagger they retrieved from the Eldemar's royal treasury.

Huh. Zach and Zorian signaled the others to stop fighting for a moment.

"Take them," he said.

"You're just going to give them to us?" Zach asked curiously.

"We both know they are meaningless to me," Quatach-Ichl said curtly.

"How much did you glean from those memories you stole?" Zorian asked curiously.

He glanced towards Xvim, but his mentor gave no indication that the experience had shaken him up to any significant extent.

"Enough to know how meaningless this all is. At least for people like me," Quatach-Ichl said, sounding a little defeated. He laughed hollowly. "Ha ha ha! You really got me good! I have to say, if you just—"

It only took a moment for them to be caught off-guard. They had unconsciously relaxed a little after Quatach-Ichl seemingly gave up and no longer made aggressive moves, and the lich immediately took advantage of it. He once again put himself under the effect of haste and then rushed straight at them, literally running up to them... and then he exploded.

Later, Zorian would wonder what exactly tipped him off and made him immediately activate his marker's restart switch when he realized Quatach-Ichl was rushing at them. Was it because he unconsciously sensed something through his soul perception? Because of some unexplainable hunch? All he knew was that, when Quatach-Ichl started detonating his own soul in that last suicide attack, Zorian had already initiated the restart ending protocol.

They still ended up being caught by part of the blast before the restart ended. Zorian's soul was engulfed in a soul-corroding, excruciatingly painful blast of spiritual energies before everything went dark.

His last thought was that he hadn't even known a soul could be detonated like that...

84. Powerless

Chapter 084 Powerless

Zorian slowly awoke in his bed in Cirin. His head was fuzzy, his body hurt all over and he had trouble remembering what he had been doing in the previous restart. Confused and in pain, he remained lying in bed for a time, fading in and out of consciousness.

Gradually, his mind began to clear up and he started to get concerned. Something was wrong. Yeah, he was feeling absolutely terrible, but it was more than that. Something was subtly off about this situation, and it was really starting to bother him.

‘Oh, right,’ it suddenly dawned on him. ‘Kirielle didn’t wake me up by jumping on me. I woke up on my own with no one else in sight. That shouldn’t be possible unless something has gone very, very wrong...’

The moment he realized this, it was as if something clicked inside his mind and it all came back to him. The sudden visit of Quatach-Ichl, the theft of the dagger from the royal vaults with his help, the final battle they had against the ancient lich and the insidious soul attack he used just before the restart ended... the memories flooded into his mind suddenly and without end. The process was forceful and alien, as if *something* was shoving these thoughts directly into his brain with little regard to his wellbeing. The waves of pain and nausea radiating from his damaged soul suddenly intensified, and he barely managed to roll himself out of bed before vomiting his guts out all over the floor of his room.

Dimly, he was aware that Kirielle rushed inside when he started making noise and then rushed back out screaming for mother to come and help, but he was in no position to react to that. It took all of his strength just to remain conscious and weather the pain. His soul felt like it was going to split apart, and he instinctively knew that it would be a terrible mistake for him to black out at the moment. He and Zach had long theorized that their soul synchronized somehow with their body at the start of every restart, interfacing with their life force and rearranging their brains to account for the memories they gathered over the restarts, and it looked as if this was true... except that in its current state, it was no longer capable of smoothly completing that process. Without Zorian’s conscious efforts to stabilize his soul, it would not only ravage his body and mind but possibly also injure itself further in its fumbling.

If he lost consciousness now, who knew when he was going to wake up next? A small, panicked part of his mind feared he had already spent the majority of their remaining restarts in a soul damage induced coma, but he shoved that thought aside for now. This wasn’t the time to worry about that. For now, all he could do was grit his teeth and deal with the problem at hand.

He didn’t know how much time he spent in that state, shivering on the floor of his room as he fought to stay awake, but eventually Mother and Kirielle rolled him over onto a blanket and carried him off to a guest room to recover in. Somehow, he managed to persist through it all until his soul finally calmed down. When he finally recovered enough to talk, he found out that it was still the first day of the restart. He had failed to react when Kirielle came to wake him up, and stayed that way for about two hours before waking up. Mother and Kirielle seemed shaken at the severity of his apparent illness, and refused to let him get up and walk around on his own in the aftermath. They also called for a local healer to come and check up on him, which was very annoying yet perfectly reasonable in light of what happened, so he could hardly object to it.

Predictably, the healer failed to find anything really wrong with him. He was not a mage, just a local who knew how to recognize common illnesses and hand out appropriate potions in response. He failed to find anything seriously wrong with Zorian, so he simply suggested that they watch him closely for a few days to make sure it didn’t happen again. Mother was rather unhappy with his ‘uselessness’, but she did seem more at ease after receiving the diagnosis.

When they finally left him alone for a while, he decided to chance things and reached into his marker, even though he knew the action would aggravate his soul damage somewhat. He had to know how many restarts they still had left.

The marker told him he still had 25 iterations left, which caused Zorian to breathe a sigh of relief. He didn’t lose any of the restarts, it seemed.

Unfortunately, this was where the good news ended. The damage Quatach-Ichl’s last attack did to his soul meant that he was currently completely incapable of casting anything – attempting to perform even the simplest of shaping exercises caused his soul to radiate waves of pain and nausea throughout his whole body in protest. Though this would go away in time, he estimated it would take at least three months before he was back in his top form. Perhaps as much as four or five months if circumstances forced him to push things and he kept aggravating his injuries.

Zorian suddenly realized that he relied on his magic for practically everything these days. He had already forgotten what it was like to be a weak, mundane teenager. Even coming up with a plan for going forward that didn’t involve the use of a teleport spell was hard...

Damn it. He doubted Zach was any better off than he was, considering he had yet to visit Zorian after so many hours into the restart, so this was pretty much a total disaster. Even though they hadn’t spent any of the restarts in a coma, the inability to use magic was going to sharply limit their options in the upcoming restarts. There was no way they would dare approach Silverlake or Quatach-Ichl with an obviously damaged soul like this, for instance. Additionally, the ancient lich may be able to recognize the soul damage as having been done by himself in some fashion – Zorian had no idea how one would go about doing that, as he found no traces of foreign soul fragments in his soul, but he wasn’t a millennia-old lich like Quatach-Ichl.

He sighed. He had really underestimated the ancient lich. He probably should have been raging internally at the amount of grief he caused them, but in all honesty? Zorian found himself kind of impressed by the decisiveness and ruthlessness Quatach-Ichl had displayed. It took mere moments for Quatach-Ichl to decide, after seeing Xvim’s memories, that the time loop was real and that he should sacrifice everything to hit them where it hurt

the most. Most people would be doubtful at the information they received or too shocked to think clearly, but Quatach-Ichl didn't hesitate at all to sacrifice his own soul in an attempt to take them down.

Zorian could see the logic. Without Zach and Zorian mucking things up, Quatach-Ichl was pretty much guaranteed to get what he wanted out of the invasion of Cyoria, and potentially cooperating with them had little appeal to him. Possibility of betrayal aside, he was a thousand-year-old lich – what use did he have for a measly decade or two? Still, knowing all of this intellectually, and being able to disregard self-preservation in order to pull off a suicide move... those were two entirely different things. Zorian had no idea that a person could detonate the outer layer of one's soul in order to launch a massive suicide attack on the souls of everyone in the vicinity, but even if he did, he would not have expected Quatach-Ichl to use such a maneuver after less than a minute of consideration. Zorian knew that he would be unable to act so boldly if he had found himself in Quatach-Ichl's shoes, and it boggled his mind that a lich – people that are typically obsessed with personal survival at all costs – was able to steel himself into pulling off a suicide move so easily.

Well. Putting that aside, he suddenly realized he had a tricky problem on his hands. Namely, he had to find a way to convince Mother to let him go to Cyoria so he could check up on Zach. From what he remembered, the last time he failed to wake up in time it was due to the Sword Diver attack in one of the restarts, and he had to remain in Cirin for the rest of the month to make Mother calm down and let him out of her sight. This time the situation looked much worse, and he needed to convince her to trust him far more than she had been willing to the last time around.

He could already feel his headache getting worse.

- break -

It took two whole days of constant nagging and arguments before Zorian was able to convince Mother to let him go. He thought about just boarding a train when she wasn't looking, but the look in her eyes made him suspect she would drop everything and follow after him if he tried that. She could be remarkably stubborn that way. Strangely, it was Father who ended up helping him by arguing in his favor. He actually seemed impressed that Zorian was willing to push through his sickness and keep attending classes, and ended up helping him convince Mother to let him go to Cyoria. It was a very surreal experience to Zorian, since he couldn't remember the last time his father took his side or approved of his choices. He didn't know how to feel about that.

In any case, Mother eventually relented on the whole issue, though she did insist he take Kirielle with him. So she could 'keep an eye on him', supposedly. It was amusing to see her pause in surprise when he immediately agreed to her request.

The journey was a bit of an unpleasant shock to him. Robbed of his magic and still plagued with phantom pains and tremors, he struggled to carry their luggage and they both ended up getting caught in the rain for a while before they sought shelter in a nearby inn. He ended up renting a tiny, overpriced room for a single night, since the rain wouldn't be stopping any time soon.

Kirielle wouldn't stop complaining about getting wet for nearly an hour and screamed like a baby when she saw a particularly large cockroach crawling along the wall of their room.

Being unable to access his vast magic abilities was an unusual and very unpleasant experience.

The next day, he brought Kirielle to Imaya's place. Thankfully, she did not make too much of an issue out of their arrival, even though Zorian had not arranged for anything with Ilsa in this particular restart.

Then he went searching for Zach.

He quickly realized this wouldn't be as easy as he imagined. Zach was, he soon found out, officially missing. Tesen Zveri, Zach's legal guardian, was organizing a search for him and called for anyone who had any information about his whereabouts to contact him immediately.

That was... very familiar. Almost nostalgic, really. It was pretty much the same situation that he had faced during the first few restarts after he got pulled into the time loop.

He wondered what that meant. Was this some kind of additional time loop safeguard that kept the controller gone until they recovered, or was this just Zach's guardian freaking out about finding a comatose Zach and faking a disappearance? Personally, Zorian would bet on the latter. Quite a few people apparently knew how inappropriate Tesen's handling of Noveda's affairs was, so if Zach were to fall mysteriously unconscious all of a sudden, he would be one of the prime suspects. Zorian could totally see Tesen fearing that the coma would be blamed on him and faking a disappearance until he can decide what to do, much like Jornak did with Veyers.

In any case, it was relatively easy to prove which one of the options was correct. Zach and Zorian both had a marker with an identical key, and Zorian knew a tracking ritual that would let him locate his fellow time traveler with ease.

All he had to do now was find someone to help him cast it. Because he was currently incapable of doing it himself.

Gods, he hated this restart so much...

- break -

The room was silent. Zorian was supremely calm and collected, staring Xvim right in the eyes despite the look of annoyance present on his mentor's face.

"So let me see if I got you correctly," Xvim said. "You are a time traveler, you fought a millennia-old lich with Zach in the previous version of this month that I can't remember, your soul has been damaged so you conveniently can't demonstrate any of this amazing magic you apparently know and now you want me to help you rescue Zach from the evil clutches of Tesen – his legal guardian who is secretly behind his recent disappearance, despite organizing a nation-wide search for the kid."

Zorian considered it for a second.

"Yes, that's pretty much what I'm saying," he nodded.

"Get out of my office."

- break -

Ilsa carefully studied the stack of papers in front of her, one hand propping up her chin while using the other to slowly tap her finger against the desk in a steady rhythm.

Zorian patiently waited for her to finish reading. If this didn't work, he would have to take a risk and seek magical assistance through black market channels. Dealing with criminals while being essentially powerless was taking quite a bit of a risk, but there was nothing he could do. He needed to know what was going on with Zach.

"So all I need to do is cast this spell on you and tell you what the results say?" Ilsa eventually asked, giving him a suspicious look.

"That's right," Zorian nodded.

"It looks like a tracking spell," she noted.

"It is a tracking spell," Zorian confirmed.

Ilsa raised an eyebrow at him.

"Dare I ask what it's supposed to track, then?" she asked.

"It's kind of personal," Zorian said, doing his best to look depressed and desperate. "I'm afraid my friend has gone missing. Please, Miss Zileti. You know I'm not a troublemaker student and I don't ask for much. It... it would mean a world to me if you did this for me!"

Ilsa snorted derisively at him.

"Hmph! You need to work on your acting skills, Mister Kazinski," she told him. "That aside... I had professor Chao tell me about a strange little visit from you recently."

Ugh. He was still kind of annoyed that Xvim was so unwilling to entertain his claims. Being implausibly good at magic was apparently really important for convincing the man there was something to his crazy time travelling claims. Well, convincing him quickly, in any case. He could probably wear down the man's skepticism with a lot of time and effort, but he didn't want to wait that long to tackle this problem.

"Is this friend of yours Zach Noveda, perhaps?" Ilsa tried after he didn't say anything for a while.

"He could be," Zorian shrugged.

"Zorian..." Ilsa sighed, folding her fingers into a triangle in front of her. "Putting aside that I have never really heard of you interacting much with mister Noveda in the past... what if you're right? What if Zach has really been kidnapped by his caretaker and taken somewhere? I cast the tracking spell and give you the location. What do you do with it? How can an academy student like you handle the guards and the security measures that this place would undoubtedly have and rescue Zach?"

Zorian internally debated the merits of explaining to her that his plan was to simply hire black market mercenaries to do the parts he himself could not, but eventually decided it was a bad idea. He had no real excuses in regards to where he got all the money needed to hire such people or why he thought he could judge their skills and character well enough to identify which of them are worth hiring and which aren't.

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"You don't have to worry about it," he told her, giving her a reassuring smile. "I'm just trying to find a friend. I'm sure it won't be all that difficult."

She gave him an unamused look. Yeah, he probably should have just gone to the black market right from the start instead of bothering with this...

Contrary to his expectations, though, she didn't just throw him out of her office immediately after.

"Give me two days, okay?" she eventually told him. "I need to speak with the academy leadership about this."

"Huh?" Zorian said, surprised. "I'm not sure I understand. Why would you need to kick this up so high? It's just a tracking spell..."

"And let you get in over your head and disappear as well? I don't think so," Ilsa said. "If we're going to do this, we may as well go all the way. Besides... mister Noveda is a student of our institution. It is well within our rights to try and locate him if he goes missing."

She pushed the stack of papers towards him and tapped it a couple of times for emphasis.

"Now..." she said, "explain to me how exactly this tracking spell works and why you think it can find mister Noveda when so many professional diviners have tried and failed to do the same."

- break -

It was fascinating to watch how quickly and effectively the academy could mobilize itself when it really cared about something. Perhaps it was because the House Noveda had some secret ally among the academy leadership or because the academy saw the whole situation as a chance to score some free reputation points, but they really did assemble a team to go check up on the location Zorian would provide them with.

He'd be lying if he said he wasn't a little intimidated by the attention suddenly directed at him. For one thing, he wasn't actually completely certain the tracking spell would work. While he personally didn't think it very likely, it was still possible that Zach's disappearance was really just some sort of time loop safeguard and that he was literally nowhere to be found. It would be quite awkward if that happened.

Thankfully, the tracking spell worked just fine. Zach was just outside of Cyoria, in one of the smaller private estates that technically wasn't owned by Tesen but could be connected to his family if one looked deeper. The group assembled by the academy immediately stormed the place, presenting official-looking authorization documents when questioned about their motives and identity. There were guards in place, but they were apparently not paid enough to face off against a numerically superior force from a well-known institution and they quickly decided to stand down and give them free rein. The secret basement Zach was being held in was cunningly hidden, but since Zorian was there to serve as a living tracking device, it was simple enough to find it anyway.

Zach was in a soul-damage induced coma, just like Zorian expected him to be. Due to his inability to cast anything, including soul diagnosis spells, he couldn't be sure why Zach had ended up in a worse state than he did, but he had his suspicions. Zach's control over his own soul was much weaker and cruder than Zorian's, as was his ability to retain mental discipline. If he woke up early on in the restart like Zorian did and had to fight to stay awake and prevent his soul from going berserk...

Well. Even Zorian found that struggle to be a challenging one.

In any case, Zorian was now presented with a new problem. Even though he had been crucial in tracking down Zach, he now couldn't access his unconscious body at all! The discovery of his unconscious body had kicked up a media storm that didn't look like it was going to die down any time soon and he had been transferred to an expensive hospital and placed under guard. Zorian was not a family member, nor did he have any other known links to the Noveda heir, and many people were suddenly questioning his involvement in all this. The academy was taking his side for now, but Ilsa told him things were a bit delicate at the moment. Tesen was trying to distance himself from the matter, bitterly denying he had anything to do with Zach's coma or imprisonment outside of Cyoria, and his faction pushing hard for Zorian to be arrested so he could be 'vigorously questioned'.

No matter. Even if Zorian could see Zach, what would he do with his unconscious body? Before he visited Zach in the hospital, he had to figure out how to accelerate his healing. Who knew how long it would take for Zach to wake up if he had to rely on his natural rate of recovery? Fortunately, this was something he could actually tackle with his current abilities.

Sudomir, just like many necromancers, often ended up damaging his soul in various ways while training and practicing his craft. As such, he had invested a lot of time in tracking down methods of accelerating his recovery, and Zorian had made sure to steal most of these out of his head during their interrogation sessions. A lot of these were purely personal soul magic exercises that were useful only to the soul mage using them, or complex ritual spells that he wasn't capable of casting right now, but a few actually came in the form of potions that could be administered to others.

And alchemy did not require any mana shaping. His inability to do magic did not hold him back here in the slightest. So long as he could track down and buy the appropriate materials, he would be able to create the potions in question.

Getting materials for such a relatively exotic potion was anything but easy, of course. Many of them were not sold on the open market, and even if they were Zorian did not have enough money on him to buy them. He thought about robbing invader caches again, but his lack of magic made that a far riskier proposition than it usually was. Additionally, he had attracted quite a bit of attention to himself lately, so going out for a little midnight stealing was probably unwise. Thus, he ended up amassing the necessary funds the hard way – he bought a bunch of raw materials with his available money, made a handful of rare, hard-to-make potions with them, sold them for money, used that money to buy even more raw materials, and so on. It took him a week of that to get enough money to buy what he *actually* wanted, and then another four days before he had managed to track it all down and finished the potions.

The end result was three different bottles, one holding a milky white liquid, another a blood red syrup that looked as if it was constantly boiling and the last one a glossy, pitch black pill that floated in the center of the bottle as if weightless.

He took all three of them and departed in the direction of the hospital that held Zach. He was still not allowed to visit him, but who cared about that? Through a strategic use of sleep bombs and other disabling potions, he managed to gain access to Zach's room, after which he proceeded to force-feed the three soul cures to his unconscious body, one after another.

He immediately left afterwards. It would take a while for the potions to actually take effect, and it would be best if he were far away from the

scene of the crime when people found the trail of unconscious bodies he had left in his wake.

- break -

The news of the second ‘attack’ on Zach while he was in the hospital kicked up another round of controversy and several dramatic vows by the hospital staff and city authorities that the perpetrator was going to be caught any day now. Considering that not even Zorian’s worst detractors seemed to suspect him as the perpetrator made him rather doubtful of that claim, though. One amusing detail was that the hospital claimed they had caught the attacker in the act and ‘heroically fought him off’, which was why Zach supposedly hadn’t been hurt more as a result of the break-in.

While he waited to see what the result of his intervention would turn out to be, Zorian looked into what had happened to Alanic, since the battle priest was one of the few competent and reliable soul mages he knew of. Sadly, with Zorian being unable to teleport and busy with the whole Zach situation, he never did intervene to save Alanic from Sudomir’s assassins, so by the time he checked up on him the man was already dead. Frustrating. It did make him kind of curious how those assassins were even capable of killing someone of Alanic’s caliber. Investigating the case a little revealed he was essentially ambushed while sleeping, allowing his attackers to kill him before he even realized what was going on. That... kind of made sense, yeah. If Zorian saved Lukav, Sudomir panicked and acted prematurely, trying to kill Alanic through sheer force before Lukav could contact him and tell him someone was killing people like them. If the assassination of Lukav went through without issues, Sudomir would act with due caution and planning and kill Alanic in his sleep.

In any case, the treatment worked far better than he had hoped – four days after he fed Zach those potions, his fellow time traveler woke up from the coma. Not long after that, he demanded to see Zorian, which pretty much shut down any further attempts to keep Zorian from visiting the hospital.

“How are you feeling?” Zorian asked his fellow time traveler.

“Like crap,” Zach grumbled. He gave Zorian a suspicious look. “I heard you’re the one who tracked me down after my asshole caretaker just stuffed my unconscious body down in some basement. I guess I should thank you for that, but... how are you so much better off than me? Did you not get caught in the blast or something?”

“You know our conversation is probably being eavesdropped, right?” Zorian asked him.

“So? Just put up a privacy ward on the room and be done with it,” Zach told him.

“I can’t,” Zorian sighed. “I can’t really cast anything right now.”

Zach was quiet for a few seconds.

“Ah,” he said finally. “I guess you didn’t get off as lightly as it appears. You probably don’t want to hear this, but that kind of makes me glad. I kind of prefer it when you have to suffer through this crap with me.”

“Jerk,” Zorian said, though there was no real heat in it.

“Yeah, yeah... but seriously, why are you already walking around while I can’t even stand up without vomiting all over myself?”

“I’m not sure, but... do you perhaps remember waking up in your own room for a moment before losing consciousness again?” Zorian asked him. Zach frowned.

“It’s hard to remember,” he said after a few seconds. “Maybe?”

“Hm. Well, we’re going to have to continue this particular topic when you get out of the hospital,” Zorian told him. “Can you estimate how long it will be before you’re back in top form?”

Zach frowned. “I don’t know. Four, five months? Something like that.”

Zorian breathed a sigh of relief. Although Zach’s condition was worse than his own, it would seem it still wasn’t *too* bad...

“Is there something urgent you need right now?” Zorian asked him. “As you can imagine, my ability to acquire things is a bit limited at the moment, but I’ll do my best.”

“All I want right now is to be out of this damn hospital,” Zach grumbled. “But I don’t think that’s going to happen before the end of the month, considering what I’ve overheard, and neither of us has the ability to force the issue right now.”

It was as Zach said. He spent the rest of the restart trapped in the hospital while Zorian had to dodge increasingly insistent questions about his involvement in the ‘Zach affair’ and his personal activities.

Thankfully, before those things could really get anywhere, the summer festival had arrived and the restart came to an end.

- break -

The next five restarts were relatively relaxed. With their souls so heavily damaged and their spellcasting impaired, Zach and Zorian couldn’t really

do anything particularly dangerous or strenuous, lest their recovery be prolonged even further or their soul damage become permanent.

Whether it was Zach or Zorian, they had no choice but to patiently wait for their souls to heal, so they gave up on doing anything serious and decided to just have fun and work on some of their easier skills. A part of Zorian was aghast at taking a break with their time steadily running out as it was, but forcing themselves would gain them little while risking a lot so he did his best to suppress it.

Unexpectedly, having his soul damaged actually ended up being quite a boon to Zorian's skill with soul perception and soul magic in general. It allowed him to map out his soul in far greater detail and enhanced his understanding of how souls generally functioned. There were some things that were very hard to notice when things were going smoothly, and some pieces of the soul were far easier to comprehend when one compared intact and damaged versions of the soul to one another. He knew from reading Sudomir's mind that necromancers often deliberately mutilated other people's souls for that exact reason, destructively studying the anatomy of the soul to enhance their own skills, but one could never really perceive foreign souls on the same level of detail as one could perceive their own. As far as Zorian knew, no soul mage was crazy enough to deliberately damage their own soul as heavily as Zach and Zorian had gotten theirs damaged just to enhance their knowledge of soul mechanics, so their current opportunity was somewhat unique.

Although Zach started from a lower level, his skill in regards to personal soul perception also grew by leaps and bounds in this period, since he invested a huge amount of effort into it – much more than Zorian himself. The fact that he had ended up worse in the wake of Quatach-Ichl's soul attack seemed to have affected him greatly.

Aside from soul magic, the two of them also worked on their basic shaping skills and tinkered rather heavily with alchemy, since this was the one magical discipline that hadn't been affected by their injuries in the slightest.

They didn't try to inform anyone of the time loop during this time. Most of the notebooks and other gathered information had been stored in the palace orb, which they couldn't actually access at the moment. They still interacted with many of the people they previously worked with, but mostly for the sake of fun and hanging out this time.

They spent an entire restart diligently going to class, being as helpful as humanly possible to every teacher and student they encountered. They spent a restart shapeshifting into various animals through transformation potions and explored the city and its surroundings through alien senses and perspectives. They dabbled in painting, sculpting, wood carving, drawing and various art skills. They went on a tour of Eldemar and its neighbors via train and other mundane methods.

And when the last of these relaxing restarts was drawing to a close, Zorian realized he wasn't sorry for it at all. Even though they kind of wasted their time, even though they would only have 19 iterations left once this restart was finished... he was at peace with it all.

"We really need to give it our all in the upcoming restarts," Zorian said to Zach one day. "19 restarts aren't that much and we never know when something like this can happen again. If we had gotten this injured with only a handful of restarts left, that would have been the end of us right there. Do you think we should still mess around with Quatach-Ichl after this?"

"Hell yes," Zach said firmly. "I mean, yeah, he really got us good this time, but we still haven't figured out a good way to break into the royal vaults without his help. And besides... while he ended up messing us up, he also showed us a really good way of taking him down with relative ease."

"Oh?" Zorian asked curiously. "And what would that be?"

"See, I think we've been overthinking things a little," Zach explained. "Instead of trying to lure Quatach-Ichl into a trap and flooding him with golems and enemy mages, we should be relying on our strengths to defeat him. Well, *your* strengths in this case. I'm talking about mind magic, of course."

"Mind magic?" Zorian said, stunned. "But with his mind blank on..."

"Xvim also had his mind blank on and it didn't stop Quatach-Ichl," Zach quickly pointed out. "It would be tricky, but if we time things right and I get a moment to concentrate properly, I'm pretty sure I can hit the guy with a powerful enough dispel to get rid of his mind blank. Just for a moment, but that should be enough for you, right?"

"I'm quite sure that Quatach-Ichl has some measure of skill with defending his mind," Zorian said carefully. "The fact he was able to search Xvim's mind so quickly in the heat of battle shows he's quite proficient in mind magic. Still... I don't think he's psychic and the brief telepathic clash I had with him didn't impress me much. I suppose it could work."

"It *will* work," Zach insisted. "Your mind magic is terrifying, and I bet it has been centuries since Quatach-Ichl has been targeted by a mind mage he couldn't kill in under a second. So long as we can stop Quatach-Ichl from murdering you before you finish subverting his mind, I think this could work amazingly well."

"You say that like it's such an easy thing," Zorian sighed. "But you're right, that *is* an interesting idea. Certainly better than fumbling wildly for a solution like we have been doing thus far. I kind of suspect Quatach-Ichl has rigged his soul to be withdrawn back into his phylactery if his mental defenses are ever seriously breached, though. That's what I'd do in his place."

"That still means we get to pick up the imperial crown from his abandoned skeleton, though," Zach said with a shrug. "That's the only thing we truly need from him. Everything else is just a bonus."

Zorian supposed he was right about that.

- break -

The next restart they decided to spring back to work and get their plans back on track. Their souls were fully healed as far as they could figure out and they didn't have too much time to waste. Thus, they quickly established a simulacrum link to Koth and Xlotic, recovered the palace orb, stole the Pearl of Aranhald, and then boarded their brand new airship and set off towards Blantyre.

It would be a long and dangerous journey. Blantyre was the largest of the world's continents, but it was separated by miles and miles of open sea from the nearest human port. Just making sure they stayed on the right path was a problem, since the endless expanse of water provided few clues as to whether or not they were going the right way and neither Zach nor Zorian were proficient in this kind of navigation. On top of that, the shortest path to the continent, which they pretty much had to take, passed uncomfortably close to a large island inhabited by dragons, Hundreds upon hundreds of dragons. It was called, somewhat unimaginatively but accurately, Dragon Island.

Dragons generally weren't fond of humanity, and the dragons of the so-called Dragon Island were especially belligerent. They not only killed any human that tried to disembark on the island itself, but actively patrolled the waters around it for any passing ships. If they spotted any, they demanded ruinous tributes in exchange for not destroying the vessel. Zach and Zorian had asked around to see what the dragons found fitting to their tastes and were prepared to pay the tribute for their safe passage, but the airship was very eye-catching and dragons were known to be capricious at the best of times. It was best to prepare for a fight just in case, and a dragon was always a headache to fight.

On top of that, some of the sea monsters were known to be able to attack aerial vessels, firing jets of water and energy attacks at things flying above them. It didn't happen often, and the Pearl of Aranhald usually flew quite high in the air, but it meant that Zach and Zorian could never fully relax and had to be constantly on the lookout for potential problems.

Still, things were finally moving again and that was the important part. They would make the attempt at the dagger and the crown again in this restart, and they would lay down the groundwork for finding the location of the staff as well.

In the meantime, they were about to establish contact with Quatach-Ichl again. It was time to arrange for a trade...

85. Critical Mass

Chapter 085

Critical Mass

Zorian would be lying if he said that interacting with Quatach-Ichl again didn't fill him with dread. Aside from the fact that the ancient lich had reached an unfathomable level of expertise in soul magic and could possibly detect residual damage on their souls, their current trade offer was fundamentally different from what they did during their last interaction with him. Before, it was Quatach-Ichl who approached them. Last time, he had blindsided them with his sudden visit. He had the initiative right from the start, which doubtlessly helped lessen the level of threat he felt from them. This time, it would be *them* who were going to blindside *him*... and Zorian was not at all sure the ancient lich could take that gracefully.

Yet, Zorian knew he had to risk it. The fact was, their current initiatives were insufficient. Even if they managed to gather all the keys together in one restart before the time ran out, that wouldn't be enough. Not for Zorian, anyway. The problem of how he was supposed to exit the time loop still remained. His original self was still out there in the real world, so he couldn't just order the Guardian of the Threshold to shove his soul into his real body and be done with it. The Guardian of the Threshold may be confused about his controller status, but it would surely notice there was already a soul in Zorian's original body upon trying that. And even if that could be sidestepped somehow, there was still the matter of how to seize control of the body from his original self.

Zorian had a couple of ideas on how he could leave the time loop despite this issue, but all of them required incredibly advanced knowledge of dimensionalism and soul magic to accomplish. Quatach-Ichl had both, and it was likely that the insights he had into those two fields were impossible to find elsewhere. Zorian couldn't afford to ignore this priceless source of information, no matter how dangerous it was.

Arranging a meeting with the ancient lich proved to be rather simple, at least. All they had to do was go to the same corner store that Quatach-Ichl had sent them to the last time they had interacted with him and ask about him. The man behind the counter acted as if they were crazy, but not long after they left, the cephalic rats suddenly became a lot more interested in them and started following them around. Zorian simply kept stealing away the individual rats from the collective for a few days before Quatach-Ichl decided to contact them personally and arranged for a meeting.

At the moment, Zach, Zorian and Quatach-Ichl were sitting in a private booth of a relatively 'high class' restaurant near the city center. Not exactly the type of institution Zorian liked to frequent, in part because just getting a seat in one of those was pretty hard for an unknown teenager like him, but Quatach-Ichl had been the one to pick the location and he was evidently in the mood to show off his wealth and influence. He was using the same face and flesh-and-blood look he did the last time they met in a public location – either this appearance was his usual persona for dealing with people or this was how he once looked before discarding his flesh for an undead existence.

"What an interesting offer," Quatach-Ichl said, playing around with his fork thoughtfully, occasionally tapping it against his glass. He had ordered an expensive meal and wine for the occasion, but did not touch any of it throughout the entire meeting. "I'm no stranger to people seeking me out for my wealth of magical secrets, but usually their offers are... hesitant. They're leery of angering a powerful lich, they aren't sure if I am really as good as they heard and they're trying to pay as little as possible to get what they want. They start small, asking for relatively minor things in order to puzzle out how I think and what it would take to get what they *really* want..."

The ancient lich then made a dramatic pause, pointing at the small pile of divine artifacts and rare materials that Zach and Zorian brought to him as payment for his 'wealth of magical secrets', as he put it.

"You though?" Quatach-Ichl continued. "You're immediately going for the kill. You want nothing less than my complete pocket dimension creation expertise – an extremely rare, almost priceless set of secrets – and you're willing to offer no less than five divine artifacts and a plethora of extremely rare materials in return. I'm impressed by your boldness, but I can't help but wonder... are you not worried I will cheat you or that this will end up a disappointing trade in the end? You are, after all, trading physical goods for information of uncertain value. I could easily just ignore you after pocketing the goods or play dumb and give you mere shadow of what you asked for."

Zorian mentally agreed with this, but wasn't really worried. Although many things about the ancient lich were enigmatic, he was pretty sure he had a good read on his sense of honor. Quatach-Ichl prided himself on his sense of fairness. He would not cheat them unless he thought they were trying to cheat him first. The real challenge was to make him agree to the deal in the first place.

"Although I don't dare claim I know you, you are as famed for your honorable behavior as you are for your great magical skill and brutality in warfare," Zorian said. Quatach-Ichl smiled idly, clearly viewing all three traits as a compliment. "We feel that if we can reach an agreement with you, you will do your best to honor it."

"Perhaps my knowledge of pocket dimensions isn't as extensive as you think it is, though," Quatach-Ichl pointed out. "I am indeed a man of many talents, but that is quite a rare and exotic field of study. You may end up disappointed by the results of the trade."

"If so, we will accept it quietly and in good grace," Zorian shrugged. "We're willing to take a gamble."

"Hm. Although it is not a smart thing to admit such a thing in these kinds of negotiations, I feel you are being a little too reckless here," Quatach-Ichl noted thoughtfully, giving them both a piercing look, as if trying to see through their souls. "It would have been smarter to try and do a smaller trade at first just to see if my pocket dimension skills are worth the more substantial investment."

"Well..." said Zach with a cheeky smile. "Although this is generally not a smart thing to admit in these kinds of negotiations, the fact is we're in a bit of a hurry. Slowly feeling you out and haggling over the details would take too long. That's why the terms we offered you were so generous,

see?"

"Generous? Debatable," Quatach-Ichl scoffed. "I was merely questioning your logic just now. I said nothing about how good the deal appears to *me*. What you are seeking is pretty damn valuable."

"Yes, but so is our payment," Zach immediately shot back. "We realize that reaching out to you so suddenly and asking for such a heavy favor is a bit unreasonable. We also realize that, being in a bit of a hurry, we are innately in a disadvantaged position compared to you. We're on a time limit, you aren't. That's why we're willing to offer as much as we did, though – in normal circumstances, we would never consider this a reasonable trade."

Quatach-Ichl stared at them for a few seconds. Perhaps he was trying to put pressure on them through silence to see how they would react?

"You're pretty interesting people," Quatach-Ichl said. "I think that's why I haven't simply told you to screw off by now. That's what I'd normally tell people if they tried to give me this kind of deal. Are you really teenagers? You are way too calm for people that are supposed to be, what, 15 years old?"

"Why bother even asking?" Zach challenged. "We already know you've tried to spy on us before inviting us here, so you probably know enough about us to answer this yourself."

"I do know some basic facts about you two," Quatach-Ichl admitted. "It's just that they don't make much sense. How the hell did two academy students gather all this and find out how to contact me? Who are you really?"

"It's a secret," Zorian said blandly. There was no point in trying to explain. "But since we're asking private questions about one another, let me ask you a question of my own. How exactly did you talk no less than four cephalic rat swarms into working under you? What the hell did you offer them to make them open to cooperation? I can't even get them to talk to me, much less work for me."

"Heh. Are we including that information as part of our deal?" Quatach-Ichl asked with a grin.

"No," Zorian snorted derisively. "I was just curious."

"And also changing the subject," Quatach-Ichl noted. "But fine, I get it. If you want to keep your true identity secret, I won't pry. But you know, if you really are as young as you appear, then we have another problem on our hands. Namely, I'm not sure if you're even capable of learning how to perform dimensional magic on the level you are asking about. What makes you think you are qualified to learn from me?"

"That is not an issue," Zorian insisted. "We know we can perform this level of magic because we are *already* capable of creating pocket dimensions."

"Oh?" Quatach-Ichl said, a little incredulously.

"Yes," Zorian confirmed. They would have to be careful not to make themselves look too amazing, or else Quatach-Ichl might notice something was wrong and attack them again. But this particular bit of information was impossible to hide, considering what they were asking of him. "We are asking you for advanced guidance, not asking you to teach us the basics of the field."

Zorian then removed a bracelet from his wrist and handed it to the ancient lich, who gracelessly snatched it out of his outstretched hand and began to scrutinize it.

The bracelet was something Zorian had personally created before coming here. It served as an anchor for a miniature pocket dimension. The internal space was tiny, barely enough to store a book or two, but that wasn't important. The important thing was that it proved that not only were they capable of creating pocket dimensions, they could create *advanced* ones.

Most products of pocket dimension magic came in the form of boxes, chests and other rigid containers that had their internal volume expanded beyond what their outside form would suggest. These kinds of objects were relatively easy to make, as anchoring a pocket dimension to an internal space of a hollow, inflexible object was a relatively simple task. Well, as much as any pocket dimension creation could ever be easy, anyway.

A more advanced procedure was to use dimensional magic to expand the interior of more flexible containers like bags, backpacks and pockets. Although this sounded rather convenient, fabric was relatively fragile and hard to imbue with spell formula. After a few years of use at most, such objects inevitably fell apart, sometimes causing catastrophic failures when least expected.

Finally, there were objects like the palace orb and the bracelet that Quatach-Ichl was currently holding. These objects were not containers with expanded interior at all. They were self-contained pocket worlds anchored to an object. Accessing the contents of such a self-contained space was tricky without dimensional magic, which drastically reduced the amount of people that could use them, but they were incredibly stable. They could be inflated to downright ridiculous sizes, if one had a sufficiently stable anchor object... as the palace orb amply proved. The bracelet Zorian cobbled up in the last few days was pretty underwhelming in that regard, but he was sure that Quatach-Ichl would recognize what it signified nevertheless.

After a minute or so of silent study, Quatach-Ichl handed the bracelet back to Zorian and then unceremoniously drew all the divine artifacts and exotic materials towards him with a sweep of his hand. After a few quick movements, they all disappeared into his pockets.

Neither Zach nor Zorian moved to stop him.

“Alright,” Quatach-Ichl said with a small nod. “You win. I accept the deal. Since you have said you were in a hurry and I’m going to be busy with something soon, we can start tomorrow.”

Busy with something... what a funny way to hide the fact he was planning an invasion of the city and the release of the primordial trapped in the Hole. Still, Zach and Zorian were pretending not to know about that in this restart, so they said nothing about that. After arranging for their next meeting place and hammering out some minor details, they turned to leave only for the lich to stop them.

“One more thing,” Quatach-Ichl said. “Who messed up your souls so badly?”

Zorian couldn’t help but jolt a little at the question.

“W-What?” he asked.

“Your souls are scarred,” Quatach-Ichl said matter-of-factly. “The damage is faint now, and will probably go away completely in a few years, but less than a year ago you must have been in an absolutely miserable condition. A normal person would take years recovering from something like that. Much of it would be spent comatose, too. I guess I should add soul magic to the list of things you are inexplicably proficient in?”

Damn it. So he *could* detect it... though it didn’t look like he recognized it as something inflicted by him in particular.

“Does it matter?” Zach challenged.

“No, I guess not,” Quatach-Ichl said, frowning. “But it makes me even more certain you are not really who you present yourself as. You are fortunate I have something else occupying my attention at the moment, or else I would not be as willing to let this go so easily. Make no mistake, though – once I’ve cleared up my schedule a little, I’ll come back to visit you so we can clear some things up...”

Zorian did not outwardly react to this proclamation, but inwardly he was breathing a sigh of relief. No doubt Quatach-Ichl meant this as a veiled threat, but so long as nothing happened within the bounds of the time loop, Zorian didn’t really care about that. Provided they didn’t mess up in some other way as the restart developed, they should be fine.

Hopefully Silverlake would take his warnings not to investigate into Quatach-Ichl more seriously this time around.

- break -

Whether because Quatach-Ichl didn’t know that they were aware of the invasion this time around, or because he never discovered just how expansive their activities around the region really were, the lich didn’t seem to view them as very threatening this time around. They were kind of baffling, yes, but he had an invasion to organize and he had no idea he had a time limit when it came to figuring them out.

In regards to his obligations, he fulfilled them to the letter. The agreement called for him to provide them with instructions for two hours every day, and he was never late for the arranged time, nor did he stay so much as one minute longer than they agreed. If he withheld some of his expertise, it was in a way that neither Zach nor Zorian could tell the difference – the amount of information he had for them was enough to keep them busy for quite a while. He spoke clearly and understandably. He readily clarified his statements if he saw they did not understand him. He pointed out any obvious mistakes they did under his supervision and explained the logic behind his instructions rather than let them ‘figure things out for themselves’. He never lost patience with them or insulted them. He was, strangely enough, probably the best teacher Zorian had ever encountered.

Realizing that a soul-defiling, warmongering, thousand-year-old lich was his ideal academic instructor was a somewhat unnerving realization for Zorian.

That aside, having Quatach-Ichl’s dedicated help in understanding pocket dimension magic made Zorian suddenly aware that it wasn’t just the lack of qualified teachers and instruction manuals that was holding him and Zach back from advancing quickly in the field. Embarrassingly enough, it often happened that Quatach-Ichl was pushing ahead in his lessons and the two of them struggled to follow along. To put it bluntly, the real bottleneck to making the most out of those lessons was their own lack of talent and comprehension, not Quatach-Ichl’s unwillingness to instruct them to the best of his ability. Zorian had a feeling the ancient lich was laughing at them on the inside about that.

Zorian knew this kind of result was to be expected.

It wasn’t that Zach and Zorian were stupid, or that their work ethic was lacking... it was just that they lacked any special advantage when it came to learning something like pocket dimension magic. They had no special talent or bloodline related to the field and neither of them was the kind of genius that could easily grasp the complexities of this relatively mind-bending, unintuitive field of study. There was little that could be done to speed their learning process up, at least through traditional methods of advancement.

So Zorian turned to non-traditional methods instead. For a while now he had been hesitating about delving deeper into the field of mental enhancements he had been messing with, afraid that he would permanently mess up his own mind in the process. Now he decided to risk it and ordered his simulacrum to kick things up a few levels. Aware that time was steadily running out, they did not complain much and simply jumped at the task with enthusiasm that honestly surprised him. He supposed that since he himself had set aside his fears and resolved to tackle the issue, they inherited his determination as well... unlike in the past, where he himself had viewed the endeavor with apprehension, and thus his simulacrum had been similarly unenthused about risking themselves.

For the moment, his idea was to try and create a sort of mental calculator and internal clock, since a lot of the problems with pocket dimensions came from the inhuman timing and precision required to pull off certain stages successfully. Normally this was achieved via a complex system of

divination magic, which added an extra layer of complexity to an already tricky task. If he could strip away the divination scaffolding and just do all the number-crunching, measurements and timing decisions purely in his head, the magic would get significantly easier.

Of course, it turned out to be not that easy. While Zorian knew that creating a mental calculator was very much possible, since it was one of the more common modifications aranea tinkered with, it was a tricky thing to pull off in practice. Several of his simulacrum had to be forcibly broken out of their experiments after they fell into strange mental states, endlessly counting the number of pebbles around them and such. Thankfully, none of them were so far gone that they had to be destroyed and recreated, so they were able to learn from their mistakes instead of starting from scratch and trying to guess where their predecessors made a mistake.

Additionally, he was also experimenting with hyper-focused mental states and with trying to replicate the hydra's unity of self with his simulacrum. He had a feeling that if he could synchronize himself with a handful of his own simulacrum the way a hydra could synchronize its multiple minds into one self, many complex pieces of magic would become relatively trivial to perform.

Of course, these kind of mental enhancement were only of possible benefit to Zorian, and did not help Zach in any way. For this reason, and also because he wanted to hedge his bets, Zorian also started to look more closely into blood magic and enhancement rituals. After all, some creatures were innately good at dimensionalism in various forms. Phase spiders, for instance, were capable of instinctively creating small pocket dimensions to hide themselves in. Blink toads could teleport short distances, voidsoul deer could bend space around them to make spells and projectiles launched at them miss and the silverstripe mole was rumored to be able to perceive dimensional cracks and boundaries in some strange fashion. It might be worthwhile to try and steal those kinds of abilities for a while, just to see if they could offer them with some kind of important insight or capability.

Of course, Zorian was currently not very well versed in either blood magic or regular enhancement rituals, so he would first have to practice with something relatively simple and then slowly work his way up to what he wanted...

Alternatively, he could just hire an alchemist to make him an enhancement potion with desired ability, but such enhancement potions did not confer the sort of instinctive competence with the gained ability that a properly executed enhancement ritual did.

In any case, both the mental enhancement route and the blood magic route were long-projects. It would be at least a couple of restarts before he could make an effective use of them, maybe more. Thus, Zorian ended up turning to something more immediate to get the most out of Quatach-Ichl's teachings – his spell formula expertise.

Zorian knew for a while now that most old, experienced diviners had specialized divination compasses they used to perform their work. Zorian himself rarely bothered with them, preferring to simply dump information straight into his mind and sort it out mentally, but he had tinkered with such devices often enough in the past. Kirma's divination flower thingy and the spell formula crafters she referred him to were especially useful in this regard. Now he embarked on a project to create such a divination compass, one specialized in figuring out divination related to dimensionalism and pocket dimension creation.

In this, at least, he had plenty of success. Spell formula were one of the things he had focused on pretty heavily throughout his entire time in the time loop, and he had reached an extremely high level of skill when it came to them. Producing a working version of such a dimensionalism-specific divination compass took only two days, after which he rapidly improved the design, producing newer and more potent versions every couple of days. By the time the end of the restart was approaching, these divination compasses had become so good that Quatach-Ichl took notice of it and commissioned a couple of them for his own use. In exchange, he provided them with the names and locations of two secretive mages that also knew a thing or two about pocket dimension magic – information that was almost as priceless as Quatach-Ichl's own lessons, as far as Zach and Zorian were concerned.

Gradually, the end of the restart started to approach...

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While trying to deepen their understanding of pocket dimension magic consumed most of their energies in this particular restart, it was far from being the only thing they worked on. An equally critical, though far more boring task was to make sure the Pearl of Aranhel reached Blantyre safe and intact. A mission that was thankfully far easier than they had ever hoped it would be. No sea monsters bothered them, and while no less than three dragons spotted them as they flew near the Dragon Island, they were surprisingly easy to keep at bay with flashy combat spells and a single experimental, magic-enhanced cannon that Zorian had installed on the ship. Neither the spells nor the cannon actually did any damage to the dragons in question, but they kept the beasts from simply rushing at them and ripping the hull into shreds. Perhaps because they had never seen an airship like theirs and did not know what combat abilities to expect from it, all three of the dragons limited themselves to probing attacks and flying in circles around them for a few hours to see if their response times and attentiveness would ever slip up.

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It helped that each of the dragons attacked alone. Only after one of the dragons had given up on bothering them would the next one try his luck. If all three of them had united against them, Pearl of Aranhel would have been doomed without question. Thankfully for them, dragons were notoriously solitary creatures that viewed their own kind largely as competition rather than kin. They lived and hunted alone, only forming societies if pressured to do so by outside aggression. Zorian had heard there had been a few ill-considered campaigns in the past that sought to systematically wipe out dragons in a particular area, only for the dragons in question to temporarily amass themselves into massive flocks that devastated everything around them for a while before eventually breaking up again when they were certain the danger was gone. Aside from that, dragons were largely an individual threat, and dragons of Dragon Island were no exception.

Unfortunately, while their journey had not been delayed by dragons and sea monsters, their own lack of navigational skill had lengthened the journey somewhat. Additionally, while the people who made Pearl of Aranhial were world-class experts, it was still a prototype that had never really been tested or truly finished before being sent on such an ambitious journey... meaning that it had almost broken down several times along the way, almost crashing them into the sea at one point and forcing them to drastically slow down at several points along their chosen route.

But in the end they made it. Five days before the restart was about to end, the Pearl of Aranhial finally spotted the shores of Blantyre.

Five days was not enough to really do anything, though. If they had to go through this kind of lengthy, annoying journey in every single restart, only to be left with measly five days per restart to locate the imperial staff, they were guaranteed to fail. Thus, their first and very urgent priority was to locate a Bakora Gate somewhere on the continent. Any Bakora Gate, really. That way they could reach the continent in only a handful of days with the help of Silent Doorway Adepts in subsequent restarts.

Sadly, this was not an easy task. Bakora Gates were scattered all over Blantyre, but the continent was vast and the Gates were small. Searching for them blindly would take forever, which meant they had no choice but to seek the natives for help in finding them.

The trouble was, Blantyre was not inhabited by humans. The steaming equatorial jungle that covered Blantyre was home to a multitude of sapient species, but the most advanced and powerful force were the lizardmen. They lived in great stone cities along the coast and the rivers, and although they were very awfully primitive by human standards, they were more or less the only ones qualified to help Zach and Zorian locate a Bakora Gate somewhere around here. Not only were they the only species on Blantyre that kept any sort of written records, they also regularly traded with humans from Xlotic and Altazia, which meant that some of them actually spoke a language that Zach and Zorian could understand.

Unfortunately, while the lizardmen did occasionally trade with humans, getting the location of a nearby Bakora Gate out of them was still a huge chore. For one thing, they existed as a collection of small kingdoms and quarrelling city-states that rarely shared information with one another, so unless a Bakora Gate was literally in their territory there was no chance they would know about such a strange but ultimately useless artifact. For another, only the priesthood was literate and knowledgeable of obscure places and artifacts like these, and they were not terribly fond of outsiders. Finally, while the lizardmen did occasionally trade with humans, they did so with great caution and only in a strictly regulated manner. If they wanted information, they couldn't just walk into a lizardman city and start asking questions – they had to go through official channels and make a formal request.

Pressed for time as they were, Zach and Zorian resorted to shock and awe to get what they want. Rather than carefully approaching the local rulers and making respectful diplomatic requests for information about Bakora Gates, they brazenly flew Pearl of Aranhial straight above the nearest lizardman city, teleported themselves into the city center and then started throwing around gold, gems and some spices that they heard lizardmen liked at everyone in the vicinity until someone came to talk to them, at which point they promised great rewards for any information about the Bakora Gates. Then they moved on and repeated this process in every larger city they encountered as they flew around the coast.

The reaction was everything they hoped it would be. The lizardmen may be primitive, but they had their ways, and news of their airship and what they were seeking quickly spread to every lizardman power in the vicinity. Soon, everyone knew that two immensely powerful human mages were flying around in their fancy airship and promising fantastic rewards to anyone who could lead them to a Bakora Gate. Admittedly, this did cause a lot of the lizardmen to come forward with fabricated tales of nearby Bakora Gates, but those were easily seen through by Zorian. Lizardmen emotions were not alien enough to give Zorian's empathy too much trouble.

Eventually, three days later, they were summoned by one of the local kings from a river city-state deeper in the continent's interior. The emissary brought with him a very lifelike drawing of a Bakora Gate as proof that they were telling the truth, which was good enough for Zach and Zorian to immediately set out towards the place.

This was why, at the moment, the two of them were standing in a luxurious stone throne room of a lizardman king, curiously observing their surroundings while they waited for the king to actually arrive and talk to them. Lizardmen rulers seemed to be fond of mosaics made out of gems and colored stones, and this one was not an exception – the walls were dominated by some kind of epic battle scene between two lizardmen forces. One of the two sides, which Zorian presumed to represent the forces of the city they were currently in, was clearly dominating their opponents, boldly advancing forward, while the other was in the process of being pierced by spears, clubbed over the head by heavy clubs or down on their knees and begging for mercy. An absolutely giant lizardman floated in the sky above the scene, curiously observing the battle. Probably a representation of one of the lizardman gods...

Zorian's idle musings were interrupted by the loud entrance of the lizardman king. A procession of musicians playing some kind of annoying flute-like instruments came first, playing ear-splitting whistles while a bunch of lizardmen children ran around and threw petals on the ground in front of the approaching king. The lizardman throne guards, which had been leaning on their spears and chatting amongst themselves in their incomprehensible lizardman tongue, quickly assumed a proper posture and pretended they had been alert and battle ready all this time. They also banged their spears against the floor a few times and let loose a keening wail that was probably some kind of salute.

As for Zach and Zorian, they just stared at the spectacle, not sure how to react. Perhaps because they had arrived so unexpectedly or because those rulers had not been so wealthy and powerful as this one, but this was not the way the other lizardmen kings had behaved in front of them.

"Uh, what's the proper procedure for greeting a lizardman ruler again? Are we supposed to bow or shake hands or something?" Zach whispered to him uncertainly.

"Why are you asking me?" Zorian protested. "You're nobility, not me. You should be the one who knows things like this."

"Please," Zach scoffed. "You're the one who is constantly interacting with various talking monsters. This is totally your area of expertise!"

Zorian turned his attention to the approaching king. He was surprisingly short compared to the warriors scattered around his palace, though the massive gem-encrusted headdress and glittering golden jewelry hanging off of him immediately marked him as the ruler regardless. In one of his hands he carried a black staff with a large, glowing, amber stone affixed on top. Four particularly massive lizardman warriors flanked him on both sides, which made for a somewhat amusing contrast between them and their king. What was not so amusing was the look in their eyes and the emotions they were radiating. Unlike the normal palace guards, these four took their jobs very seriously and their yellow, slitted eyes followed them with a threatening intensity – if they made so much as a threatening movement, they were ready to shove a spear through their throat without warning.

Also accompanying the king was another lizardman with lots of jewelry and an elaborate headdress, although one less impressive and of slightly different type and color scheme. Zorian suspected that *she* (he was pretty sure it was a female lizardman) was the high priest of the city.

And though she wasn't as overtly hostile as the king's honor guard, she clearly did not like them. At all.

Zorian inwardly sighed. Of course nothing could ever be easy...

- break -

Zach and Zorian had already managed to claim the imperial ring from the Ziggurat of the Sun in the past. Since they now knew that it was held by the sulrothum high priest, getting it was slightly easier than it had previously been, when they had yet to even locate where it was. However, easier didn't mean easy. The sulrothum high priest resided in the innermost, most heavily defended portion of the ziggurat. Getting to him still required a large-scale assault on the sulrothum settlement, which was... non-ideal.

Rather than organize another assault on the Ziggurat of the Sun in this restart, Zorian agreed to try something different this time around. After establishing a base near the ziggurat using Bakora Gates, they brought over a dozen or so aranean mercenaries and instructed them to spy on sulrothum guards and patrols. Although sulrothum minds were as alien to the aranea as they were to Zorian, the aranea were far more experienced with making sense of alien minds than he was. They did it all their lives, after all.

At the same time they began ambushing and killing sulrothum hunting parties and patrol groups leaving the ziggurat, in the hopes that doing this continually would eventually force the high priest to confront them directly or at least motivate to sulrothum to try and negotiate with them. After all, the colony would surely starve if they couldn't send anyone outside without them disappearing, right?

Unfortunately, the sulrothum didn't behave like they hoped they would. Rather than investigate the problem, they simply barricaded themselves inside and no longer tried to leave the ziggurat. It was baffling. Either the colony had sizeable stockpiles of preserved food and felt certain they could last for a while under siege or there was a Dungeon entrance somewhere below the ziggurat and they decided to brave the tunnels to feed themselves instead.

Either way, it was annoying. Thankfully, the aranea were somewhat successful in their information gathering.

"So," Zorian asked the aranea in front of him. "I don't think the damn wasps are going to poke their heads out of their turtle shells any time soon. Do you have something useful to report?"

"I think so, yeah," Storm Dream, the aranea in question, answering him through a voice spell so Zach could hear her too. "First of all, the ring you're after? It's not an accident that the high priest has it on him. He knows what it does and is actively using it."

Oh.

"Now that I think about it, that does make sense," Zorian mused. "I could tell the last time we met that he's a soul mage. That was a bit unusual, since sulrothum aren't exactly known for their magic abilities, but I thought nothing of it at the time. Since he's wearing a ring that grants soul sight, though, I guess it's to be expected he became interested in that type of magic. We're fortunate he didn't populate the ziggurat with undead guards or something."

"Probably wouldn't happen, even if he knew how to do that," Storm Dream said. "They're very religious and they seem to attach great importance to being cremated upon death. Some nonsense about returning to the 'sun mother' and whatnot."

"Well, they should be happy about all those patrols we fireballed to death recently, then," Zach said cheekily. "They got a proper burial as they died."

"Yes. Well," Storm Dream said after a second of awkward silence. "If you want to lure the high priest out of the ziggurat, I have only two ideas. One is to wait for him to come outside on his own to perform one of his periodic 'land blessings' and 'reading of the signs'. The next such occasion should be about two months from now and—"

"Too long," Zach immediately said, shaking his head.

"I don't understand why you're in such a hurry about this... the ring has been in the high priest's hands for years now. It's not going anywhere," Storm Dream said, with no small amount of exasperation. "But fine. The other option is to try and ally yourself with the nearby sulrothum tribe that this particular bunch has a rivalry with. I'm not entirely sure, but I think he would come out of the ziggurat and support his warriors if he thought it was a rival tribe attacking them instead of scary human mages with their unfair, mysterious magic and thunder sticks."

"Ah," nodded Zorian. The thought of seeing if the tribe had any local enemies and allying with them had honestly didn't even occur to him. A silly

mistake, in retrospect.

Zach and Zorian discussed the merits of the idea for a while, before Zorian noticed that Storm Dream was shifting in place uncomfortably and looked like she wanted to say something more.

“What?” he asked her.

“It’s... probably just a stupid coincidence, but the sulrothum high priest has the same kind of knife you do,” she said.

“My knife?” Zorian asked incredulously. Since when did he even carry a knife? “Oh! Oh. You mean this?”

He tapped the knife hanging from his backpack. It was the divine artifact they had recovered from the palace orb – the one they had no idea what it did. Zorian sometimes liked to inspect it, staring at it while futilely hoping he would finally succeed in unlocking its mysteries.

“Yes, like that one,” Storm Dream said. “I know you humans churn out thousands of identical objects as a matter of course, but I thought it was strange that a sulrothum high priest on another continent carries the same kind of knife like you do. Especially since their one is of immense religious importance to them and has an impressive magical ability.”

“Oh? Do tell,” Zach prompted. “What magical ability?”

“The high priest can use it to command a sand worm of immense size hidden beneath the sands of this place,” Storm Dream said. “It could be just more superstitious nonsense, I guess, but I don’t think so. Maybe the sulrothum are overstating the worm’s real size, but they seem pretty certain of its ability to repel all intruders, so it should be pretty impressive. If your knife is the same, then... maybe you can control it too?”

Zach and Zorian were silent for a moment.

“I knew it was stupid,” Storm Dream said. “Just... forget I said anything.”

Zorian thought about the gigantic flying sand worm they had faced in their last assault on this place. The creature was an immense threat, only kept manageable by Zach’s incredible combat prowess and their extensive preparations before the battle. And the way its mind had completely stopped Zorian’s mental abilities like a brick wall, unlike any other mental defense he had ever seen...

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Zach asked him quietly.

“I doubt our dagger can really control the sulrothum sand worm,” Zorian said. “But it’s too bad that we already killed the giant hydra guarding the palace orb, I’ll say that much.”

It was just a suspicion, but Zorian felt it was likely that each knife was keyed in to a different creature. Assuming that the strange flying sand worm was the divinely-enhanced guardian of the imperial ring, it made sense that a knife that the sulrothum probably found near the ring was keyed to it. By the same logic, the knife Zorian currently held in his hand was probably meant to control the hydra instead, since it normally seemed to live in and guard the orb.

“Next time, then,” said Zach dreamily. “I like the idea of having my own pet hydra, you know? We could pit it against the stupid sand worm while we tackle the sulrothum ourselves. Or we could throw him at Quatach-Ichl, just to see the look on that stupid bag of bones when a massive hydra starts screaming and charging at him... or just take it on a walk through Cyoria like some kind of oversized dog and just soak in the people’s reactions... lots of potential there...”

Zorian looked at the dagger in his hand and then grasped it tightly.

Next time, indeed...

- break -

As the end of the restart began to approach, Zach and Zorian turned their attention to something they had been gradually building up to throughout the entire restart – raiding the royal vaults for the dagger again. They sought out Quatach-Ichl for help again, too – partially because they still hadn’t grasped the details on the inner wards, so his help in getting inside was still critical, and partially because they still had designs on his crown.

Zorian had to admit he was more morally conflicted about betraying Quatach-Ichl this time around. After all, the ancient lich had been nothing but helpful throughout the entire restart. It felt wrong, *dishonorable*, to just stab him in the back like this in the end...

Then again, didn’t Quatach-Ichl indicate during that initial negotiation they had with him that he would return to interrogate them after his little invasion business was over? Perhaps he was just looking for excuses to make himself better, but seen in that light this attack could easily be viewed as pre-emptive defense on their part. Plus, the lich clearly intended to invade Cyoria as normal – a fact he sometimes cryptically alluded to during his lessons, but one which he never actually made clear to them. In a very real way, that was betrayal as well.

He supposed in the end it didn’t matter. Quatach-Ichl once again agreed to help them steal the dagger from the Eldemar’s royal vaults. They once again achieved their goal, successfully fought their way out of the capital city and then kept running from the Eldemar military until Quatach-Ichl figured out the nature of the tracking device that was used to track them. They again opened a dimensional gate to Xlotic and stepped through it...

The moment Quatach-Ichl followed after them they shut off the gate and attacked him with no warning.

There was no talking. They attacked silently and without hesitation, and Quatach-Ichl took their ambush entirely in stride. As an endless barrage of incinerating rays, impossibly sharp dimensional blades and disintegration blasts suddenly rained down on him, he quietly blocked, dodged, teleported and retaliated in return. He did not rage at their betrayal or try to talk to them to find out their reasons. Perhaps he had been expecting it. Maybe he was just that used to sudden ambushes. Whatever the case, he silently accepted their challenge and met their attack head on.

The desert quaked. Sand was melted and turned to glass over and over. Several hidden wards and traps that Zach and Zorian prepared in the area in advance activated, only to be shattered and neutralized by Quatach-Ichl. The ancient lich summoned a bunch of skeletal undead giants from some internal storage space on his person and Zorian responded by throwing his combat golems at them to keep them busy. Zach managed to shear off Quatach-Ichl's leg with one of his attacks, but the lich simply reattached it in the next moment. Three of Zorian's simulacra sacrificed themselves to keep him alive when facing Quatach-Ichl's counterattacks, their inhumanly tough metallic bodies unable to withstand the ancient lich's attacks.

It was then, right in the middle of the heated battle, that several hidden devices revealed themselves in the distance, blanketing the whole area with small, fast-moving silver discs.

Most of the silver discs were completely mundane, meant purely to mask the real threats. Some of them were infused with specialized magic meant to stress and overload typical force shields that protected mages against physical projectiles.

And finally, a small number were special. They were infused with the same sort of soul severing magic that was once used by Kael to make the coin that ended up banishing Quatach-Ichl back to his phylactery.

In order to make sure Quatach-Ichl couldn't simply push away all the discs with a simple wave of his hand, Zach and Zorian immediately intensified their attacks. Despite that, Quatach-Ichl took the little silver projectiles as a deadly threat, never letting a single one touch him, raising the ground as walls and pillars to keep them at bay when the shield disruptors started to eat away at his magical shields.

But the silver discs did their job of occupying his attention anyway. So busy was he with avoiding them, dealing with Zach and Zorian's normal attacks and trying to counterattacks that he overlooked a far larger silver disc hidden in the sands nearby. This disc was also imbued with soul severing magic, and with a much more potent form of it, too.

Upon dodging one of their attacks, Quatach-Ichl ended up stepping on it and it visibly discharged a wave of white light straight into him.

For a moment, the whole battlefield stilled. Quatach-Ichl was momentarily frozen in place, a look of surprise on his face. Zach and Zorian waiting with bated breaths to see if the lich would collapse into a lifeless pile of bones in the aftermath.

And then the lich moved.

"Heh," Quatach said, speaking up for the first time since the battle had started. "You got me. But do you really think a stupid trick like that can beat me?"

Well no. He did not think that. But as a distraction, it worked better than Zorian had ever hoped it would.

The moment Quatach-Ichl had finished talking, a massive wave of dispelling energy erupted out of Zach, powered by most of Zach's remaining mana. It washed away everything in the vicinity, completely catching Quatach-Ichl off guard. For just a moment, all of his defenses went down.

Including his mind blank.

Zorian immediately reached out with his mind and began his attack.

Quatach-Ichl's mental defenses were impeccably made. They were thick and without any obvious flaws, and he could rebuild them in an instant, just like Xvim. Considering his endless reserves of mana, this meant that even Zorian would fail to break through them if he tried to gradually wear them down. He could never hope to win a battle of attrition against the ancient lich, not to mention that every second he failed to break through was a second that Quatach-Ichl could use to murder his fleshy body to remove the mental threat he posed. Thus, Zorian held nothing back when attacking the lich. He poured all of his mana into a quick succession of telepathic attacks.

After three such attacks, he was delighted to see some actual exploitable flaws starting to appear. Quatach-Ichl was proficient enough in fixing the aftermath of a single mental attack, but multiple ones in succession strained his defenses. As powerful as he was, the ancient lich had probably not encountered a mind mage that could meaningfully threaten him for a very, very long time. His defenses had probably once been truly flawless, but since he had not had to use them in ages, he had gotten a bit rusty.

Too rusty to stop Zorian, in any case.

With one final push, Quatach-Ichl's mental barrier shattered into countless pieces, leaving his mind defenseless before Zorian's telepathic might. Letting lose an ear-splitting scream of incoherent rage, Quatach-Ichl swung his skeletal hand towards Zorian, firing a jagged red ray in his general direction.

Zorian did not stop. Even when the ray hit him, severing his left arm just below the shoulder and sending waves of incredible pain throughout his whole body, he did not stop. He sank deeper and deeper into Quatach-Ichl's mind, paralyzing his skeletal body and starting to root through his long-term memories...

Without warning, the mind Zorian was invading suddenly disappeared. The bones Quatach-Ichl had been animating fell to the ground, lifeless.

The lich had admitted defeat and fled.

"Ha! We... we did it!" yelled Zach breathlessly. "Oh man, I can't believe we actually succeeded in beating the stupid bag of bones. We— Oh shit. Zorian, your arm!"

"Y-Yeah, I know," Zorian said, looking at the mangled stump connected to his left shoulder. "I'm... not feeling too well. I think I'm going to lie down a little."

Zach was saying something, but Zorian could no longer hear him. Everything was kind of fuzzy and eventually he just closed his eyes and let himself fall to the ground.

- break -

Two hours later, Zorian had woken up from unconsciousness only to find Zach beside him and his wound professionally bandaged. It was just something he had learned while learning medical magic, Zach explained. Apparently his teachers had insisted he learn some good old-fashioned mundane care for the injuries, and lost limbs were included in these lessons.

So now Zorian would get to experience what it was like to live with a missing arm for a few days. Lovely. The time loop was a gift that just kept on giving. In any case, they had to move fast. Quatach-Ichl was bound to be utterly furious with them, and they weren't really sure how long it would take him to possess another body and come after them. They had learned that this time varied a lot from lich to lich while researching the topic, ranging from a few hours to several days. Considering how good Quatach-Ichl was, they should probably assume it was the shorter option.

After hurriedly breaking into the time magic research facility beneath Cyoria, they asked Guardian of the Threshold about the crown and dagger they had newly acquired. They quickly found out that they had guessed correctly – the crown gave the Controller the ability to place temporary markers on people, bringing them into the time loop for a limited time, while the dagger gave the Controller an ability to place a special kind of marker on a soul of the target, letting the time loop know it should not recreate their soul in future restarts. Soullkill, as Red Robe called it.

Just like the orb and the ring, both items also had a mundane function that even normal people could use. The crown acted as a personal mana storage, which they already knew thanks to Quatach-Ichl, but it was nice to have confirmation anyway. In particular, Quatach-Ichl's story had not made it clear whether the amount of personal mana stored in the crown was proportional to the one using it or fixed. Now they knew it was fixed in size. For Quatach-Ichl this gave him ten times more mana reserves than he usually had, but for Zorian it would be far more since his reserves were relatively tiny in comparison. Though it would also take him forever to fully fill up the crown, as well.

As for the dagger, it had the ability to 'cut that which cannot be cut'... or to put it more plainly, it could hurt immaterial spirits. An ability that was probably far more impressive in the distant past, when spirits were around every corner and a pissed-off god could send their servants to mess you up at any time. These days, its base ability was of dubious usefulness.

Upon leaving the time magic research facility, they temporarily set the dagger aside and started feverishly tinkering with the crown, trying to figure how to activate its ability to place temporary markers while sending urgent messages to every member of their little conspiracy. Thankfully, by now they had a fair bit of experience in making imperial artifacts work, so after a few hours they succeeded in figuring out how the crown worked.

And then they got to work. By now, a whole throng of people had gathered around them. It was not just people like Alanic, Xvim, Silverlake and Daimen that were there. There were also various teachers from the academy, some of whom Zorian was familiar with (Ilsa, Nora and Kyron) and some of whom he wasn't, but which Xvim assured him were dependable and could be counted on. Kirma, Torun and several other select members of Daimen's team were also there, as was his fiancée Orissa and some of the members of her House. Many, many aranea were also scattered about, hailing from the Silent Doorway Adepts, Luminous Advocates, Filigree Sages and others that Zorian felt could be helpful and wouldn't freak out. Lukav was also here, as were some other people that Alanic had vouched for.

While Zach and Zorian had been running around Blantyre, planning how to beat Quatach-Ichl and scouting out the sulrothum in the ziggurat of the sun, their fellow conspirators had been tasked with gathering all these people and informing them about the time loop. Thus, everyone here knew what they were dealing with. They did not necessarily believe in this crazy story, but that didn't really matter because seeing was believing.

The restart was soon going to end, and then they would experience the truth first-hand.

Zorian steeled himself a little and went out to face the crowd around them.

"Zorian... what the hell happened to your arm?" Taiven asked him with a horrified expression.

"It doesn't matter," he said, waving her off with his one remaining hand. "I'll get it back soon, as good as new."

"So!" said Zach happily. "Who wants to be first?"

86. A New World

Chapter 086 A New World

“Good morning, brother!” Kirielle screamed, her voice disgustedly shrill and cheerful. “Morning, morning, *MORNING!!!*”

Zorian sighed, stretching his arms and legs while Kirielle babbled on top of him. Another restart, another annoying wakeup call from Kirielle. He gave his little sister a silent, complex look, which caused her to hesitate for a second and ask him what’s wrong. Zorian didn’t answer. Instead he suddenly started shaking like a madman, taking advantage of that brief moment of indecision when she loosened her grip on him to push her off to the side. She fell on the floor with a soft thud and an indignant yell. She was back on her feet in a flash, though, annoying him with questions about the academy and requests to ‘show her some magic’.

In other words, she was still the same old Kirielle he had come to know over the restarts. He had thought about including her among the many people who gotten a temporary marker in the previous restart, but in the end he had decided bringing her into the time loop would be reckless and cruel. Unlike the others, Kirielle was just a child. Her personality had yet to fully form, and there was no telling how being stuck in a constantly repeating month would warp her thinking. She also couldn’t keep a secret to save her life and had no way to really contribute to their projects. Not to mention that if he failed to find the way to extend the temporary markers before the sixth restart was up, he would have to watch her forget six months’ worth of memories... that would be a hard pill to swallow.

No, the idea was definitely off-limits. While he would have appreciated a chance to have more meaningful interaction with Kirielle, it wasn’t worth inflicting existential dread on a nine-year-old and dragging down everyone’s chances of survival just for that.

After a few minutes, he finally coaxed Kirielle into leaving the room. He promptly locked the door and created a single simulacrum. It was a simple ectoplasmic copy. This early in the restart, he had neither the time nor the materials to create the golem bodies necessary for the improved mechanical simulacra he usually liked to use. However, accessibility was more important than mana efficiency in this case. He needed the simulacrum now and not later.

The moment it popped into existence, the simulacrum gave him a silent nod and then teleported away. There was no need to explain anything. The simulacrum had a simple task, planned out all the way in the previous restart and now simply put into practice. His copy was to go to Cyoria and immediately hunt down and dismantle all four cephalic rat swarms lurking in the city. It would doubtlessly alarm Quatach-Ichl if he did that, but it had to be done. With all these new time loopers walking around, the swarms were too much of a threat. They needed them gone, and the sooner it was done, the better.

After dispatching the simulacrum to his task, Zorian went down into the kitchen to eat something while waiting for Ilsa to arrive. He couldn’t help but be a little nervous. While Ilsa’s visit at the beginning of the restart had long since become repetitive and routine, meeting his invocations teacher should be different this time around. She was, after all, one of the people they placed a temporary marker on. If everything went well, she had retained her memories of the previous restart.

He shook his head, trying to collect his thoughts. He was kind of annoyed at himself for being so emotional over this. Previously, when he and Zach were considering going down this road, he had imagined himself facing this scenario with a stoic attitude and cool assurance borne out of years of experiences and conflicts in the time loop... but reality was cruel and his nerves were not as steely as he imagined them to be. Would the temporary markers work as advertised? Would they work at all? Would Ilsa be able to take first-hand experience of the time loop in good grace or would she flip out and start flinging spells at him, demanding answers? He couldn’t help but worry about questions such as this as minutes ticked by. What was taking her so long, anyway? He wasn’t sure, but he thought it didn’t usually take this much time before she—

There was a knock at the door.

“I’ll get it!” said Zorian quickly, rushing for the door. Mother looked amused at this kind of reaction, but said nothing as he ran past her.

He opened the door and found Ilsa standing there. She looked... no different than she usually did at the beginning of the restart. The same clothes, the same judging look, the same stack of documents held in her hands. However, that was only outward appearance. To his empathic senses, she was practically radiating uncertainty and apprehension.

They stared at each other in silence for a while.

“May I come in?” Ilsa eventually asked.

“Hmm? Oh!” said Zorian with a small laugh, wincing inwardly at his behavior. “I guess I spaced out a little. Forgive my manners, Miss Zileti. Come in, please.”

“Thank you, Mister Kazinski,” she said, stepping into the house.

Although his momentary brain freeze wasn’t the most flattering way to start a meeting like this, it seemed to have put Ilsa at ease somewhat, as he felt a lot of the tension drain out of her in the aftermath.

Like usual, Mother immediately left the house when she realized who had come, taking Kirielle with her. This left Zorian alone with Ilsa to

ostensibly discuss his electives and whatnot. But, well...

"Same as the last time, I suppose?" Ilsa asked, waving the academy documents in front of her. When Zorian answered yes, she simply threw the stack to the side and sighed. "Of course. You probably heard this all a hundred times by now. I don't even know why I brought these along with me."

"Clinging to a sense of normalcy in light of a very bizarre situation," Zorian guessed. "I was the same, back when I was first dragged into the time loop. I spent quite a few loops going through the motions."

"You were a teenager who barely started learning magic, though. I am an experienced adult mage. I should be better than this," Ilsa countered, frowning slightly. She was silent for a few seconds, tapping her fingers against the table as she considered what to say next. "So this is real? We really travelled back in time?"

"It's a little more complex than that, but yes," Zorian said. He didn't want to get bogged down in details of how the time loop actually worked. "Did the marker we gave you work?"

"Obviously," she scoffed. "How would we be having this conversation otherwise?"

"What I meant was... did you completely retain your magic and memories?" Zorian clarified. "Any holes in your recollection or difficulty in doing magic?"

"That's a possibility?" she asked, surprised.

"It might be. As I said in the previous restart, this is the first time we have done something like this," Zorian said.

She gave it a thought for a minute before shaking her head.

"I don't feel there are any obvious blanks in my memories," she said. "I did forget quite a few things, but I think that's just me being forgetful as usual. My memory is hardly flawless. As for magic, well... I'm a grown mage that has reached most of her potential years ago and a month is not that long of a time. Plus, it wasn't like I did any real training sessions in the span of this month."

"In other words, any growth in shaping skills you may have experienced is so minuscule that you wouldn't even notice if it was gone," Zorian surmised.

"Yes, that," Ilsa nodded. "I guess I can learn a new spell or two this time just to see if I retain them the next time the world... resets."

"I can probably just ask Kael. The effect of even one month on his shaping skills and spell knowledge should be dramatic enough to tell," pointed out Zorian.

"I suppose that's true," said Ilsa. "Plus, now that I think about it, I'm probably going to improve my shaping skills and learn quite a few new spells just by helping you out over time. Though you never did really explain what you wanted our help with..."

"Yes, we did not explain our plans and reasons too deeply in the previous restart," admitted Zorian. "Partly because we didn't want to overwhelm people with information, but also because we suspected you would only take us seriously after you witnessed the time loop with your own two eyes."

"Ha. Well, you're probably right about that," Ilsa laughed. "Xvim tried to explain how the time loop worked when he was trying to convince me to accept a mysterious soul marker from my two teenage students. I confess I didn't pay too much attention to it, since the whole idea was so crazy. I'd have probably been even less interested in what you and Zach had to say."

Well, at least she was honest.

"Do you want me to explain now?" Zorian asked.

"No," she said immediately. "I don't think I could pay attention well enough at the moment. I'm still rather disturbed at reliving the same month all over again. You said this has been happening for a while now?"

"Yes. The time loop has repeated itself many, many times," Zorian said. "This is just your first time remembering it."

"So, before this I was just... obviously reliving the same month over and over again? Repeated the jobs, taught the same classes and spoke the same conversations?"

"Well, sometimes me and Zach shook things up a bit and you reacted accordingly, reacting to the changes," Zorian said. "But yes. Without a marker, people do not retain continuity across restarts."

"I tried to talk to some of the people around me before coming here," Ilsa admitted. "Just to check if they really don't remember anything. I couldn't resist. I don't think I revealed anything crucial, but I feel it's only fair to let you know."

Zorian sighed. He suspected she wasn't the only one to make such 'discreet' tests, and that there would be more of that stuff to deal with later... but that was okay. They kind of expected that.

"I understand the need for confirmation, but please try to be responsible about this," he said. "It would be a disaster if the knowledge of the time loop reached certain people."

"And now I'm being lectured by one of my teenage students," Ilsa said, clacking her tongue. "How low the mighty have fallen. But fair enough, I do understand we have a mighty, millennia-old lich breathing down our necks. Your fight against him has left quite an impression on me, I must say..."

Zorian just made a slightly sour expression in response. Unsurprisingly, Quatach-Ichl had taken great offense at them trying to look through his memories and stealing his crown. While Zach and Zorian were placing temporary markers on people, Quatach-Ichl was burning down the Noveda estate and Imaya's house as the first step of his revenge. Fortunately, all inhabitants of Imaya's place had been evacuated to Koth by that point, and Zach couldn't care less about the Noveda estate. The ancient lich remained quiet after that, probably because he couldn't find them and still had an invasion to execute.

Then Zach and Zorian had the bright idea to bring the new loopers to Cyoria on invasion day, to show them how high the stakes really were. Despite being under a plethora of powerful divination wards and constantly moving, Quatach-Ichl somehow noticed them.

The resulting fight completely leveled the street they were fighting in.

"Though Quatach-Ichl is a huge danger, I'm pretty sure the Eldemarian government, the Triumvirate Church, powerful Noble Houses and other powers would also make problems for us if they knew," Zorian said. "So please be careful."

They spent the next half an hour discussing various things – the mechanics of the time loop, the way things usually developed if Zach and Zorian did not interfere with things, and the details behind the Ibasan invasion. Ilsa turned out to be just as interested in the invasion of Cyoria as she was in the time loop itself. Then again, that was probably not too unusual. They brought people to witness the attack for a reason.

"You don't seem to care much for the suffering and devastation we witnessed," Ilsa eventually said, a note of condemnation in her voice.

"I'm just a little numb to it all, that's all. I've seen it happen too many times, sometimes from the memories of the invaders themselves," Zorian said. "It's impossible for me to have the same visceral reaction to it that you probably have."

"You read their memories?" she asked, surprised.

"I had to," he simply said.

"Of course you've dabbled in mind magic too," she said in a strange tone.

"Dabbled?" Zorian huffed. "This annoys me more than it probably should. I did not 'dabble' in it – I'm a natural mind mage who spent years honing his skills."

She seemed to be at a loss for words upon hearing that.

"This situation is endlessly bizarre and disturbing," she finally said after a few seconds.

"Agreed," Zorian nodded. "I've been stuck in this time loop for nearly eight years, not counting all the time dilation chambers, and I still think that."

"Time dilation chambers?" Ilsa asked. She suddenly shook her head. "No, never mind that for now. Eight years is actually not as long as I thought it would be."

"I got included rather late into this thing," Zorian said. "Zach is the one who has spent decades inside the time loop."

"Ugh. Every answer gives me five new questions," Ilsa complained. "You know what? Let's stop this for now. You are planning to take the train to Cyoria, right?"

"Yes, I'm taking Kirielle with me, so I need to pretend I'm somewhat normal. Of course, if you are willing to teleport us to Cyoria yourself..."

"No," she said immediately. "I'm taking a train ride with you instead."

Zorian was taken aback at the proclamation. He knew that things would be very much different now that other loopers were walking around, but he couldn't help but get blindsided by things like this.

"Uh, why?" Zorian asked uncertainly.

"You might be used to it, but I've just watched the city get brutally invaded by hordes of monsters and undead," she told him. "I'd like to stay away from Cyoria for a while, and this is a convenient excuse."

"Oh," he said lamely.

Come to think of it, it had only been a few hours at most since the invasion, at least from her perspective.

"You don't mind, do you?" she asked him.

"Not at all," he said, shaking his head. "Just watch out for Kirielle if you plan to ride in the same compartment as us. She has an intense interest in magic and anything related to it, and she's probably going to find you absolutely fascinating."

"I don't see a problem with that," Ilsa smiled. "It's nice to see kids interested in my work."

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Zorian didn't bother to clarify things.

Some things were better as a surprise.

- break -

Mother did not look very surprised when Ilsa informed her she would be accompanying them to the train station. It probably seemed entirely sensible to her that Ilsa would use a train to get back to Cyoria. The two of them got along pretty well with one another, and were soon happily chatting along as they waited on the station for the train to arrive. Zorian mostly ignored the conversation, as it sounded like your typical parent-teacher discussion. Kirielle was too excited about going to Cyoria to care about the teacher that had decided to stick around for a while longer, but Fortov did feel the need to approach the group and say hi after seeing Ilsa present. That was a little new.

"You didn't include Fortov among those who received the marker," Ilsa observed quietly.

"No," Zorian whispered back. "He's useless and I don't like him."

Ilsa had nothing to say in response to that, just giving him a guarded look in return.

Maybe he really was a little harsh towards Fortov. Still, he honestly couldn't see any good reason to give the guy a temporary marker. Fortov was unreliable and had no work ethic, so including him in the time loop would be about as wise as including Kirielle.

Eventually they boarded the train and set off towards Cyoria. Kirielle became more wary of Ilsa when she realized the teacher was going to stay in the same compartment as them, but... well, it was Kirielle. Patience was never her strong suit. She barely lasted half an hour before she started bombarding Ilsa with questions.

Ilsa was a patient woman, but after an hour and a half of Kirielle's chattiness, Zorian could feel she was starting to get rather exasperated with the whole situation. Thus, he decided to have mercy on her and distracted his little sister with a bunch of visually impressive illusions and stories.

Ilsa observed the illusionary scenes he conjured up with a surprising amount of interest. Try as he might, he just couldn't figure out what she found so fascinating about those. Weren't they just illusions? She was a mage at the continent's best magical academy. Surely she had seen plenty of those in her life...

Eventually he decided to ask her. Since he didn't want Kirielle to listen in on them, he established a mental link to her and spoke to her telepathically. She was badly startled at first, flinching at the sudden voice in her head, but she recovered quickly. Her response was swift and smooth, with no unintentional thoughts leaking through. It was clear that she had experience with this kind of communication.

[You can ignore the shaping disruption of the train wards,] Ilsa telepathically sent back through the link. [I mean, of course you can. For someone like you, doing that is a minor thing. I could do it too. However, casting such sophisticated illusions while being suppressed by the wards... that takes considerable skill. Did you say you were trying to pretend you are 'somewhat normal'? How is this even remotely normal?]

[Err, well... it's not like Kirielle can really tell how amazing this is,] he sent back lamely.

Truthfully, neither could he until this point. He learned these illusions pretty much solely to entertain Kirielle. They were just little tricks to him, and so was the ability to bypass the laughable disruption wards on the train. It completely slipped his mind that someone like Ilsa could figure out exactly what he was doing and how difficult it was and find it notable.

[So,] Ilsa sent. [You are good enough at combat magic to fight a thousand-year-old lich. You are a mind mage and an illusionist. You can teleport around with ease and open dimensional gates. You can create duplicates of yourself. You are an expert golem maker, with all that implies. You say you achieved all of that in, what, eight years?]

[Pretty much, yeah,] Zorian confirmed.

[Forgive me for being blunt here, Mister Kazinski, but aren't you a fairly average mage?] Ilsa asked curiously. [I never got an impression that you are some amazingly talented person from the information I was given. And trust me, people had looked into it. Whenever a world-class talent like Daimen appears, their family is always investigated in case their boons run in the blood.]

[Aside from being an innate mind mage, I am indeed pretty average,] Zorian said calmly. Ilsa's comment might have infuriated him once, but these days he no longer cared. [I know what you're thinking, and yes – my rapid growth as a mage is all due to the time loop. It doesn't just give time, you know. It's also given me nigh-limitless resources, access to restricted materials and plenty of normally unobtainable experience. It's also put me under enormous pressure, keeping me constantly motivated in a way I otherwise wouldn't be. I honestly think anyone could do what I did, if put in the same position. Well, provided they didn't just break under the pressure...]

Ilsa stayed quiet for a while, but Zorian could practically feel the gears turning in her head. She was probably realizing for the first time the sort of amazing opportunity the time loop represented.

[I think I'm getting just a tiny bit jealous of you, Mister Kazinski,] Ilsa eventually concluded.

[Don't envy me just yet,] he told her. [There is still a good chance that I will get erased in the end, and everything I have worked for will be for naught.]

[What?] she asked, startled. [What do you mean?]

With that, he started explaining the situation in detail to her. He told her about Red Robe, the uncertainty about whether they could even get out of the time loop, the problems he had to solve to survive the exit, and so on.

It took a while to go through everything. Strangely enough, Ilsa looked calmer and more reassured by the end, even though he had just told her there was a big chance they would *all* lose everything at the end. Then again, maybe it wasn't so strange. She already knew that temporary markers like her own only lasted six months. Compared to that, a more distant deadline that would also destroy Zach and Zorian probably didn't seem so intimidating. On the contrary, she may have found it reassuring that they also had the same fate waiting for them, if they failed.

[I was wondering why you decided to include so many people in this time loop, instead of just monopolizing the whole thing for yourself and Zach. Your situation is quite desperate,] she said, humming to herself audibly enough for Kirielle to hear her and give her funny looks.

[You don't have to sound so happy about it,] Zorian groused. [But yes, we really do need your help badly.]

Ilsa was mostly included because of her connections. Though she acted a bit low key most of the time, she knew many people and was owed quite a few favors. Hopefully, she could help them convince people to go along with whatever crazy plans they came up with and smooth any ruffled feathers they caused along the way. Considering how few other members of their little conspiracy were diplomatically inclined or familiar with bureaucratic wrangling, this was a valuable skill.

Plus, she was a powerful alteration expert. Zorian wasn't sure, but he felt she might be able to help him produce his golems faster. She couldn't animate them, of course, but he was currently producing such a large number of them every restart that it took a while to simply create enough mechanical bodies for animation. If Ilsa was as good at alteration and material alchemy as Xvim claimed, she should be able to take over that part of the production process and free Zorian to do other things.

[Why not just hire someone to do that for you?] Ilsa asked when he told her that. [I hear from Xvim you've been doing that a lot already.]

[I can't,] Zorian shook his head. [Anyone I contract will surely figure out what I intend to do with such a sophisticated metal doll, and making combat-capable golems is forbidden without a license.]

[Makes sense,] Ilsa said. [You don't want to have random mages building themselves a private army of golems in their free time.]

[Exactly,] Zorian said. [I might be able to coax a person to build me a single puppet, but if I order a batch of twenty puppets, they'll freak out. Nobody wants to get implicated in an attempted rebellion or whatever. I'd be lucky if they didn't immediately report me to the government when they throw me out of the shop.]

Ilsa nodded. After some thought, she changed the subject. [You know, all this talk about golems and alteration is reminding me of something I thought of when you were explaining how the time loop works. Destroying the entire world and then recreating it out of nothing... it reminds me of a persistent ambition of mine...]

[Oh? You mean true creation?] Zorian guessed.

[You know about it?] Ilsa was surprised. [I don't remember talking about it around you... I suppose one of my previous incarnations told you about it?]

[Yeah,] Zorian confirmed. [I sought you out quite often in the beginning to learn from you. You taught me much of what I know right now, or at least gave me a push in the right direction.]

[We'll have to talk about that more on some other occasion,] Ilsa said with a smile. [It looks like you owe me and I don't even know about it. How am I supposed to know to seek you out for favors if I don't even know that I have leverage over you? But anyway, true creation... yes, in a way, the time loop is the ultimate expression of that desire of mine. A magic that creates an entire world, over and over again. Are you sure you have no idea how it is done?]

[No, sorry,] Zorian said apologetically. [That power is absolutely godlike in scope and mystery. Or rather, *primordial*, since the Sovereign Gate seems to be made out of one of those.]

[Considering the stories of mortal mages doing it in the past, and in light of the fact that there is a device that can repeatedly create an entire world, I am convinced it is easier than most people suspect. Maybe I'll be able to figure something out by observing this constantly recreated world I'm in,] Ilsa said wistfully.

[Maybe,] Zorian said doubtfully. He doubted she would really get anywhere with that, but he wouldn't stop her.

Eventually, Kirielle dozed off and the telepathic conversation died down a little, leaving both Zorian and Ilsa lost in their own thoughts.

The train continued its routine journey to Cyoria.

- break -

When Zorian, Kirielle and Ilsa arrived in Cyoria and disembarked, they found there were people already waiting for them. Zach being there was kind of expected, but he was also accompanied by Xvim, Kyron and Taiven. Most people did not react to this, of course, but Kirielle knew damn well that there was something fishy about that and kept giving everyone weird glances and got really quiet for a time. Zorian also noticed Fortov staring at him weirdly in the distance. He wasn't sure how much his brother really knew about him, but he was probably aware that Zorian hadn't had any real friends until recently, so having a bunch of people wait for him at the train station was beyond unusual. He did not make any move or approach, though, since nobody was attacking anyone and Zorian didn't look like he needed help.

After dropping off Kirielle at Imaya's place, the group found a secluded location and started talking. Kyron, their combat magic instructor, was included into the group due to his high combat skills and the fact he had connections to people in Eldemar's military. He was the first to speak up.

"These temporary markers you placed on us to retain our memories... can they be revoked?" Kyron asked.

Of course the first thing they wanted to discuss was the markers. Zorian didn't blame them. He knew he would have been the same if he were in their place. He was kind of mystified why they hadn't just asked Zach about that while they were waiting instead of saving it until now, but maybe they had talked about other things, such as how the time loop worked. Or maybe they had just gathered together quite recently and hadn't had the time to discuss anything. He knew that Zach hated waiting and had a habit of showing up late, so he probably hadn't been at the train station for long.

"Yes," Zorian told him bluntly.

"At will?" Kyron asked next.

"Well, we need the crown that is currently in Quatach-Ichl's possession to do it," Zorian said carefully. "So not really, no."

"Also, removing the marker only prevents you from keeping your magic and memories when the world resets next," Zach said. "It doesn't wipe away what you achieved until that point."

"Can the marker be reapplied once it runs out or is revoked?" Xvim asked.

"I know what you're thinking," Zach sighed. "Sadly, it's not that easy. Yes, you can place a marker on the same person the second time, but only after twelve restarts have passed. You can't just remove the marker and then reapply it to extend the time."

"I imagined it was something like that," Xvim admitted.

Zorian suddenly yelped in pain. After looking around, he realized Taiven had pinched his arm for no discernible reason.

"Why did you do that!?" he protested.

"I wanted to make sure your arm is really fine," she said, frowning.

Zorian suddenly realized this was the same arm that ended up getting cut off by Quatach-Ichl in the previous restart. He had pretty much been a cripple the last time that she had seen him.

Still, how the hell was it okay for her to just pinch him like that!? Huffing with indignation, Zorian stepped away from Taiven and maneuvered himself to place Ilsa between the two of them. Ilsa gave him an amused look in response.

"So what's the plan?" Kyron said.

"We are hoping we can figure out a way to adjust the temporary markers into lasting indefinitely," Zorian said. "Admittedly, tampering with a piece of magic that probably had gods involved in its construction sounds hopeless... but we suspect that Red Robe entered the time loop through this very method. If so, it should be possible for us to do it as well."

"Right, if Red Robe could have done it, surely all of us working together should be able to work something up," Zach said.

"And if you fail?" Xvim insisted.

"We will hopefully gather the entire Key before all six restarts run out, at which point we will be able to unblock the exit," Zorian said. "If we have an exit method also ready by then, we might be able to just get you out of the time loop at that point. At which point it doesn't really matter that your marker will run out."

"And what, you're just going to continue in the time loop alone afterwards?" Taiven asked. "Or are you just going to create new temporary loopers once we're gone? And then get them out too? I don't know about the rest, but I think the world doesn't need three different Taivens."

"Actually, we would just exit the time loop with you," Zach said. "We already got almost everything we could wish for out of the time loop. No

need to risk everything by being greedy and cutting things close. If we can leave six months from now, we will.”

Silence greeted this proclamation. Zorian knew that the new loopers were worried about their motives, afraid that he and Zach were trying to make use of them as much as possible before discarding them. Not an unreasonable fear. Temporary markers were pretty much designed with that in mind. Presumably the controller would place these on people without ever informing them of the time limit, allowing them to reap all the benefits of having a person work with them for six months and then conveniently forgetting everything. However, Zach and Zorian did not intend to use the temporary markers just to get a convenient workforce. They got them into the mess and they would do their best to get them out of it. Maybe they would fail in the end, but it wouldn’t be for the lack of trying.

“Well,” Xvim eventually said, breaking the silence. “We’d best get to work, then.”

- break -

Days passed, and the effects of the many new loopers rapidly became evident. Kael arrived in Cyoria earlier, barely a day after Zorian did. Lukav and Alanic did not need to be saved from Sudomir’s machinations. Taiven no longer bothered hunting monsters with her team. Ilsa’s classes were completely different, since she decided she would shake things up a bit. The cephalic rats had been completely wiped out by Zorian’s simulacrum on the very first day of the restart, with the exception of a handful of individuals the simulacrum had saved up for study. Their usual routine of convincing Xvim, Alanic and Silverlake that the time loop was real became unnecessary, freeing up a surprisingly substantial amount of time.

Finally, not having to gain the trust of the Silent Doorway Adepts before they could use their ability to operate the Bakora Gate network meant they could access distant places from the very start of the restart.

Thus, once Zach and Zorian had sorted out the situation in Cyoria for a bit, they used a Bakora Gate to reach Koth so they could pick up the imperial orb... and maybe get themselves a pet hydra.

Before they did that, though, they decided to visit the Taramatula estate to see if everything was fine there. Daimen had assured them that the people he had picked were reliable, but Zorian knew better than anyone that Daimen said a lot of things...

When they arrived, they found the whole estate to be a hive of activity, people constantly coming and going, and there were people already waiting for them. There was no need to justify themselves or try to get them to admit Daimen was present, like they usually did the first time they contacted them in the restart. Still, while not having to wait at the door was convenient, what came later was not. Just like the new loopers back in Cyoria, the new loopers in Koth also wanted their questions answered, and what was supposed to be just a short check-up ended up being a grueling question and answer session that lasted for most of the day.

“I really hope this is a one-time thing,” Zorian groused later to Daimen. “You were supposed to explain these sort of things to them, Daimen.”

“I did!” Daimen protested. “They just wanted to hear things from you, I guess. Can you blame them?”

“I guess not,” Zorian said. If Daimen had explained things fairly, then these people must surely know it wasn’t Daimen who was really in charge. It made sense that they wanted to talk to the people who are the source of the temporary markers and have first-hand information. “Anyway, did you get your team ready? Will the Taramatula really cooperate when you inform them you want to send their best trackers all the way to Blantyre all of a sudden?”

This was the main reason he and Zach wanted Daimen’s cooperation, and why they allowed him to include so many people into the marked group. To put it bluntly, they needed these people to find the staff. They had managed to track down a Bakora Gate on Blantyre in the previous restart, thanks to the help from that lizardman king, but that was just the first step. The next was to track down a tiny little staff on a giant, jungle-covered continent. To put it bluntly, this was something that he and Zach alone were utterly incapable of doing. Zorian would never say this out loud to Daimen, but he and his group were probably the most critical people to receive the temporary markers. Without them, they would probably never find the staff. This was one of the primary reasons they decided to go down this path to begin with.

“My team will listen to me, even if I tell them we’re going to Blantyre through a dimensional gate opened up by my little brother,” Daimen said proudly. “Hell, they’d probably go along with it even if I alone received the marker, but they would complain more. With Torun, Kirma and other critical members of the team also on board, though, everyone will readily fall in line. As for the Taramatula... well, I’m not sure what level of support we can get out of them, but we will definitely get something. The main problem is that we’re being a bit unreasonable and pushing for full commitment to this project without the idea being even hinted at before now. That’s not how House Taramatula usually does things, to say the least, so some tension and incredulity are to be expected.”

“Will it help if I give you money and resources to throw at them?” Zorian asked. “I know House Taramatula is not poor, but I’m pretty sure me and Zach could gather enough money to finance a small state if we really try. Not to mention a large amount of priceless materials that cannot be bought on the open market.”

Daimen looked at him with a strange mixture of horror and joy, his face alternating between various unusual grimaces.

“I hate you,” he finally said. “You better plan to gift some of that money to your poor older brother when we get out.”

“Aren’t you pretty well off?” Zorian asked, arching his eyebrow at him. “You’re even marrying into nobility.”

“You can never have enough money,” Daimen said. “Never. And yes, please do send all that money here if you can. Trying to flat out bribe the Taramatula directly with it wouldn’t go well, but I’m sure they would look more favorably on the plan if we agreed to pay for all the equipment and

mercenaries out of our own pockets. And some completely unrelated gifts would probably be appreciated.”

Zorian nodded and made a mental note to mention the matter to Zach.

And speaking of Zach, his fellow time traveler... well, *one* of his fellow time travelers, now... was already waiting for them at the front gate, humming to himself happily.

Zorian didn't have to ask to know what the other boy was thinking of at the moment.

“Say,” Zorian asked Daimen. “Do you know what the legality of owning a giant, magically-enhanced hydra is in Eldemar? Just asking for a friend.”

87. Agents of the Crown

Chapter 087 Agents of the Crown

Deep in the jungles of Koth, in what was otherwise an unremarkable patch of rainforest, a situation was unfolding. The trees shook, the animals vacated the area in panic and the underbrush was trampled underfoot as a gigantic, furious hydra thundered through the area in pursuit of its target. Its eight heads fanned out and snapped angrily towards anything in the vicinity that failed to get out of its way, breaking low-hanging branches and killing any animal that was too slow to flee.

As for Zorian, who was its target, he simply kept running and dodging while marveling at the incredible speed with which the hydra was able to move through the thick vegetation of the rainforest. He had thought its size would make maneuvering difficult and allow him to easily keep ahead of it, but he had seriously underestimated its ability to just plow through everything in front of it without stopping. He was purposely running through the most difficult terrain he could find and he never even came close to losing it. It was constantly trailing just behind him.

A blue, translucent, ectoplasmic eye constantly trailed after Zorian, hovering above his head and staring at the hydra. It was through this eye that Zorian was able to keep track of the hydra's movements and dodge its attacks, despite having his back turned to it. Otherwise, if he were forced to run blind or had to periodically slow down to turn around, the hydra would have grabbed him a hundred times by now. Though the spell itself was very simple, very few people would be able to process information from two different perspectives like that. The fact Zorian could look both in front of him and behind him at the same time, while maneuvering through a treacherous, obstacle-filled jungle floor was proof that his experiments with mental enhancement were bearing some fruit.

The chase led them next to a fallen, rotting log covered in moss and mushrooms. Without its main body slowing down at all, one of the hydra's eight heads reached down and bit into it, lifting it out of the ground and launching it at Zorian. Half a dozen monstrous centipedes and one very terrified squirrel tumbled out of the rotting log as it sailed through the air, having hidden in it when they noticed the rampaging hydra approaching. Zorian reacted instantly, making a few silent movements and causing a bright red ectoplasmic hand to materialize in the air behind him and slap the log aside. It collided with the nearby tree where it exploded into a shower of rotting wood. Both Zorian and the hydra simply charged through the cloud of wooden shrapnel, one with the aid of magical shields and the other through the power of supernatural toughness and regeneration.

"Zach, what the hell are you doing there!?" Zorian yelled. "I've been running for ages here! Did you figure out the dagger or not!?"

Zach, who was trailing behind both of them while occasionally making funny poses and waving the dagger in his hand at the hydra, seemed to pause at the question.

"It's hard, okay!" he yelled back.

"I'm running low on mana here!" Zorian said. "If you don't figure it out soon, I'm calling this off."

In truth, the hydra posed very little threat to Zorian. If the situation ever got too dangerous, he could have always teleported away or simply flown away too high for the hydra to reach. However, that would leave it free to turn around and shift its attention to Zach, which would defeat the whole purpose of this setup. The point of him leading the hydra on the merry chase through the Kothic jungle was to give Zach the time he needed to figure out how to use the dagger on the hydra. Something that didn't seem to be going too well.

Oh well. On the bright side, if Zach couldn't figure it out by the time Zorian ran out of mana, it would be Zorian's turn next. Zorian would actually prefer if *he* was the one who figured out how to use the dagger, since he and Zach had agreed that whoever succeeded at this would get to 'own' the hydra. He had a good feeling about his chances, since, unlike Zach, he had soul perception unlocked. Surely that would—

"Hydra!" Zach suddenly shouted, dramatically pointing the dagger in the monster's direction. "I am your master now! Kneel before me!"

No less than three of the hydra's head glanced towards Zach, giving him a hateful, contemptuous look before returning their attention to Zorian again.

Before Zorian could say anything, Zach suddenly teleported right on top of the hydra and plunged the dagger straight into its back.

Zorian wanted to scream at his fellow time traveler for being such an idiot. Not only had Zach exposed himself to incredible danger, since the hydra's heads could twist backwards to reach people foolish enough to climb on its back with incredible speed and ease, the boy had also invalidated all the effort Zorian invested into making sure the hydra was focused on him and him alone. Even if Zach got away from this stunt completely unscathed – and he probably would, in all honesty – the hydra would no longer ignore him from this point onward.

Indeed, the moment Zach popped into existence on top of the hydra's back, before he even finished plunging the dagger into its flesh, the monster was already stopping its charge, all eight of its heads refocusing on this sudden new threat. However, the moment the dagger sank into its back, a strange thing happened. Instead of simply ignoring the puny wound and biting down on Zach anyway, the hydra suddenly stiffened as if paralyzed. Its many heads froze in the air, jaws still stretched wide for a lethal bite, staring at Zach with confused, uncomprehending eyes.

"No way..." Zorian complained weakly.

"Ha ha!" Zach laughed, wrenching the dagger out of the wound and quickly straightening himself up. The hydra's back not being the most stable of

grounds, he almost lost his balance upon doing that and had to spend several seconds to stabilize himself. The hydra remained completely motionless throughout all of that. Zach slapped the closest hydra head a few times playfully. “What did I tell you, eh? I really *am* your master now. Kneel!”

The command seemed to break the hydra out of its paralysis. Without hesitation, it dropped to the ground. Being a quadrupedal life form, it couldn’t really exactly kneel as such, so it instead just dropped on its stomach and lowered its many heads on the ground. The sudden motion completely unbalanced Zach, however, sending him tumbling down the creature’s back with a strangled cry. He hit the ground with a dull thud, landing on one of the exposed rocks, and then spent the next minute and a half rolling around in pain on the ground.

Zorian eyed the hydra for a few seconds before deciding not to approach for now. It was no longer attacking him, but he had a feeling that might change if he made any moves towards its new ‘master’.

“There is no way that was the correct command phrase to activate the dagger, is it?” he eventually asked.

“Ugh. Damn, this hurt,” said Zach, laboriously rising to his feet while using the nearby hydra as a stabilizer. He did his best to dust himself off and get rid of the branches and bugs stuck in his hair. “And no, that wasn’t the command phrase. The way to activate the dagger is to first cut yourself with it to establish resonance and then cut the hydra to forge a bond with it and finalize the deal.”

Zorian gave him a curious look. “How the hell did you figure *that* out?”

“I, err, accidentally cut myself with it while trying to mess around with it while running,” Zach admitted with an awkward laugh. He turned towards the hydra, whose many eyes diligently followed his every move. “Anyway, who cares about that! It doesn’t matter how I discovered the dagger’s usage, all that matters is that the hydra is finally mine! Well ours, but you know...”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Zorian said, clacking his tongue. He’d normally be annoyed about losing a bet like that, but it was probably better this way. There was no guarantee he would have uncovered such a curious method of activation himself.

He felt the hydra’s mind a little. He kind of expected to find the hydra resentful of being effectively enslaved like this, but he found the creature to be mostly curious instead. Confused and a little scared too, but mostly just curious. It did not seem to harbor any ill will towards Zach. Zorian had never heard of a monster control method that was that thorough and effective, and the hydra should be highly resistant to mind control due to its unique mind anyway. He had a feeling this was more than just control – in some strange way, the hydra was conditioned to regard the bond forged by the dagger as innately legitimate and did not struggle against its bindings at all.

Zorian was torn between being impressed by the maker of the dagger for pulling it off and disturbed that such a thing was possible.

In any case, the friendliness was only towards Zach. The moment Zorian tried to step closer the hydra immediately jumped to its feet and interposed itself between Zorian and its master, hissing and snapping its jaws at him menacingly.

“Oh come on,” Zorian complained. “That guy doesn’t need your protection from me. If anything, I would need to be protected against him if we seriously fought...”

The hydra didn’t understand human speech, and probably wouldn’t have listened to him even if it did. It was about to lunge at Zorian when Zach placed his hand on its flank and stopped it.

“Hey, knock it off,” Zach said. “That guy is our friend, okay? No eating friends.”

It took a few gestures and shouting before the hydra managed to understand what its new owner was telling it, at which point it gave Zach something reminiscent of an incredulous look, as if unable to believe Zach would be friendly to someone like Zorian, who had led it on a wild-goose chase for a better part of an hour.

“I know, I know... he can be very annoying, but he’s very useful and mostly means well,” Zach said sagely, patting the hydra gently on the flank.

The hydra directed one last unhappy hiss in Zorian’s direction before grudgingly standing down and indicating it would allow him to get close without attacking him. Possibly.

Zorian folded his hands over his chest and gave Zach an unamused look.

“Don’t worry, I’m sure she’ll warm up to you in time,” Zach told him, grinning widely. “Princess is just a little shy.”

What?

“W-What!?” Zorian blurted out.

“It’s a she,” Zach said, nodding sagely. “I know, I was a little surprised myself when I felt that through the link and—”

“No, not that!” Zorian snapped. “You’re seriously naming a hydra ‘Princess’?”

“Why not?” Zach challenged. “What’s wrong with that name?”

The newly named ‘Princess’ focused three of her heads on him, as if daring him to say anything.

Stupid reptile. It didn't even understand what they were talking about but felt the need to side with Zach anyway...

"It's a stupid name," Zorian told him bluntly.

"It's a great name," Zach disagreed. "A royal name for a very royal girl. She's a divinely empowered guardian of an imperial item... that's pretty high-ranked if you ask me. Plus, you know how royals like to refer to themselves in plural? 'We' this and 'we' that... well, Princess here can talk about herself in plural and be completely factual! So there. It's actually very clever and you were just too judgmental to figure it out."

"Ugh," Zorian grunted. "If that's your logic, why not call her 'Queen' instead?"

"Because 'Princess' is a more ironic name for a giant hydra," Zach admitted.

Zorian spent the next fifteen minutes trying to argue the issue before giving up. It took another hour after that to coax Princess back into the imperial orb for transport – she wanted to follow around after Zach like a puppy, and was confused why he wanted to abandon her in the orb so soon after their bonding.

Zorian had to say, watching Zach awkwardly try to convince a clingy hydra that he would be back and that she should stay put was kind of amusing.

Perhaps it was a good thing that Zach ended up winning that bet after all.

- break -

After recovering the imperial orb and tentatively subduing the hydra guarding it, Zach and Zorian turned their attention towards the sulrothum at the Ziggurat of the Sun and the imperial ring in their possession. They already knew they could steal their ring if they launched a big enough attack on them, but that took a great deal of time and effort. Well, the presence of Princess on the battlefield would probably make an all-out assault a little easier this time around, but it would still be a major undertaking that would consume a lot of their time and resources that would be better spent elsewhere.

"It's a pity Princess is too big to fit in the ziggurat corridors," lamented Zach. "Otherwise we could just climb on top of her and charge in, trampling and brushing aside any sulrothum that got in our way."

"If our attack was that unstoppable, the sulrothum would probably just pick up whatever they can and flee," pointed out Zorian. "They'd probably flee underground, and it would be an utter pain to track them down then. Not to mention they have a massive sand worm on their side. We don't want to get in an underground battle with them, I think, even with Princess on our side."

"Hmph," Zach mumbled unhappily. "How about we just infiltrate the ziggurat through this underground connection, then? We might be able to avoid a massive battle that way."

"They have their pet sand worm constantly guarding that," Zorian pointed out, shaking his head sadly. "I bet we've noticed instantly through whatever exotic senses that thing has... and then it collapses the whole tunnel on top of us before we can do anything. Considering the layout of their Dungeon entrance, I think it was made by the worm in the first place, so they probably have no qualms about destroying it. They can always command the sand worm to create another one later."

Zach was silent for a while.

"How about... just soul-killing the entire colony?" Zach finally asked. "I mean, it makes me a little uncomfortable to use tactics like that, but this is pretty much what the damn knife was made for."

"It's definitely an option," Zorian said after a short pause. "However, we probably wouldn't be able to get all sulrothum with this and we don't know how many of them know about the ring and its importance. If we kill most of the colony but one of the survivors takes the ring and runs, things could get really bad. Right now we know where the ring is. If a shattered group of sulrothum survivors takes the ring and spends a day or two running around in the desert or, gods forbid, the depths of the Dungeon..."

"Yeah, you're right," Zach said. "It's too risky. Even if we get them all, there are neighboring sulrothum tribes and other denizens of the desert to consider. If they discover the state of the ziggurat and loot the ring before we reach it, we would still have a problem on our hands."

"Speaking of the neighboring sulrothum tribes, do we still go forward with the idea of arranging an alliance with them?" Zorian asked. "The idea is nice, I admit, but it may very well take more time and effort to do it that way than to just send our own army at the ziggurat."

"Not if we use Princess!" Zach declared triumphantly.

"You want to use the damn hydra for everything these days," Zorian scoffed. "You're like a little kid who just got himself a new toy and now wants to show it to everyone. How the hell will that thing help us convince the sulrothum faster?"

"There is no need to be jealous, Zorian," Zach chided. "You lost the bet fair and square. In any case, I think you greatly underestimate the impression of power we will project when we show up with a giant menacing hydra in tow. I bet those tribes will be tripping over themselves to stay on our good side after seeing that."

“Or they’ll be too scared to even talk to us,” Zorian pointed out.

“Then we just smash them until they’re willing to listen,” Zach shrugged.

“This is starting to sound a lot less like arranging an alliance and a lot more like us bullying the neighboring tribes into being our reluctant army,” Zorian pointed out.

“Eh, I think of it more as an ‘aggressive demonstration’ than bullying,” Zach said dismissively. “We would have had to prove our strength for them to take us seriously, anyway. But really, so what if we end up cowing them into submission forcefully? We’re already attacking the ziggurat tribe without any provocation. We lost the moral high ground a long time ago, I think.”

True.

“Alright,” said Zorian. “Let’s try to make them willing allies if possible, though. I have another task I want to give them, and they probably won’t try very hard if our overwhelming force is all that keeps them in line.”

“Oh? Something important?” Zach asked.

“Maybe,” Zorian answered. “There is a magical creature called a tunneler toad, which lives deep within the Xlotic desert. They live in a series of hidden worlds left by some forgotten ancient civilization, called Ishmali Reservoirs by the ancient Ikosians, because they seem designed primarily as water reservoirs. They’re basically large caverns full of water, enclosed in their own pocket dimensions. The reservoirs are largely uninteresting, but the tunneler toads themselves have a curious ability to detect pocket dimensions and enter them with ease. In their natural habitat they use this to pass in and out of the Ishmali Reservoirs as they please, using them as a hidden nesting ground, but the ability is said to be usable on any pocket dimension they come across.”

“Ah, I see, this is for that blood magic initiative you want to set up,” Zach said. “Why do you need the sulrothum’s help for this, though? If the toads live only around these reservoir things, they should be easy to find. It’s not like the reservoirs can move, right?”

“They’re static but I’m afraid the records of where the reservoirs are located have all been lost in the Cataclysm, and no one had bothered to track them down again as far as I can tell,” Zorian said, shaking his head. “With much of the interior now covered in desert and taken over by sulrothum tribes and worse, the reservoirs have become extremely isolated. Not to mention that most people are neither master dimensionalists nor tunneler toads, so they would be unable to track down and enter these hidden worlds even if they wanted to. Thus, if we want to find tunneler toads, we must find a desert native that has heard about strange toads that sometimes seemingly vanish into thin air, only to just as suddenly reappear later.”

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“Annoying,” Zach remarked with a frown. “Is this really necessary? We have lots of candidates for ability theft when it comes to magical creatures with relevant abilities.”

“None of them are easy to track down,” Zorian pointed out. “Not only are they rare and mostly extinct near human-dominated territories, the very nature of their abilities means these creatures can hide and retreat with incredible ease. The other may very well be even more annoying to find. If you think tunneler toads are bad, wait till you hear how annoying it is to track down a phase spider without it taking the initiative to reveal itself.”

“Right,” Zach said, clacking his tongue unhappily. “I guess I’ll try to be a little nicer to the stupid wasps.” He paused for a second. “So we’re really going to start dabbling in blood magic and enhancement rituals in this restart, then?”

“Yes. Although we should start with something relatively easy and well tested,” Zorian confirmed. “Eagle Eyes enhancement, for instance. Or any of the simple physical enhancements that aim to improve the user’s strength, stamina, regeneration and so on. Well-known, straightforward things that are unlikely to go catastrophically wrong when attempted by beginners like us.”

“Not really instilling me with a sense of confidence here, Zorian,” Zach complained.

“What can I say?” Zorian shrugged. “Blood magic is dangerous. If it makes you feel any better, I will be going first.”

“It does not,” Zach said. “We both know it will be me who has to take the biggest risks in regards to this. I have way more mana to burn on permanent enhancements and I am also proficient in medical magic, so I will be able to push my limits more and understand life force manipulation way better than you.”

Zorian didn’t dispute him. While he had no intention of piling most of the risk on Zach, his fellow time traveler was likely right in his prediction.

“Eh, don’t make such a grim face,” Zach said dismissively. “I already agreed we should do this when we talked before, didn’t I? I didn’t change my mind.”

“I kind of feel I’m pressuring you over this,” Zorian admitted.

“I’m not that easy to pressure,” Zach assured him. “You’ve been trying to pressure me to let you inspect my mind for a long time now, for instance, and I have never let you do it.”

"I still think that's a mistake," Zorian told him.

"And the answer is still no," Zach said, grinning. "See? Pressure ineffective. I agreed with this creepy blood magic stuff because I honestly think you're right. We're too slow at figuring out primordial prisons. Only distasteful, unconventional methods like this can let us find a shortcut we need."

"Fair enough," Zorian said. Personally, he did not find blood magic to be *that* creepy, and even viewed it as a potentially useful tool for usage outside the time loop, but he understood where Zach was coming from.

They spent two more hours discussing various ideas before they both entered the pocket dimension inside the imperial orb for a very important task.

They had to convince Princess to let Zorian examine how her mind worked without trying to bite his head off for his insolence.

It would prove to be a very challenging task.

- break -

As days went by, some curious things began to be noticed by various countries of Koth, Xlotic and Altazia. The first one was that House Taramatula suddenly organized and launched a major expedition to Blantyre in order to find the fabled imperial staff of Ikosia, sinking a massive amount of money and manpower into the endeavor. The level of support House Taramatula had given to the project was not as extensive as Daimen had hoped, but it was still major by virtually any means, and the frantic speed with which the whole thing was organized and executed was enough to give others pause. The Taramatula seemed almost desperate to track down the staff, and nobody could figure out why. The leadership of the House declined to answer any questions regarding the matter, contributing to the air of mystery.

More importantly, the Taramatula displayed the ability to open cross-continental dimensional passages between their land and their base in Blantyre. This was not something Zach and Zorian wanted to make known, but proved to be utterly impossible to hide, given the scale of the operation. This information soon spread around like a wildfire throughout various spy agencies, especially ones based in Koth, who were immediately consumed by an intense desire to know everything possible about the situation. Amusingly, this included trying to track down information about the imperial staff. They thought the imperial artifacts were just historical curiosities, but since the Taramatula wanted the staff so badly, there had to be something special about it. Many people suddenly wanted to get their hands on the imperial staff, or at least hoped to understand what sort of power their rivals would possess should they successfully claim the item.

Zach and Zorian intended to steal the results of all such research near the end of the restart. Who knows, maybe the combined might of all these spy agencies would find something they had overlooked.

The second thing that got people's attention, especially in Altazia, was intricate spell formula schematics, alchemical recipes, new spell compendiums and sensitive spy reports that started to surface all over the continent. Nobody knew who was responsible for this, how they had come up with all this in complete secrecy, or what their motives were... and it was completely unknown just how many people had received this assistance, considering many people had simply accepted their 'gifts' quietly and set out to exploit them in secret. Finally, the gifts seemed to be most heavily concentrated in Eldemar, which was a huge concern for everyone around them. This caused a frenzy of speculation and activity across the continent, as people tried to figure out what this meant and how to hopefully take advantage of it.

This was, of course, done by Zach and Zorian. They did it for a very simple reason: to muddy the waters and prevent their newly marked fellow time travelers from standing out too much. It was too much to expect all of them to behave themselves at all times or never make a blunder, especially in this first restart while they were still under heavy impression of their first repeat of the month. Introducing enough waves into their surroundings would hopefully keep most people too busy with other matters to pay attention to crazy stories of time traveling academy professors and the like.

Thus far, the idea seemed to be working, but it would remain to be seen if that would hold out until the end.

This done, Zach and Zorian turned their attention to organizing the search for the imperial staff in Blantyre. While the bulk of the job was done by Daimen and his men, it was a necessity for Zach and Zorian to get regularly involved. For one thing, the descriptions of the imperial staff were vague and contradictory, so they were the only ones that could identify the staff with any degree of certainty, thanks to their ability to sense the presence of the Key. Additionally, they were necessary for transporting people and supplies all over Blantyre, since they were the only ones that could easily open dimensional gates from one location to another.

Zorian had been quietly hoping that the immense amount of resources they had mobilized in the search would provide quick results, but his hopes were soon dashed upon the rocks of reality. Finding the staff turned out to be much, much harder than finding a Bakora Gate. The gates were rare and obscure, but fairly distinctive. The staff, on the other hand, was something incredibly common in Blantyre. The lizardmen loved their staves – they were a popular symbol of authority, and virtually any lizardman ruler and priest had a staff to call their own. While this meant that the imperial staff probably hadn't been thrown away and forgotten in some ancient treasury, it also meant that tracking it down was akin to searching for a needle in a haystack. The one saving grace was that the imperial staff was free of most decorations, being just a plain piece of dark wood, whereas the lizardmen liked to decorate their own staves with gems and feathers and whatnot. Then again, what was to stop the new owner from adding those things to the imperial staff to pretty it up? Ugh...

Influenced by such things, Zach and Zorian decided to approach Quatach-Ichl for lessons again. Originally they wondered if they should skip their interaction with him in this particular restart, due to all the new time loopers suddenly walking around, but in the end they decided they would risk

it. This time, the topic they chose was tracking magic and search spells. This was a relatively safe topic to ask about, and it might help them find the staff faster. A foolish hope, probably, considering the staff was immune to normal divination, just like all the other imperial artifacts. However, Quatach-Ichl was familiar with divine energies in a way that others couldn't match, so perhaps he knew of a way it could be done.

The topic was also potentially useful in tracking down Red Robe once they were outside the time loop, and it might give them an answer about how Quatach-Ichl had managed to detect their presence at the end of the previous restart. Zorian really wanted an answer to that last question, since he had thought his privacy wards were pretty much flawless at this point.

It was really unfortunate that he had been unable to find out anything of worth when he broke through Quatach-Ichl's mental defenses, Zorian thought gloomily. While he was extremely proficient at performing memory probes by now, that type of magic took a long time to really get going and the ancient lich had given him very little time to work with before abandoning his body. He probably shouldn't have tried to find out where Quatach-Ichl's phylactery was located. That kind of information was incredibly important and was thus bound to be guarded with the greatest possible zeal. He should have gone for something fairly mundane. Maybe Quatach-Ichl would have been willing to risk things and spend more time struggling against his mental probe.

At the moment, though, Zach and Zorian were in the time magic research facility beneath Cyoria. The two of them were disguised as adult agents of the crown, and were having a private talk with Krantin Keklos, the head researcher and overseer of the facility.

Krantin was slowly turning the imperial orb in his hands, utterly fascinated with it.

"You understand that we require your complete silence about this matter, don't you, Mister Keklos?" Zorian asked him.

The man suddenly looked up, a slightly confused look on his face. He had evidently been so absorbed in his study of the orb that he had lost track of time.

"Hm? Oh. Oh yes, I absolutely understand the need for secrecy," Krantin quickly said, nodding furiously. "I assure you, me and my team are quite used to working on top secret projects and dealing with potential leaks."

He took another long look at the orb in his hands.

"This thing... it's absolutely amazing," he said, obvious admiration in his voice. "I cannot put into words how glad I am to be given this honor."

"I hope you remember you are not being given this orb just to satisfy your personal curiosity," Zach said gruffly. He was playing the bad guy in their 'fake royal agent' scheme. "We have given you this honor because you are our nation's foremost expert on Black Rooms, and we hope you can turn this pocket dimension into the largest one yet. Can you do it or not?"

"Yes, absolutely," Krantin said. "While the volume of space inside is larger than anything we have ever done, the isolation from the outside world is also unprecedented. We can definitely turn this into a temporal dilation zone. Just..."

"Just?" Zorian prompted.

"W-Well, this is a very ambitious undertaking you are proposing here," Krantin said, stumbling over the words slightly. Zorian could feel that, although Krantin was a little nervous, he was also determined to make the absolute most out of this opportunity he was presented with. "To create this thing you are proposing, we would have to considerably expand the research facility and design whole new methods of Black Room construction. While I am sure we can do it *eventually*, the amount of time involved is not small. We are a very small team and..."

"You want more money," Zach said bluntly, cutting him off.

"And people," Krantin nodded.

He seemed to sense this was important to them. In that case, he felt it was entirely appropriate to ask for increased commitment in terms of resources and available staff.

Zorian did not answer verbally. He just reached into his jacket and handed Krantin a promissory note from one of the local banks. He could have brought actual cash too, of course, but he knew by now that government facilities like this rarely dealt with such things and that dumping large stacks of paper money on them would be a huge mistake. It would raise all sorts of red flags in their heads.

Krantin wordlessly accepted the promissory note and glanced at it. He raised his eyebrow at the number printed on it. Zorian could tell he was appreciative, but not really impressed.

"This is just the initial sum to get you started, of course," Zorian said. "You will get further funding once things actually start moving forward, as well as additional bonuses if the project is going particularly well."

"Of course," Krantin said, slightly more impressed.

"In regards to additional staff, that is a bit more complex," Zorian said. "Due to the somewhat abrupt nature of this initiative, it will take at least a month before we can send some new people here on a permanent basis."

"That's fine," Krantin said easily. "I can wait a month or several. Just be aware that the longer it takes for additional manpower to arrive, the more

the project will stall.”

“I wasn’t finished,” Zorian said, shaking his head. “Although we cannot send people here officially, you will get several mages skilled in dimensionalism to help you move faster with the project.”

Specifically, the man would be getting Xvim, Silverlake, Zach and Zorian. With their expertise in dimensionalism and with the research facility staff’s experience in constructing Black Rooms, the project would hopefully result in something useful after a few restarts.

Krantin didn’t seem to like the idea, however.

“I don’t like experts outside my authority coming here, telling me how to run things,” he told them bluntly. “Even if they’re highly capable, they don’t know the wider context of why we do things the way we do. They would just slow things down and create confusion.”

“Are you the facility overseer or not?” Zach challenged. “Are you telling me that you cannot keep a couple of new arrivals in line or bring them up to speed in a timely manner?”

Krantin frowned at him, giving him a slightly angry look.

“These people are being sent here as help,” Zorian said in a conciliatory tone. “If, after talking to them, you feel they contribute nothing of worth to the project, you are free to send them away.”

“Just remember that their help has already been factored into our projections on how long the project will take,” Zach warned.

“Very well,” Krantin said, a little unhappily. “I shall give these people a chance, at least. We will see if they are as good as you say they are.”

It took them another hour to arrange everything. Zach and Zorian handed Krantin a whole stack of ‘official’ documentation, which the man merely glanced at before handing it over to the rest of his staff. He evidently didn’t even consider the idea that this was all just an elaborate ruse. Zorian hoped the people actually in charge of processing the documentation would be every bit as careless as their overseer, because many of the documents wouldn’t stand up to detailed scrutiny.

“Well,” Krantin eventually breathed out. “This has certainly been a productive evening. Was there anything else you wanted to talk about?”

“Actually, yes,” Zorian nodded, handing the man another folder full of documents. “There’s been a change in regards to the group that is planned to take advantage of the next Black Room period.”

This wasn’t how Zach and Zorian usually took over the Black Room beneath Cyoria when they wanted to use it. Normally they just disabled the true group and then showed up with bogus documents at the last possible moment, giving the facility staff little time to consider the issue. This time, however, they planned to bring an entire group with them. Thus, they had taken time to arrange things a little more thoroughly.

“Oh? The Retin’s group decided to cancel their scheduled Black Room use?” Krantin said, skimming through the folder. “Strange, they were all so enthusiastic about the whole thing...”

He gave them a knowing look. He clearly knew there was some foul play involved here, but he probably thought it was the government bullying a group into dropping their claim rather than some kind of deception.

He shook his head sadly, throwing the folder to the side.

“I’m curious,” he said. “This orb, the sudden changes in resource allocations and the like... are they related to these mysterious ‘gifts’ I keep hearing about through the rumor mill?”

Hah.

“We aren’t paid to ask those kind of questions, and neither are you,” Zach told him grimly.

“But probably,” added Zorian.

Zach gave him a warning look in response. He was a pretty good actor, all things considered. Did he used to do this sort of thing a lot during past restarts or was he just a natural?

“Alright, I understand. Forget I asked,” Krantin said, rising from his seat. “I guess we should both get back to our jobs. When can I expect these ‘experts’ of yours?”

“Three days from now,” Zorian said. That should be enough to see if their ruse worked or not. “We will also periodically drop by to check your progress and see if you need anything.”

“Give me sufficient resources and I’ll give you what you want,” Krantin assured them.

Zorian had no doubt about that. The real question was whether the results would come fast enough to be of any use.

He also swore mentally that if Krantin really produced impressive results with what they’ve given him, he would find a way to reward him for it in

the real world.

Somehow.

- break -

In a typical restart, Zach and Zorian had a habit of holding meetings in all sorts of different places: parks, taverns, abandoned houses, houses under construction, tiny caves in the middle of the wilderness... they usually made a choice based on pure impulse and convenience. The novelty of holding a meeting in a new location was also a welcome reprieve from the soul-crushing *sameness* that dominated the time loop.

Now, however, they had a lot more people participating in these kinds of meetings. This completely changed their usual dynamic. They couldn't decide these kinds of things on a whim anymore – they now had to find a space big enough to hold all of them in relative comfort and make sure everyone could gather there in a timely manner. Public places were pretty much out of consideration – a group of a dozen people of a variety of ages and occupations, plus some giant spiders, would turn heads wherever they went. Additionally, Ilsa got angry at them when they tried to arrange for a meeting in a cold, damp cave in the middle of uninhabited wilderness. Zorian didn't understand what the big deal was, the centipede that tried to climb up her leg was less than a finger thick and the bats didn't bother anyone, but afterwards everyone agreed to only hold meetings in actual buildings.

Thus, the two of them eventually decided to just hold all the meetings at the Noveda Estate. The place had plenty of empty, spacious rooms and very good privacy wards already in place. Though Zach complained that was the boring choice, he agreed with Zorian that organizing meetings elsewhere was more trouble than it was worth.

Thus, at this moment, there was a huge group of people gathered in one of the larger meeting rooms in the Noveda Estate. The actual meeting was already over by this point, but the group had not disbanded for the day. Instead they had mostly broken up into smaller groups that discussed things of mutual interest between themselves.

In one corner, the emissary from the Filigree Sages was having a loud and enthusiastic discussion with Nora Boole. The female spell formula teacher did not seem to mind that she was talking to a giant spider and instead relished the chance to discuss her field of study with a kindred soul. The Filigree Sages emissary, meanwhile, seemed immensely pleased to have found a human mage that was interested in their brand of spell formula. The two of them seemed completely oblivious to their surroundings and the passage of time, so consumed they were in their discussion.

Not far from them, Alanic and Kyron had covered a table full of various maps and were staring at it in silence. Every once in a while they would point at a random spot on the map and speak a few curt words at each other before falling silent again. Zorian couldn't figure out anything from their brief, mysterious exchanges. In all likelihood, neither could anyone else – everyone seemed to be giving them a wide berth.

In the other corner, Zach was having a loud discussion with the emissary from the Luminous Advocates. This one was less friendly than the one between Nora Boole and the Filigree Sages emissary, though. Zach seemed to be trying to convince the Luminous Advocates to tutor him in mind magic, while the emissary was stubbornly pointing out that Zach wasn't psychic and that this would be a waste of time.

Zorian suspected Zach would get his way in the end. Luminous Advocates were a lot less prideful with them after experiencing the time loop in person, and they now knew exactly how powerful Zach was. They knew they couldn't afford to piss him off, and Zach was unlikely to quit once he set his mind on something, so they would probably cave in eventually. Whether anything would come out of such a lesson was something Zorian was a lot less sure about.

Not too far from them, a small group consisting of Kael, Taiven, Lukav and Daimen was sorting through the various rare materials Zach and Zorian gathered and exchanging stories. The talk seemed to be pretty mundane, focusing on amusing anecdotes and such.

One of the tables was completely monopolized by Silverlake, poring over their documents related to their study of the Ibasan gate. Zorian was pretty surprised at her behavior in this restart, in all honesty. She seemed far more enthusiastic and open about helping them now. It was interesting how dramatically she changed once she experienced the time loop with her own eyes.

Finally, there was Zorian. Like Silverlake, he wasn't really interacting with anyone at the moment. Instead, he was inspecting a table full of divine artifacts that they had stolen for study. He had never made any progress in figuring out these things, but he certainly wasn't about to give up. Especially since Quatach-Ichl had given them definite confirmation that it was possible to at least detect divine energies with regular magic.

Eventually his solitude was broken by Xvim, who walked up to his table and sat down on the chair next to him. He looked faintly displeased.

"Problems?" Zorian asked.

"I have a newfound appreciation for the amount of patience you and Mister Noveda possess," he said blandly. "I've just spent the entire morning marking down a stack of student homework that was absolutely identical to what I had already done in the previous restart and realized this would happen a lot. An unpleasant realization."

"Hah," Zorian said. "You can always just ignore it."

Xvim shook his head.

"That would go against my professional pride," he said. "Just as I demand dedication from my students, I demand the same from myself. A little thing like this should not break me. I shall treat it as personal tempering, I suppose."

"I see," Zorian said, nodding. "I suppose you'd be quite a hypocrite if, after subjecting your students to such an infuriating initial treatment, you ended up losing your patience after only a handful of repeating months."

Xvim hummed in response, not giving a verbal response. He glanced at the divine artifacts Zorian was inspecting.

"You realize, I'm sure, that no one has ever managed to figure out how divine artifacts actually work?" Xvim asked.

"Of course," Zorian said. "But very few people had the opportunity to take one apart over and over again as a method of study."

"Still, I'm surprised you're wasting time on this," Xvim remarked. "Wouldn't it be wiser to spend more time on time loop related things?"

"I would actually classify this as very much a time loop related thing," Zorian answered. "The time loop clearly works at least partially with the help of divine energies. Who's to say they aren't involved with our markers?"

"Oh?" Xvim asked, suddenly more interested.

"It's just baseless speculation," Zorian said. "But I've been thinking about what Red Robe could possibly have that other past Controllers didn't that would allow him to break the limitations placed on temporary markers, and the most likely answer I've come up with is... Quatach-Ichl. I suspect divine energies are involved with the marker somehow, and that the reason Red Robe had been able to alter it is because he had Quatach-Ichl's help. His method of perceiving and possibly modifying divine energies may have allowed him to tamper with the marker in ways that are impossible to us... in which case our efforts to understand and modify the marker are doomed to fail right from the very start."

"I hope you are not right about that," Xvim said after a short pause. "Quatach-Ichl has been alive for centuries. Who knows how long it took him to develop such capabilities?"

Zorian had nothing to say to that.

88. Mysterious Ways

Chapter 088 Mysterious Ways

With the palace orb handed to the time magic researchers for study and experimentation, Princess had temporarily lost her home. They weren't going to leave her in there while the researchers tinkered with the pocket dimension. That would probably end in tragedy, and they still needed her to intimidate the sulrothum tribes into allying with them, anyway.

Although Princess herself was not particularly heartbroken about being away from the orb, the situation did make moving her around a bit of a chore. She couldn't live in the desert. While she could tolerate dry areas, she needed plenty of water to rest in. Thus, Zach and Zorian mostly kept her deep in the Kothic wilderness, where she was happily terrorizing the jungle wildlife, and used dimensional portals to move her where they needed her. Thankfully, while Princess was huge, she was also serpentine in build and very flexible. She could squeeze herself through surprisingly small openings. However, this still meant Zach and Zorian had to expand their dimensional gates to far greater sizes than they typically used, greatly increasing casting time and mana costs involved.

Princess did have her own, divinely-granted teleportation abilities. They had experimented with them somewhat, trying to see if the hydra had underutilized her gifts somehow, but they were disappointed in the end. Her teleportation powers were exactly what they appeared to be: a short-ranged teleport ability that Princess could use for entering and leaving the palace orb, as well as tactical positioning during battles. It was incapable of transporting her across large distances.

The logistics of hydra transport aside, their alliance building was moving along extremely well. The sulrothum tribes they were visiting were both less secure and less prosperous than the ziggurat tribe. Their settlements had no defensive wards, they had no guardian beast on the level of the divinely-touched sandworm and their equipment was far shoddier than what Zach and Zorian were used to. Thus, when a pair of powerful human mages came to them, riding on a gigantic eight-headed hydra and handing out gifts, none of them dared to simply snub them. Not all of them were eager to work with them, but all of them at least agreed to hear them out.

It helped that this time they had brought an actual sulrothum language specialist to translate for them. The bearded, middle-aged man had only agreed to work with them after Zach and Zorian used Neolu and her family connections to guarantee their trustworthiness, but he had been worth the trouble. Not only was he proficient in the hand language that sulrothum normally used for their communication with humans, he even understood some of their native clicking and buzzing that they used to talk to each other... though he couldn't actually speak it, of course.

Curiously, the man was completely non-magical. Ibak, as he was called, claimed that spells were of little help to him in his job. They only put the sulrothum on edge, as many of them were wary of talking to mages. The devil wasps had great difficulty distinguishing spell chants from mundane conversations, so any time a known spellcaster started speaking they would be viewed with great suspicion.

At the moment, Zach, Zorian, Ibak and Princess were approaching another of the sulrothum tribes for recruitment. This one was particularly underwhelming, however, and Zorian privately wondered if they should even bother. The settlement was just a series of circular holes dug into a cliff, and Zorian had seen enough of such places by now to estimate the number of sulrothum living there. The tribe probably had less than a hundred members total. Since the group had done nothing to mask their approach and Princess was very eye-catching, the sulrothum scouts had long since spotted them and the entire tribe was a nervous hive of activity. This allowed Zorian to take a look at the decorations and weapons the group was sporting, and he was not impressed with what he was seeing.

"Why are all these tribes so much worse than the ziggurat one?" Zach asked out loud.

He probably did not expect an answer, but surprisingly Ibak had an answer.

"Because of the dungeon access," Ibak said.

Zach and Zorian shot him curious looks, not really understanding.

"While humans like to build their cities on top of accessible dungeon layers, most other species do not, as their less sophisticated magical expertise makes them less capable of dealing with creatures crawling out of the Dungeon on the regular basis," Ibak clarified. "The sulrothum living in the Ziggurat of the Sun are an exception, probably because of the giant sandworm you mentioned. The creature probably allowed them to reshape their local underground the same way human communities do, letting them exploit the place in relative safety. The other tribes do not have that, and thus appear underwhelming in comparison."

"Huh," Zach said thoughtfully. "I guess that sandworm is even more important than we thought. The wasps really lucked out with that thing."

Before anyone could continue the discussion, Princess released a warbling cry and pointed one of her heads towards a spot on the horizon where a group of sulrothum was flying towards them.

Zorian frowned at the sight. He wasn't surprised that Princess had noticed them before anyone else – she had eight pairs of eyes and was intensely vigilant by nature – but the direction they were coming from and their numbers were unexpected. They were coming from their left, rather than the sulrothum settlement in front of them, and there were twelve sulrothum in the approaching group.

"An emissary from a different tribe?" Zorian guessed. He doubted the tiny settlement in front of them would send out a hunting party as large as

this... and if they did, the group would first enter their home to consult with their elders before confronting them.

"Probably," Zach said. "I hope this becomes a thing in the future. This would go so much smoother if the surrounding tribes started coming to us instead of the other way around."

As they grew closer to Princess and the humans accompanying her, the sulrothum group eventually slowed down and landed in the area in front of them. The sulrothum chose a spot that was a fair distance away from their own, trying to make their entrance seem less threatening, but in the end they did effectively block their path and Princess instantly became outraged at the temerity of these newcomers. If Zach hadn't hurriedly calmed her down, she would have already been charging at them, heads roaring a battle cry.

In the end the two groups silently agreed to meet in the middle and negotiate. Zach, Zorian and Ibak ordered Princess to stay in the back and loom over the meeting threateningly, while the apparent sulrothum leader took two bodyguards with him and ordered the rest to similarly stay in the back and look intimidating.

Zorian was kind of biased, but he felt that Princess decidedly won the 'aggressive posturing' competition.

For the next ten minutes, Ibak and the sulrothum leader exchanged words while Zorian took the chance to study the group that sought them out. They were pretty impressive by sulrothum standards, he realized. They were all armed with iron spears and decorated with plenty of war paint, trinkets and various 'magical charms'. The only person that wasn't armed was their leader, who carried a plethora of metal rings and chains but no weapons. He also had a particularly large number of charm bundles hanging off of him, some of which actually looked like they might be doing something. Zorian immediately pegged him as a priest.

After a while the talking died down and Ibak turned to them awkwardly. Zorian could immediately tell that he didn't have good news for them, though the sulrothum themselves remained non-aggressive. Curious.

"What is it?" Zach prompted.

"This group here comes from the Ziggurat of the Sun," Ibak said slowly.

Oh.

He did think those spears were kind of familiar. However, weapons like that were hardly unique to the ziggurat tribe, so he thought nothing of it.

"They know we want to attack them, huh?" Zach mused out loud.

It wasn't that unexpected, Zorian supposed. It wasn't like they were being low-key in their alliance building. Quite the opposite, really. With that in mind, it was probably inevitable that the ziggurat tribe would detect their plans long before the actual attack was executed. Since their goal was to lure the high priest out of the ziggurat and not to catch the sulrothum by surprise, this wasn't something they cared much about.

Still, they hadn't expected the ziggurat tribe to seek them out for a friendly chat. Try to ambush them, maybe, but not this.

"Yes," Ibak confirmed. "They want to know... what it would take for you to call your attack off."

"What, no threats?" Zach asked curiously.

"No," said Ibak, shaking his head. "Just questions about your motives. Not that I know much about that myself, of course."

Zach ignored the accusatory tone in Ibak's last sentence. While he probably wouldn't betray them to the sulrothum, it wouldn't make them look any less crazy or mysterious if they told him they were doing all this for a magic ring.

"How do they know we don't want to simply take away their ziggurat?" Zach asked. "Ask them that."

"That's... are you trying to start a fight with them?" Ibak asked incredulously.

"I want to see how they react," Zach said. "Just do it."

Ibak muttered something that sounded like a curse in his native language and then started conversing with the sulrothum priest again. Interestingly, the sulrothum did not visibly react to the question at all. It wasn't long before Ibak turned to them again.

"They say three of us are not enough for that," Ibak said. "That you would have brought an army with you if you wanted to occupy something." The sulrothum priest made another series of hand gestures. "They think you want something smaller. Something *portable*. They acknowledge your strength but wonder if a trade wouldn't be preferable to bloodshed."

"What we want they would never trade away," Zorian said, shaking his head.

Should they tell them they were after the ring? No, that might make it harder to lure the high priest out of the ziggurat later... but maybe he would actually agree to hand it to them if he thought it would ward off a catastrophic attack on his tribe? The ring was important, but it wasn't like they were asking him to hand over the sandworm control dagger or something.

"Tell them this is not something they are qualified to negotiate about," Zach suddenly said. "We want to talk to their high priest."

Zorian raised his eyebrow at Zach. Did he really think it would be that easy?

A furious exchange of hand gestures occurred between Ibak and the sulrothum priest, after which Ibak turned to them again.

"They say they are also not qualified to bring strangers before their elders," Ibak said. "They are here merely to find out what you're after and if the conflict can be averted. After that, they will report back to their tribe and receive further orders. They say meeting the leaders of the tribe may be possible, but you have to give them something to bring back if you wish for that to happen."

Zach and Zorian looked at each other briefly. A quiet exchange of telepathic communication occurred between them and they quickly came to an agreement.

"I guess that makes sense," Zach admitted out loud.

Zorian reached into his pocket and retrieved a metal watch from it. Using a quick alteration spell, he melted the portion of the casing and shaped it into a replica of the imperial ring before handing it over to Ibak.

"Tell them to hand this over to the high priest as our response," Zorian said.

"He'll understand," Zach added.

Ibak raised his eyebrow at them but did as he was told. The sulrothum priest hesitantly accepted the ring, turning it in his chitinous hands. He seemed rather dubious about the explanation he was given, staring at both Zach and Zorian with his large faceted eyes in a searching manner, antennae nervously twitching in all directions.

After a while, he carefully placed the replica ring in one of the many leather pouches hanging off his body and nodded to them in a very human manner. He then waved towards his bodyguards, signaling they were done here. Apparently he realized this was all he would be getting out of them. A few minutes later the entire sulrothum group lifted into the air again and rapidly flew away in the same direction they came from.

The humans silently watched their retreat for a while, before Ibak decided to speak up.

"You brats are too damn mysterious about everything," he groused. "I don't even know why I agreed to this."

"You're getting paid handsomely for this," Zach pointed out.

"Yet I'm still starting to regret this," Ibak said. He looked towards the sulrothum settlement in the distance. "Incidentally, there is another group of sulrothum incoming. This time from the settlement we were going to visit before we got interrupted by this one."

Zorian looked towards the settlement and noticed that Ibak was correct. The local sulrothum did not dare interrupt the ziggurat tribe emissaries while they were talking to Zorian and others, but now that they were gone, they seemed to be hurriedly assembling their own emissary group to intercept them.

"Are we still going to talk to them about allying against the ziggurat tribe?" Ibak asked.

"I don't see why not," Zach said, shrugging. "There is no guarantee that the high priest will accept our message in good grace. If we thought it would be that simple to get what we want, we wouldn't have started down this path to begin with. We'll keep gathering forces, putting pressure on him while he considers what to do."

- break -

Neither Zach nor Zorian really thought the high priest would capitulate and hand them the ring without a fight. On the contrary, they felt sure it would make their task of eventually obtaining the ring far harder in this restart. However, on the off chance it did work, it would be pretty much an ideal solution to obtaining the ring in future restarts. Thus, they decided to give it a try anyway.

They didn't expect to be approached by the same emissary group the very next day, inviting them to the ziggurat to talk with the high priest.

Ibak cautioned them against accepting the offer. It was an obvious trap, he said. However, Zach and Zorian did not care. Even if the meeting was just an excuse to ambush them, they still had to go. They were far more powerful than either Ibak or the sulrothum high priest realized, and were unlikely to die. As long as they met the high priest face-to-face and he had the ring on him, they would get what they wanted, one way or another.

Unfortunately, Ibak adamantly refused to follow them into the ziggurat, calling them suicidal fools. Zorian understood the man's attitude. Ibak couldn't possibly know just how capable he and Zach really were, so his concerns were well warranted. However, this didn't make things any less frustrating and the argument was rapidly becoming heated.

The ziggurat tribe emissary calmly observed the argument for a few minutes before casting some sort of spell. Both Zach and Zorian instantly became wary, but it quickly became obvious that the sulrothum priest was casting magic on himself.

The spell was far lengthier and ritualized than what Zorian was used to when dealing with human and aranean mages, involving nearly a minute of buzzing and gesturing, and at the end of it the sulrothum priest burned a handful of scented materials as some kind of offering to the heavens. An entirely superfluous gesture as far as Zorian could tell, not impacting the spellcasting results at all.

This done, the emissary straightened himself up and faced them again.

“The fight: unnecessary,” he declared with a somewhat distorted but perfectly understandable human voice. “Talk: still possible. No need to pressure companion.”

Zach and Zorian stared at the sulrothum for a while before Zach spoke up again.

“You could have done this right from the start and you let us talk through a translator all this time?” he asked.

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The sulrothum's antenna twitched nervously as he tried to decipher Zach's words.

“He clearly has only a rudimentary knowledge of Ikosian tongue,” Ibak said in an exasperated manner. “It makes perfect sense for him to prefer conversing with me, using more familiar hand gestures, than bothering with this.”

“My speech: poor,” the emissary added. “High priest: much better. Will be enough until we reach temple.”

After some more discussion, Zach and Zorian agreed to leave Ibak and followed the sulrothum back to the ziggurat. Despite their worries, they were not attacked at any point in the journey, not even when they entered the ziggurat itself. Instead the emissary dutifully led them through the empty corridors and straight into the temple, where the high priest and his honor guard waited for them.

Zorian was honestly a little surprised. The sulrothum had actually brought them in front of their high priest, just as they had promised. Sure, the room was also packed full of heavily-armed guards and several lesser priests, but it did not seem like they were walking into an ambush. The sulrothum were tense and agitated, but they did not move to attack them.

The high priest stood proudly in front of the huge sacred fire that served as the heart of the temple. Situated at the top of a large stone dais, the fire illuminated the entire place in a dull orange glow. The air was uncomfortably hot and dry, even though Zach and Zorian had spent their time traveling through a scorching desert just before coming here. From his elevated position, the sulrothum high priest silently stared down on them, his multifaceted eyes unblinkingly studying their every move.

A deathly, uncomfortable silence soon descended on the scene. For several minutes, the two sides simply stood in their spots without making a move. Even Zach remained patient and unmoving, reluctant to make the first move.

Finally, the high priest seemed to reach a decision. He reached towards one of his hands and removed a familiar ring from it. He then placed it on his palm and thrust it towards them decisively.

“Take it,” he said. His voice was deep and resonant, and echoed dramatically throughout the room.

“Just like that?” Zach asked curiously.

“You do not want it?” the high priest asked.

“We want it,” Zach said. “I’m just a little surprised by your behavior.”

“I mirror your sentiments, human,” the high priest declared. “I, too, am... a little surprised by your behavior. If you wanted the ring, why did you not just come here and ask for it? Why bother with the hostilities?”

Zach looked at him like he was stupid.

“What are you talking about?” Zorian said. “Are you saying you’d have given us the ring if we had simply walked in here and asked you to?”

“Of course,” the high priest said. “We are children of angels. What child dares defy its parents?”

“The angels?” repeated Zorian confusingly.

The high priest stared at them silently for a few seconds.

“As I thought,” he said, lowering the hand that held the ring. “You do not know.”

“No, we really don’t,” Zach freely admitted. “What are you talking about?”

“Have you tried to contact the angels recently?” the high priest asked.

Zorian raised an eyebrow at him. What a ridiculous idea. As if anyone could just contact the angels to have a friendly chat of something. Besides...

“The spirit world cannot be contacted at the moment,” Zorian said.

“Ah, so you do know that much at least...” the high priest said, his antennae waving in the air lazily. “Good. Just before the angels fell silent, they graced us with their presence and gave us a warning. They said that in the coming month, a powerful human mage may arrive here and ask for the

ring. If that were to happen... we are to simply hand it over without struggle."

Zach and Zorian stayed silent, digesting the explanation. Angels specifically instructed the sulrothum to hand over the ring to them? Well, to the time loop controller, really. To Zach. Did that mean that angels were the ones to give Zach the marker?

It would certainly explain how Zach could have gotten a divine blessing when such things were supposed to be all but extinct in modern times...

"Why would the angels tell you to do such a thing?" Zach frowned.

"I don't know," the high priest said, cocking his head to the side like a curious bird. "You should tell me."

"Well, did they actually give you a description of this 'powerful human mage'?" Zach asked agitatedly. "Did they leave some kind of message for him?"

"No descriptions, no message," the high priest responded curtly. "However, they did assure us not to worry about the loss of the ring. They said... that in the end, the loss would be just a temporary matter."

Before Zach and Zorian could say anything else, the high priest threw the ring at them. Zach caught it in his hand and inspected it. However, that was largely pointless. Zorian could tell through his marker that the ring was genuine, and so could Zach.

"The heavens instruct; the children obey," the high priest stated. "You have what you came here for. You may leave now."

This was apparently the end of the meeting, because then the regular priests soon came to them, and politely but insistently ushered them out of the ziggurat.

- break -

Somewhere in the jungles of Blantyre, not far from the coast, was an unremarkable dirt trail made by the local lizardmen. This was normally a quiet and rarely used road, but today this sleepy peace was shattered by an entire group of humans loudly and messily trudging through the region. Though sheer manpower and powerful magic, they cut down the vegetation that threatened to overgrow the path and continued inexorably towards their destination.

This was Daimen and his personal team looking for rumors about the imperial staff. This time, Zach and Zorian had decided to tag along with them for a while. It had been four days since they had managed to obtain the imperial ring from the sulrothum, and they were still somewhat under the impression of what they had heard in the ziggurat. They didn't know what to think about the whole incident. Clearly the angels were aware that the time loop was going to be activated and took at least some precautions in regards to that... did that mean they were behind the whole thing?

Zach certainly did not remember even talking to an angel, much less receiving any sort of instructions from them. Of course, it was possible that Red Robe was responsible for that, having erased Zach's memory of that for some reason, but then one couldn't help but ask why they didn't plan for that possibility and leave a message for him through one of their other servants. The ring situation proved they were both capable and willing to make such contingencies when it suited them, so why not for other things as well?

There were no easy answers for that. Even Alanic admitted that this sort of thing did not make much sense to him, though he did not seem to be too disturbed. The angels work in mysterious ways, he said, since they labor under many limitations and restrictions placed on them by the gods. Many times they simply *couldn't* do the logical thing, or even tell you why they are acting the way they do. One just had to have faith that they knew what they were doing and not rely on them too much.

Well, at least this way they had a trivially easy way of recovering the imperial ring...

"See, I told you Princess was the solution!" Zach said, spinning the imperial ring on his finger.

"This is not how you expected things to go and we both know it," Zorian told him firmly. He looked over to the side where Kirma was fiddling with the brand new divination compass Zorian had made for her. "So? What do you think?"

She didn't answer for a moment, opting to instead cast a quick series of divinations through the device before turning it in her hands a few more times. Like her old one, it was flower-shaped and made of metal, but with a much denser array of spell formula. Zorian was pretty sure his work was a massive improvement on what she had been working with up until now, but high level diviners were finicky and what worked for him might not necessarily work for her.

"Very impressive," she finally concluded. "A bit bigger and heavier than I'm used to, but I can work with this. It feels a little weird to accept something this valuable for free, though."

"Free?" Torun scoffed from their side. One of the floating eyeballs that followed him swiveled towards them while Torun simply kept scanning the jungle canopy for something. He had a bad habit of not looking people in the eye while talking to them, letting his floating eyeballs maintain eye contact instead. "He's had all of us searching an entire continent worth of jungle for a straightened piece of wood without having to pay us a single thing. It was about time he started handing out gifts."

"That's not very fair," Kirma protested. "We're also doing this for ourselves, not just for him"

“And I’m paying plenty of money to make this happen,” Zorian pointed out.

“Fake time loop money,” Torun said dismissively. “Doesn’t count.”

“Also, why don’t I get a gift?” Taiven suddenly asked, having snuck up to them from behind while they were talking. “Seriously, Zorian… you’re handing out expensive gifts to strange women, but you don’t have anything for your old pal Taiven? Shame on you!”

Zorian looked at her, amused. He’d thought she was still busy gawking at the jungle sights, since this was the first time she had ever stepped foot in one, but apparently she had calmed down a little and decided to seek him out.

Kirma gave Taiven a less friendly look, since she apparently didn’t like being labeled a ‘strange woman’ out of the blue.

“My gift to you is taking you with me to Blantyre, even though you have no useful skills for the mission and no wilderness survival experience,” Zorian told her blandly.

“Eh, I guess that’s true,” she laughed nervously. “I really do appreciate it, though. Traveling to exotic lands, searching for ancient artifacts… this sort of expedition is exactly what I hoped to one day experience. It’s great! It’s just too bad I can’t put this on my job profile or something.”

She was entirely too giddy about the whole thing. On one hand it was kind of annoying to have her dance around the whole group like an excited little girl, on the other hand it kind of made him glad he had agreed to bring her along, since this clearly meant so much to her.

At least she wasn’t defenseless. The one time she had walked into a patch of carnivorous plants, she burned them all to ashes before anyone had even realized what had happened. Her inexperience aside, she was a decent combat mage.

Eventually, the group soon reached their destination – a small lizardmen village where they would supposedly find a reclusive sage that knew ‘everything’ about the history of the region. While the ‘everything’ was almost certainly an exaggeration, there was probably *some* sort of basis for his reputation, right?

Right.

The village was a humble one, with tiny houses made out of mud and straw. There was a river right next to it, and most of the adult villagers were currently busy tending to their boats, which they dragged onto the shore for easier handling. The children were either shuttling tools and materials between various work groups or chasing each other and play fighting while their parents shouted something vaguely threatening at them. Probably telling them to stop messing around or demanding they get out of the way if they wouldn’t help.

Their arrival caused a small commotion in the group, but they were mostly curious rather than wary. Most lizardmen never saw a human in their entire life, Zorian had learned, so they did not know what to expect of them. Since the group was accompanied by lizardmen guides hired in the nearby city-state and no one in the group carried an obvious weapon like a spear or a club, the villagers were not particularly frightened of them.

Annoyingly, this meant that some of the braver children tried to examine them closer or even touch them. One of them specifically picked Zorian as a target, probably because he was one of the shorter humans present, and kept asking him something while poking him.

Lizardmen language sounded nothing like normal lizard hissing. It was more like a high-pitched, warbling bird song. Zorian understood none of it, but by peering into the kids mind and listening to the snickering explanation of their lizardmen guides, he managed to puzzle out that the child was asking him if he was a ‘fairy’.

He hated this village already.

In any case, the group eventually set up a small camp just outside the village, with most of the group just idling around while the leaders of the village exchanged gifts with Daimen and went through various ceremonial gestures. The whole procedure was annoyingly lengthy, but apparently necessary. The reclusive sage they wanted to talk with was normally… well, *reclusive*. He wouldn’t deign to meet most people, but perhaps if they could convince the village elders to put in a good word for them, he might give them a chance.

Zorian was currently sitting on one of the cut down logs on the outskirts of the village, watching some of the lizardmen children fight the animated mud person he had created out of the ground to distract them from himself. Although the mud construct had the size and strength comparable to an adult human, the truth was that humans were notably smaller and weaker than lizardmen. Their vaguely crocodilian frames were wider and larger than human ones, and their skin was covered in tough leathery scales. Thus, even though the mud construct’s enemies were mere children, it was still being gradually overpowered. This was pretty much how Zorian had intended it to be, however. He didn’t really want to hurt the little brats, even if they were loud, grabby and generally annoying.

Not far from him, some enterprising lizardman woman had come to try and peddle her crafts and trinkets to the gathered humans, trying to exchange pottery and necklaces made out of colorful stones for metal tools and fabrics. She was currently ‘negotiating’ with one of the female members of the group, each of them loudly talking at one another, even though neither spoke the other’s language.

He took off his glasses and started obsessively cleaning them. Damn it, when was this damn meeting going to en-

“Why so impatient?” asked a voice beside him. “It is good to sit down from time to time and appreciate the simpler things in life.”

His heart skipped a beat when the voice started talking. He turned towards the source of the voice, shocked to find that there was suddenly a

strange lizardman sitting next to him. And he did mean ‘suddenly’. The lizardman did not register at all on Zorian’s mind sense and seemingly materialized out of nowhere when he started talking.

He was also very, very weird-looking. An intricate pattern of blue and white lines was painted over his whole body, and he wore what seemed to be a massive deer skull over the top of his head. A multitude of bone armbands, necklaces and ankle-bands decorated his limbs and neck. Resting horizontally on his lap was a gnarled wooden staff with a huge pearl attached on top of it.

His posture and appearance gave the impression of someone old and worn down – eyes half-closed, scales cracked and faded in places, his posture hunched and drooping – despite that, he inspired a faint feeling of terror in Zorian, who couldn’t understand how he had been able to sneak up on him so easily.

“I hear you’ve been looking for me,” the lizardman said. He was speaking fluent Ikosian, which was kind of interesting but way down the list of questions Zorian wanted answered at the moment.

“What? Oh, you’re the sage we wanted to speak with,” Zorian realized.

“Indeed,” the lizardman said, fiddling with one of the bone armbands while watching the children play with Zorian’s mud construct. “I dislike this kind of attention, so I decided to just meet with one of you and be done with it.”

Zorian looked around and realized no one seemed to be paying attention to his conversation with the weird lizardman that had showed up out of nowhere.

“Only you can see and hear me,” he said casually.

This was such bullshit.

“Why did you pick me out of everyone else present?” Zorian asked with a small frown.

“I like you,” he said. “You took the time to play with the children. Don’t you remember what I said earlier? It is good to sit down from time to time and appreciate the simpler things in life.”

Zorian looked at him incredulously, not sure if the lizardman was being serious or not. He had only made that toy so the children would let him rest in peace.

“How did you sneak up on me?” Zorian couldn’t help but ask.

“I’m old,” the lizardman said, tapping the staff in his lap with his scaly, clawed fingers. “Ancient. It’s natural to have a couple of secrets.”

He did not offer to explain any further and Zorian did not press him.

The staff was probably some kind of divine artifact. Zorian checked it out with his marker, just in case it was the one they were after. It wasn’t.

“What did you seek me out for?” the lizardman asked, his half-closed eye focusing more firmly on him.

Zorian quickly described the origin and probable appearance of the staff to the old lizardman. The sage patiently listened to his explanation, saying nothing. He said nothing for nearly fifteen minutes, seemingly lost in thought. Occasionally he whistled to himself softly in the native lizardmen tongue, tapping on his various bone ornaments and drawing some kind of simple geometric diagrams in dirt.

Zorian patiently waited for the lizardman to come to his senses again, not daring to interrupt his musings. Unfortunately, when the sage finally turned to him again, he did not have a favorable answer for him.

“I cannot remember anything that would help you in your quest,” the lizardman said, shaking his head sadly. The various bone necklaces hanging from his neck clinked softly at the movement.

Zorian sighed. So much for *that*.

“However...” the lizardman continued, “I have an idea where you might look for more knowledge on the matter, if you feel brave enough. This staff... it is a very valuable thing, yes?”

“Yes,” Zorian confirmed.

“There is a particularly loathsome dragon mage terrorizing our people throughout the entire region and beyond,” the sage said. “I don’t know her name, but our people refer to her as the Violet-Eyed Disaster, The Covetous One or Typhoon. For centuries she has preyed upon our communities, snatching away any item that catches her fancy and killing anyone that tried to bar her way. Many important artifacts have been lost to her. If this staff of yours is as important as it seems, she has probably tried to find it and knows a thing or two about its whereabouts. Perhaps... it may already be in her possession.”

Zorian gave the lizardman an unamused look. An infamous dragon mage? There were few things in the world more dangerous than that... feeling brave indeed.

Still, the old guy's logic was sound and the idea was worth checking out. Didn't Zach already demonstrate the ability to kill Oganj, who was similarly an infamous dragon mage?

"So what do you—" Zorian began to speak, only to realize the old lizardman was no longer there.

He waved his hand through the air where the sage had been sitting next to him, but hit only empty space.

Groaning audibly, Zorian wandered off to find Zach and Daimen to inform them that arranging the meeting with the sage was no longer necessary.

- break -

Zorian woke up with a panicked scream as an endless deluge of ice cold water poured on top of his head as he slept. Stumbling and flailing around in panic, he tried to jump out of bed, but the wet fabric clung to him and made him trip. He tumbled awkwardly to the floor, frantically trying to rub the water out of his eyes while searching for his glasses.

When he had finally come to his senses and looked around, he found Kirielle pressed into a corner of the room by the door, a large bucket clutched tightly in her hands.

There was still water dripping from it onto the floor.

"Kirielle... what the hell are you doing!?" Zorian shouted incredulously.

"I, u-umm..." she stumbled, pacing nervously while clutching the bucket in her hands tightly. "I was trying to make you assume your true form!"

Zorian looked at her like she was crazy.

Actually, scratch that – she *was* crazy!

"True form!?" he asked her. "What the hell are you on about? You just dumped a bucket of cold water on my head in the middle of the night!"

"I read in the book that doppelgangers assume their true forms if you surprise them while they're sleeping," she said. "So, um, if you dump water on them when they're deep asleep, they'll drop their disguise and assume their true form."

Zorian stared at her, unable to believe her explanation.

"You think I'm a face-changer?" Zorian asked her in a calm voice.

"Y-You aren't acting like the Zorian I know," she said while staring at the ground and refusing to look at him. "You have all these friends all of a sudden, you didn't get angry at all when Imaya asked you about Daimen and... you're way too nice to me."

Zorian sighed and ran his hand through his wet hair to get it out of his eyes. He looked at the closed door, confused as to why the entire house hadn't woken up by now because of all the shouting, but then he remembered he had put pretty strong privacy wards on the room.

"If you thought I was a doppelganger, you should have at least gotten someone to back you up when confronting me," Zorian told her.

He made a couple of gestures and pressed his hands against his chest, evaporating most of the water out of his clothes.

"You're too good at magic, too," Kirielle added. "That's another thing that's weird. But, umm... you didn't change forms, so I guess you really are Zorian."

Zorian debated the merits of using an illusion to seemingly morph into some kind of grotesque monster right at that moment, but immediately discarded it as too cruel. As much as he wanted to rage and get back at her, she had good reasons for pulling off this stupid stunt.

He was getting entirely too careless around her, it seemed.

"Yes, I really am Zorian," he told her in an exasperated tone. He took the bucket from her hands and lifted her up before marching back to his bed and plopping her right on top of it.

Right on top of the wet part, that is.

"Why!?" she protested, immediately jumping off the bed and inspecting her suddenly wet behind.

"Punishment," Zorian said pitilessly. "You did say I was too nice to you, no?"

She gave him an angry look but said nothing.

"Anyway," he said. "I suppose I can tell you a little bit about what's going on and why things are so weird right now..."

- break -

Time marched on. The search for the staff in Blantyre, the research on pocket dimensions and other points of interest, the training of people with

the aid of Black Rooms and nigh-limitless resources... as the restarts started to accumulate, these and other projects started to gradually bear fruit. Just like that, another five restarts had passed.

89. Victory

Chapter 089

Victory

It was a peaceful summer day in the Great Northern Forest. The vegetation was vibrantly green and thriving, colorful flowers covered the forest meadows, the songbirds were seemingly competing to see which one of them was louder and shriller than the next, and strange insects were flying through the air.

While the vast expanse of trees that covered the northern portion of the Altazian continent was usually portrayed as a dark and foreboding place, crawling with dangerous monsters and hidden dangers, the truth is that the area could be quite beautiful and breathtaking. One just had to be strong enough to survive the challenges and travel the land unchecked.

Zorian, Taiven and Kael were definitely strong enough. Not just because Zorian was present in the group, either. Taiven and Kael had gone through five whole loops by now, each of which included additional time in the Black Rooms. They'd had nearly an entire year to improve their magic, backed by nearly unlimited resources and top-tier tutors. Even Kael, who spent most of that time focusing on alchemy, was now capable of at least defending himself from common threats. As for Taiven, she was a combat magic specialist to begin with. Her power was probably equal to an average professional combat mage at this point. She even had real combat experience, since she insisted on fighting the Ibasan invaders at the end of every restart and often participated in minor battles that Daimen's team stumbled upon while exploring Blantyre. Even if Zorian decided to stand back and let the other two fend for themselves, there was very little in the forest around them that could threaten them.

Currently, the three of them were resting on a large boulder in one of the forest clearings and playing a game of cards. It was just something to pass the time while they rested their feet. They had been wandering the forest for hours before stumbling upon the clearing, and it looked so perfect for a temporary camp they decided to take a bit of a break. They didn't intend to stay here for very long.

As Zorian pondered his next move, he felt Taiven 'subtly' try to take a peek at his cards with a spying spell. Zorian was proud for her for expanding her horizons beyond flashy combat magic, but that didn't stop him from reflexively crushing her magic into nothingness before giving her a knowing smile. She pouted for a moment, before remembering she was supposed to act like she didn't know anything and schooling her expression into one of indifference.

Kael silently observed the scene from the side before shaking his head in amusement, probably guessing what had happened. Zorian suspected Taiven had tried to use the same trick on Kael as well, though he had no idea if the morlock boy had managed to stop her, or even noticed her cheating. Then again, Kael didn't seem to take the card game very seriously. He seemed to be playing mindlessly, uncaring of how likely he is to win. Zorian supposed this sort of attitude made perfect sense, since this was supposed to be just a nice relaxing game with no stakes, but it faintly annoyed him anyway.

Zorian himself didn't try to cheat, of course. That would suck the joy out of the whole activity, since it would be so trivial for him to succeed. He simply immersed himself in the game while listening to the sounds of the wilderness around them. His legs throbbed in pain, unused to the level of activity he was engaging in, but he had kind of gotten used to that by now. Even with the aid of potions and mind magic, the beginning of every restart involved Zorian being in a constant state of dull pain because he lived far more actively than he had before the time loop. Hopefully that wouldn't have any long-term mental effects on him once he was out of the time loop...

He was broken out of his thoughts by a loud crunching sound. Looking to the side, he saw Kael with a large yellow root stuffed in his mouth.

Taiven gave Kael a strange, possibly disapproving look.

"What?" Kael complained, chewing loudly. The sound it produced reminded Zorian of someone eating a raw carrot.

"How can you eat that thing?" she asked him.

"It's really tasty," he told her matter-of-factly.

"It's a wild root you washed in a nearby river," she protested. "That cannot possibly be safe or hygienic. Plus, I can smell it from here and it doesn't smell like something you should be eating..."

Kael gave her a challenging look before biting into the root again and chewing even louder.

Zorian pretended to study his cards while inwardly chuckling in amusement. Personally, he wasn't worried about Kael in the slightest. Although the morlock was the weakest of the three in terms of combat strength, he was the person who was most at home in the forest. He had been working and living in this very environment ever since he was a child, and doubtlessly knew exactly what was safe to eat and how.

Taiven had gotten relatively close to Kael after they had both received a temporary marker, since the two of them were arguably the closest in age and relative skill among the new loopers, so she probably knew that too. Thus, she simply threw her hands in the air with a huff, accidentally showing them a glimpse of the cards she was holding, and dropped the issue.

Zorian took note of her cards and changed his tactics accordingly. This wasn't cheating, of course. Taking advantage of your opponent's mistakes was only natural. It wasn't his problem that he could memorize her entire hand flawlessly after seeing it for only a fraction of a second...

After another fifteen minutes of chatting, playing cards, eating roots and berries and lazing around, the three of them reluctantly decided to move on. After all, this whole expedition originated from Kael's desire to search for rare alchemical ingredients in the depths of the Great Northern Forest. This wasn't really some critical task that had to be done, and the three of them were mostly using it as an excuse to relax and socialize, but they did intend to seriously search for things Kael was after.

For the next half an hour or so, Zorian followed after Kael casting divination after divination and occasionally taking over the minds of forest birds in order to scout the area around them. Taiven also utilized divinations, having achieved some measure of expertise in the field over the various restarts, while Kael mostly relied on his own two eyes. Considering his extensive experience in searching for magical plants, however, he probably still saw and understood far more than Zorian and Taiven did.

Every once in a while the morlock boy would inspect some random stump or boulder, occasionally picking up some other magical plant that wasn't on their list, but which he apparently also considered worthwhile, and occasionally just stared at them meaningfully while pondering some mysterious issue. The backpacks the three of them wore had all been made by Zorian, and were considerably larger on the inside than they appeared, but Zorian estimated Kael's backpack was already starting to get full from the various plants, jars full of worms and beetles, and even some colorful stones that seemed pretty mundane to Zorian's eyes. Even if they failed to find the things they were searching for, Kael certainly intended to make the most out of this expedition, that's for sure.

Relaxing times like these had become increasingly rare in these last five restarts. Everyone was constantly busy with something, whether it was following some plan, searching for things that could help them, experimenting with exotic magics or simply training their skills. This was especially true in this particular restart, since this was the last restart for the temporary loopers. If they could not figure out a way to modify the temporary markers before the end of the restart, they would lose... well, *everything*.

Sure enough, eventually Kael and Taiven could not help but bring up the issue that was constantly in the back of everyone's mind these days.

"This is the end, isn't it?" Kael suddenly said.

The other two gave him conflicted looks. There was no need to ask him what he meant by that.

"Tell us honestly, Zorian... what are the chances we can figure out how to adjust our markers before this month runs out?" Kael continued, seeing how he had their attention.

Zorian suppressed a sigh. Temporary markers... they had spent almost a year studying them, if one factored in the time spent in Black Rooms, and in that time they had made significant progress. They managed to map the general structure of the markers and figure out what many of the pieces did. They compared these markers to the larger, more complete markers embedded in Zach and Zorian. They placed and removed temporary markers on random people to test possible modifications and see what happened. They found out that, yes, the markers really did contain components made out of divine energies... and they also found a way to deal with that. Through several ruinously expensive deals with Quatach-Ichl and innumerable destroyed divine artifacts, they managed to create methods to detect and crudely manipulate strands of divine energy inside their markers. Not enough to manipulate them as they wished, but enough to tear out some portions of the structure and change how this divine foundation interacted with more normal magic that surrounded it.

It wasn't enough. Despite their best efforts, the solution remained frustratingly out of reach.

What bothered Zorian most about this was that he didn't think the problem was impossible. They were making good progress. He felt they were definitely on the right track. He felt that this was something that could definitely be solved in time.

Could they figure out a way to prolong the temporary marker in one more restart? No. Not even three would be enough. But maybe if they had five or six... if their soul magic was more developed... if they had easier access to the imperial crown resting on Quatach-Ichl's head... if they had learned how to sense divine energies sooner...

If. If, if, if...

"No," Zorian finally admitted. "There is no chance at all."

All three of them walked in silence for a while.

"I am actually not that upset," Taiven eventually said. "The idea that I could just suddenly disappear at the end of the month was terrifying at first, but I've gotten used to it by now. I even died in one of the restarts."

Zorian vividly remembered that one. Watching Taiven get decapitated by a war troll was strangely upsetting, even though he knew she would be fine in the next restart.

"I mean, I don't *want* to disappear at the end of the month," Taiven continued, "but we've done everything we could and it was fun while it lasted. If this is how it has to be, then so be it."

"Indeed," Kael said. "Besides, if I understood Zorian correctly, there are only 13 more restarts left at this point. A little more than a year. We're not losing all that much."

"Both of you talk like you think you're dead for sure," Zorian said. "Have some faith, okay? Modifying the temporary markers is probably a failure, but the possibility of exiting the time loop still remains. This was our fallback plan if we couldn't modify the markers, remember?"

“Oh?” Taiven perked up. “That’s still an option?”

“Of course,” said Zorian. “What do you think we have been doing all this time?”

“Well, I don’t know,” Taiven said with a grin. “That mean old witch keeps complaining about you ‘wasting your time on distractions’ and ‘taking too many breaks from your duties’, so...”

“Silverlake thinks everyone should be a tireless golem except her,” Zorian said with a derisive snort. “It’s not like she never takes any breaks or tinkers with new potions that have no connection to anything urgent.”

“I thought that whole project was still shrouded in uncertainty, though,” Kael pointed out.

“Well, yeah,” Zorian reluctantly admitted. “We have yet to actually try things, so it’s all very theoretical. However, just because we are uncertain about some things doesn’t mean the attempt is bound to fail. It’s hard to put actual numbers on things, but I think there is at least a 70% chance that we could transport people’s souls into the real world, and 30% or so that we could successfully open a dimensional bridge that would let us physically step out of the time loop.”

The two of them gave him complex looks that he could not interpret. It was a little hard to accurately discern their emotions these days, since they had both learned to protect their minds and emotions with unstructured mental defenses. In fact, this was something that *all* temporary loopers decided to invest time in, once they realized the extent of Zorian’s mental powers. Even the ones that already had some level of unstructured mental defenses promptly decided they were insufficient and needed to be strengthened as much as possible.

Zorian understood their reasoning. It was just like that old saying: trust your neighbor, but lock the door. Even if you trusted someone to be a moral and principled person, it was better not to tempt them with easy opportunities. Thus, he did not take such things against them. In fact, he encouraged it. Considering aranea explicitly considered anyone with an unshielded mind fair game for psychic invasion and that they were working closely with several groups of them, getting some level of mental protection was just plain common sense.

“If the only option to exit the time loop is to steal our original bodies from our past selves, I would rather stay here and forget everything,” Kael said, shaking his head. “Additionally, I only care about physically leaving if it allows me to take Kana with me. If not, I’d rather stay with her till the end.”

Zorian opened his mouth to say something, but then realized that it probably didn’t matter that Kana doesn’t have the temporary marker. If they physically left the time loop, every person was as good as any other.

Would others also want to bring family members with them? That... could get kind of complicated.

“Err, I might have gone for the soul exit if it was actually an option,” Taiven said hesitantly. “I mean, I feel sorry for old Taiven but let’s get real here... she is kind of an idiot.”

Zorian’s lips twitched into the beginning of a smile, but he suppressed it.

“As it is, I am not actually capable of taking this way out,” Taiven said. “I’m not even good enough to survive Silverlake’s soul perception granting potion, never mind possessing my old body. So physically crossing over is the only option for me, really.”

Zorian nodded slowly. Truthfully, this was true for most people. People who had zero experience with soul magic would find it impossible to get good enough at it to survive the soul transferal and successfully possess their body. People who were well versed in soul magic, even before the time loop, would probably be annihilated by the originals if they tried to possess them. Aside from Zorian, only Kael, Xvim and Lukav had a good chance of pulling that off. And Xvim, much like Kael, had already ruled out the idea of ‘stealing his own life away from himself’.

“Physical exit is what we’re aiming for, anyway,” Zorian said. “Transferring souls is more of a last resort than anything.”

“Yes, but you admitted yourself that chances of success aren’t too high. Not even a coin toss,” Taiven noted. “So yeah, there is still hope... but it’s nothing to get excited about. Hell, you’re probably putting a positive spin on things to cheer us up!”

“No, not at all,” Zorian said, shaking his head. “I was actually trying to be conservative with my estimates. I really think this could work.”

“There is one thing that’s been bothering me about all this,” Kael said. “We’ve spent a lot of time trying to figure out a way out of the time loop, but did you think about what we’re going to do if we succeed with this? If we physically step into the outside world with all our skills and knowledge?”

“Stop the invasion from destroying Cyoria?” Taiven tried, raising her eyebrow at him.

“Well, yes. But what about afterwards?” Kael asked. “You have an entire life in front of you, but there is already someone living your life for you. Are you going to avoid your friends and family and set up a new life for yourself elsewhere? Or are you going to do your best to insert yourself into your old life and damn the consequences? What if someone reports you to the authorities and they come to drag you off? How would you explain your presence and identity?”

Taiven squirmed uncomfortably.

“I don’t know,” she admitted, biting her lip. ‘Honestly, I try not to think about things like that. I’m kind of impulsive, so even if I reach a resolution here, I will probably just break it when I actually get there. So there’s no point. I can only hope I’ll be able to figure something out when the time comes. I don’t want to ruin the other Taiven’s life, but... I don’t know. What about you two?’

“I’m fairly disconnected from most people,” Kael shrugged. “So long as I have my own Kana, everything is fine. I guess I would deliver my alchemy notes to my original and then wander off to do my own thing. But I’m not sure very many of us are like that. Silverlake and Alanic, maybe. The rest? There are probably at least a few of them that would fight bitterly for a piece of their old life.”

“Honestly? I don’t think I could stay away,” Zorian admitted. ‘I’d try to ‘reform’ my original into something better. Teach him a few things, nudge him into getting closer with Kirielle, things like that. A bit manipulative, but it would come along with personal magic instruction and other help so I think it could work. I wouldn’t try to steal his life away, though. If there was no place for me in my old life, I would find something else to amuse myself with.’

“As I said, I’m not sure everyone would be so serene about it,” Kael pointed out.

“Yeah, I know,” Zorian nodded. “Zach and I purposely didn’t raise the issue to the group, since we felt there was no way to reach any kind of official agreement on this. No matter the conclusion, someone would disagree. Possibly violently. The entire group might even fragment, if someone feels very strongly about the option that was chosen or *not* chosen. It’s better to keep everyone focused on the immediate problem and worry about these things later.”

Despite such efforts, however, they already had a couple of casualties. Two restarts ago, a pair of professors Xvim included into the group decided they couldn’t handle the existential implications of the time loop and asked for their temporary markers to be removed so they could forget everything. Additionally, one of the aranea from the Luminous Advocates became so hysterical and violent that the other aranea asked for her to be stripped of her marker and ejected from the group. Zorian wasn’t sure what had caused that, but since the other Luminous Advocates mysteriously acquired soul perception around that time, he suspected it was a product of some secret procedure they had collectively performed on themselves. In the interest of not starting a fight, though, he decided not to pursue the issue.

With this being the last restart in which the temporary markers would remain effective, the pressure on people would only increase.

Zorian really hoped nobody would crack too badly before the end.

- break -

Spells could only persist for so long. Even the most stable spell, supplied with an ample amount of mana, would fall apart in a couple of hours if not anchored to something. Thus, enhancement rituals had a problem. They aimed to place the user under a permanent magic effect or give them an innate magic ability, but that meant they had to anchor the spell to something to prevent it from decaying.

This was a great problem. Anchoring the magic to one’s flesh by inscribing sigils into the skin was ill advised. Forcing large quantities of mana to flow through living flesh, even if it was one’s personal mana, was usually unhealthy in the long term. Additionally, the resulting anchor was easy to break by physically harming the sigils, which was likely to result in dire consequences for the user. Abrupt, uncontrolled spell failures were dangerous enough in normal circumstances – when the spell was embedded into one’s very flesh and bones, the grisly result could be easily imagined.

Fortunately, there was a solution. Far in the distant past, some nameless mage had discovered how to repurpose a portion of their mana reserves into a spell anchor for the enhancement ritual. Since one’s mana reserves were kept naturally stable by the soul, any magic fashioned from them would also be kept stable. The only problem was that since the anchor was literally made out of one’s mana reserves, the caster would permanently have less mana at their disposal. The mana used in the construction of the anchor would never recover, since it was still there in the caster’s reserves, being stabilized by their soul along with the rest of it.

There was one additional issue, however. Even though an enhancement ritual could grant the user a magical ability, it was ultimately just fancy transformation magic. It never expired, it was almost impossible to dispel and the user had very fine control over it, but they would not get the same instinctive affinity with it that the base creature had.

This was where blood magic came into play. It allowed a mage to anchor the spell not only to their mana reserves, but to their life force as well. The resulting connection was deep and potent – potent enough that the user’s descendants had a chance to inherit the ability in question as a bloodline. The innate understanding of the base creature was also transferred over to the new user, allowing them to use it almost as well as someone who had been born with it right from the start.

Enhancement rituals were dangerous. Poorly executed, they could kill the user or permanently ruin them as a mage. More than one mage had completely locked down their mana reserves or transformed them into something that ripped them to shreds from the inside.

Blood magic rituals were dangerous. The user had to cut complicated patterns into their flesh and bleed themselves in order to stir up their vitality and coax their life force into appropriate structures. Unless one knew exactly what they were doing, it was very easy to die of blood loss, or worse.

Zach and Zorian combined the two anyway. They started small, but moved on quickly to more ambitious projects due to time constraints. They made mistakes, but none of them too serious... and any lingering consequences were washed away at the end of every restart. With the help of Kael, they tracked down and talked with surviving morlock blood mages scattered across the continent, seeking advice and tricks of the trade.

They practiced with their new abilities and took note of which one worked best for them and why.

Now, with time running out and this restart being so critical, they decided to immediately put those skills into practice. They performed the relevant rituals at the very beginning of the restart. A week and a half later, when their mana reserves and life force mostly stabilized, they gathered Xvim, Silverlake and Daimen for a project that would test their dimensionalism skills to the limit. Something that would prove that they were capable of eventually creating the gateway out of the loop.

They were going to create a miniature copy of the palace orb.

Currently, Zach, Zorian, Silverlake, Xvim and Daimen were all standing on the edge of a massive spell formula circle, equidistant from each other. They had spent the past several hours embedding the spell circle into the ground of this place, followed by setting up several complicated wards that had to be layered just right for the whole thing to work correctly. Now they were resting and adjusting their minds for the final task in front of them.

There was a luxurious house sitting in the center of the circle, surrounded by a large garden and ornamental trees. It stood in a fairly isolated location and Zach and Zorian actually bought the entire place, so they shouldn't be interrupted by anyone. Silverlake complained about the amount of money that had been wasted on this, when they could have simply 'stolen' a house from someone or picked a random patch of ground, but Zach didn't want to hear it. He wanted his own pocket mansion, and he wanted it to really be his.

In any case, the idea behind their current project was a little different than that behind other pocket dimension creation projects. Previously, Zach and Zorian had focused on isolating a patch of space with a dimensional membrane and then inflating it to desired volume. Now they would be forcibly isolating a large patch of land from the rest of the world, compressing it and then attaching it to a prepared anchor object. In this case, that was a ball of magically-reinforced glass, for maximum resemblance to the palace orb.

This was similar to the method Silverlake used to hide her home from outside scrutiny, but harder. Silverlake simply compressed an area to make it seemingly 'disappear', but it remained connected to the rest of the world. That made her pocket dimension immovable, but easier to actually create. What they were doing now, however, would require them to effectively tear out a piece of reality and put it into a portable box for their own use.

The house and its surrounding land were not nearly as big as the space inside the palace orb. Despite that, attempting this required all five of them to join hands and perform a group magic ritual, employing every trick and advantage they could think of... and they still weren't sure if they could pull it off. Zorian didn't even want to think what it took to create something like the actual palace orb.

Looking around, Zorian saw that the others were well rested and ready to start. He took a deep breath and stepped forward. Five simulacra followed after him.

The tale has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the violation.

Zorian had long since cracked the method that Princess used to coordinate her eight heads as one entity, and was now capable of using it with his simulacra. It was a fascinating thing, connecting multiple viewpoints and thought-streams into one unified perspective, but it did have an important limitation: it could only be used when Zorian and his simulacra were broadly doing the same thing. Such as fighting the same enemy or cooperating on the same task. If he was reading books in Cyoria and his simulacra were scattered all over the world, each doing their own thing, there would be no connecting points to bind their consciousness together and the hydra method couldn't be used. But for the task at hand, it was just perfect.

He then activated the magic ability he had acquired through the enhancement ritual. He had acquired it from the humble tunneler toad, whose ability to perceive and navigate warped space had seemed most useful for his purposes. It wasn't the best ability he could have gotten, but it was relatively cheap and worked well enough for Zorian's purposes. Anchoring it to his mana reserves robbed him of roughly 8% of his maximum mana, which pained him, but did not affect him *too* badly.

Finally, he activated the mental enhancements he had crafted over the past year or so, helped by numerous aranea experts and even some human researchers. Many of his simulacra paid with their short lives to test these enhancements, and the end result was appropriately impressive for something made after so much sacrifice. His thoughts immediately became clearer and more focused, his integration with his simulacra deepened and his ability to calculate and measure things at a glance became superhuman.

Around him, he saw the others prepare themselves as well.

Zach was leaning back and forth on his feet, humming some sort of tune to himself. He looked relaxed and careless, but there was a distant look in his eyes, as if he wasn't really all there. His choice for the creature to use an enhancement ritual on was the voidsoul deer. Zach seemed to really like its ability to alter trajectories of things in the space around it, since that meant the ability was useful in combat, as well as for things like this. It was a fairly expensive ability in terms of mana reserves, but Zach was easily able to afford it. Zorian could feel the space around Zach ripple and warp as he flexed his new ability in preparation of the task at hand.

Daimen's presence was a bit of a surprise. Before the time loop, Daimen hadn't even known how to cast the gate spell, never mind how to use pocket dimension magic. However, his reputation wasn't for nothing. With a year of time and access to all the restricted material and knowledgeable tutors he could wish for, Daimen had experienced a meteoric rise in his dimensionalism skills. It reignited Zorian's jealousy a bit to see him blaze through things so easily, given that Zorian had to try so hard to get where Daimen currently was, but objectively speaking, it was a

good thing to have another capable dimensionalist on hand. It increased their chances of success immensely.

Daimen had also chosen to dabble in enhancement rituals along with Zach and Zorian – the only one of the temporary loopers that dared to do so. He picked a phase spider that Zach and Zorian were lucky to track down in one of the restarts. Their signature ability, which was literally a power to create small pocket dimensions, was bound to be very useful today.

Silverlake had stabbed six gold-plated stakes into the ground around her and was mumbling something to herself and making some sort of strange finger gestures. They didn't look like spellcasting gestures. It kind of reminded Zorian of Kirielle trying to perform math with the help of her fingers, except that he knew damn well that Silverlake was frighteningly good at performing calculations in her head. Her growth in skill over the past five restarts was difficult to judge, as she often did things on her own, and gave bullshit explanations when people tried to question her about it. Still, her skill at dimensionalism and soul magic made her one of the key people in the group, and little could be done about it.

Xvim simply stood on the edge of the spell formula circle, staring forward with arms crossed behind his back. He gave off a silent and stoic air, as if the problem in front of them was no big deal at all. Zorian didn't think his magic had improved all that much in the past five restarts, but then again he had already been a highly-capable archmage before the time loop had started. At his level, every improvement took a lot of time and effort as one started hitting their personal limits and their magic plateaued.

With a silent signal, the five of them began casting.

Glowing filaments of light sprang from Zorian's hands, and from the hands of his simulacra, crisscrossing into a dome of light over the entire area, before seemingly sinking into thin air and disappearing. Silverlake fired pitch black beams from her fingers at seemingly random spots in the air, causing flashes of red light to burst out on the invisible boundary, while Zach and XVim created pale white rings that spun lazily around the outer perimeter. Space warped and twisted, distorting the house and its surroundings like hot summer air and causing strange currents and whirlpools to be created in the sky.

A spatial membrane eventually sprang up around the house, transparent and spherical. Its surface rippled and undulated like it was made from water. Strands of inky blackness occasionally radiated from points on its surface, as if reality itself was cracking apart and letting everyone see the terrible void that existed beneath everything. These were hurriedly sealed by the five participants, disappearing into flashes of rainbow light before springing back anew somewhere else. A miniature cyclone whipped about in the air, kicking up dust and pelting the participants with leaves and small stones.

The process took hours and hours. Five times they had to rest to recover their strength, but thankfully the ritual was designed specifically with that in mind. They knew they would not have enough mana to finish the project in one go, so small breathers were planned in advance.

Eventually the process reached a critical point. The spatial membrane turned completely opaque and pitch black, its surface churning wildly like a pot of boiling water. Cracks spread out from the ground as the entire area was ripped out of the surrounding landscape, small tremors threatening to knock down the participants – something that would surely disrupt the casting at a critical moment and ruin everything. In the end everyone kept their balance, but the momentary distraction caused lances of spatial cracks to scythe through the area, reducing trees into chunks and utterly destroying one of Zorian's simulacra. He managed to compensate for the loss, however, and the casting continued.

The spherical black membrane started to repeatedly expand and then collapse inward, looking almost like a giant black heart. This process continued for several minutes, but if one observed the whole process carefully they would notice that the sphere was gradually getting smaller and smaller. It was being repeatedly compressed into an ever decreasing volume.

When the sphere had reached half of its original size, a fundamental change occurred and the whole area of space seemed to collapse inward, as if it was about to be sucked into a tiny point in the center. Zach reacted immediately, throwing a large glass ball into the center of the collapsing mass while the rest scattered sixteen stone stabilizers into the surrounding space. Each of the stones was a cube densely covered in spell formula, and they immediately floated into a dense spherical formation around the black mass.

In only a few seconds, the black mass was completely sucked into the glass ball and everything was silent and still. The strange lights and spatial distortions disappeared. The area inside the spell formula circle had completely disappeared, leaving behind a circular crater where the house and garden once stood. In the center of that crater floated an innocuous-looking glass globe, with sixteen stone cubes lazily orbiting around it.

Then, with a deafening boom, all of the stone cubes shattered and fell to the ground. The glass globe was still fine, however – the stabilizers had sacrificed themselves to give that final push for the whole process and firmly attach the newly-made 'pocket mansion' to its portable anchor.

If one looked closely, they would be able to see a miniature, lifelike house suspended in the center of the globe. It even appeared intact, which was great. There was a nontrivial chance for everything inside the globe to end up getting wrecked by the stresses of the creation process, if it was not channeled properly.

Complete success.

Everyone gathered around the globe to gawk at it and admire their handiwork. Zach, Zorian, Silverlake and Daimen were in visibly high spirits following the success of such a difficult project. Only XVim managed to retain his reserved attitude, though Zorian felt he still looked faintly pleased with himself.

"You know, I just realized I have no idea how you intend to power this thing," Daimen said. "Surely this thing requires a great deal of mana to keep stable."

"We placed a permanent miniature gate inside the house," Zach said. "It connects to a cavern deep in the Dungeon, sucking up mana to keep both the gate and the pocket dimension operating. It's too tiny for the dungeon denizens to pass through, but mana can be collected just fine."

"Oh? You cracked Quatach-Ichl's permanent gates?" Daimen asked, surprised.

Silverlake puffed herself up, looking pretty smug. Her contributions were pretty crucial in cracking the method Quatach-Ichl used to make his gate stabilization frame. Hers and, oddly enough, that of the Filigree Sages. Their method of creating spell formula anchors had some surprising similarities to the methods Quatach-Ichl used in his construction of the stabilization frames.

"Yes, we finally managed to replicate the lich's methods," confirmed Zorian. "It has limited usefulness to us as a method of transport, though, since it takes a while to make those. It's more convenient to just use my simulacrum as mobile gate creators."

"We have made a great deal of progress," Xvim spoke up. "This globe is a perfect representation of that. However, I wonder if that is really enough to let us make a gateway leading out of the time loop."

Everyone shared a look for a moment as they considered the issue.

"We have a chance," Zorian said.

"The chance is too low for my liking," Silverlake grumbled, before Zorian could say anything else. Her good mood seemed to deflate a little. "If we had another six months..."

"But we don't. We won't be able to crack the temporary markers in less than a month," Zach told her. "Why even waste time thinking about that?"

"Well it's easy for you and Zorian to be so relaxed about that," Silverlake sneered at him. "You'll still be there, even if this all fails, won't you?"

"You are oversimplifying things and you know it," Zorian said, frowning. "The protections on the temporary markers are such that we won't be able to place temporary markers on you for the next six restarts. We have no hope at all of pulling this off without you. Thus, we would be forced to wait until the very last moment to make our next attempt... and if that fails, we are lost. Do you honestly think Zach and I are comfortable with that? We are just as invested in the success of this project as you are."

"Hmph," Silverlake scoffed. "Almost as invested, I suppose. But not quite as much."

"What do you think they should have done, then?" Xvim asked, giving her a knowing look.

"They should have experimented more freely with temporary markers and people's souls. There are plenty of people in the world that nobody cares about, and it's not like the damage would have been permanent," Silverlake said, looking Xvim straight in the eye. Her voice was loud and clear, but perfectly calm. "They should have given Quatach-Ichl a temporary marker and recruited him into the group."

Ugh.

"Both ideas were already discussed and soundly rejected, and not just by Zach and Zorian," Xvim pointed out.

"We were already taking a huge risk by dealing with the lich as much as we did," Zorian said. "Even a minor mistake could easily burn all of our remaining restarts away."

"The old bag of bones would be more likely to ruin us than help us," Zach added. "Without us, his plan probably succeeds and Cyoria is leveled to the ground. Why would he want to risk that by helping us escape?"

"Bah!" Silverlake spat. As in, she literally spat on the ground to express her frustration. "I can see when I'm outvoted. Besides, it's too late to change things now... though I still say our chances are too low. Surely there is something more that could be done?"

"Well, you did say we just need more time," Daimen pointed out. "If the project to turn the palace orb into a Black Room succeeds as well as expected, we should get another couple of months in a time dilation room."

"We already turned the palace room into a time dilation chamber two times by now," Silverlake pointed out. "It was impressive, but the effectiveness was little better than that of a regular Black Room. It just had larger volume. Why expect this attempt to be any different?"

"Well, if Krantin and his staff are to be believed—" began Daimen.

"I'll believe it when I see it," Silverlake cut him off. "In the meantime, I have another idea..."

Although Silverlake could be very abrasive and unpleasant, her skill at dimensionalism was undeniable and many of her ideas were quite insightful. Some of them were even perfectly ethical and legal, shockingly enough.

Thus, the group eventually returned to Cyoria, peacefully discussing various plans along the way...

The search for the imperial staff was long and frustrating. For a long time, they didn't have even the slightest clue how to narrow down their search. Zorian was almost willing to write off the entire endeavor as a lost cause and focus entirely on the exit portal project. However, Daimen felt it was beneath his pride to let the expedition end in failure, and eventually found a clue.

One of their earliest leads for the staff was a dragon mage called Violet-Eyed Disaster, or just Violeteye for short. However, she was almost as hard to track down as the staff itself, and there were plenty of other candidates around, so they didn't focus on her in particular. In time, however, a curious fact became obvious – Violeteye seemed capable of instantaneously teleporting herself across vast distances. There was simply no other way to explain how she could get around so quickly and evade pursuers. Dragons were fast flyers, but her speed was unearthly. This idea was reinforced when Daimen and his group caught sight of her and pursued, only for her to disappear when they briefly lost sight of her.

This was significant, since dragon mages had huge issues trying to use teleportation. Dimensional magic was nearly unknown among dragons, and the sort of teleportation Violeteye was performing would be shocking even in a human mage.

She was most likely using some kind of divine artifact to pull it off. And by following after her and repeatedly provoking her, Zach and Zorian eventually confirmed it was a simple, unadorned staff.

Deep in the jungles of Blantyre, atop a small mountain, a fierce battle was raging between Zach and Zorian on one side and Violeteye the dragon mage on the other. Shattered remains of Zorian's combat golems littered the mountainside, and several large craters lay scattered around the place. Smoke and dust covered the skies.

Roaring in outrage, Violeteye swooped down on Zach's position, opening her jaws and breathing fire at him. The jet of flame was unnaturally hot and concentrated, even for dragon breath – a white-hot incineration beam that set nearby bushes on fire just by passing near them. Without flinching, Zach placed an opaque black shield made out of spatial forces in front of him. The incineration breath sank into the shield and harmlessly disappeared, as if it had never existed in the first place.

Moments later, he was hit by a gust of magically-enhanced wind. It looked rather ethereal, a gentle rainbow glow suffusing it, but the moment it reached Zach it caused the black shield to collapse into nothingness and almost sent him tumbling down the mountain side.

A trio of stone cylinders flew in the air towards the dragon, shining with dangerous blue light. She managed to knock them away from her before they exploded, but it disrupted her charge and allowed Zach to regain his balance.

She sent a quick glare at Zorian, who was standing in the distance with a gun-like cylinder-launcher in his hands, before judging Zach a greater threat and smashing her tail towards him like a flail.

Zach didn't try to dodge or put some distance between them. He merely cast another spell, causing huge hands of stone to erupt from the ground beneath her, reaching towards her.

Her eyes narrowed imperceptibly, but she continued her attack, trusting her strength and vast reserves of magic. She was justified in her confidence when trading blow for blow with a human, since they could never match a dragon in terms of toughness.

However, her attack... missed.

Her eyes widened in surprise, not understanding what had happened. This wasn't the sort of rookie mistake she could ever make.

If one had looked really closely, though, one could have seen space itself subtly shift around Zach just before the tail slap had descended upon him...

The stone hands closed around the dragon, pulling her downward. She manifested huge ectoplasmic claws to crush them into powder, but the moment of weakness was enough for Zorian's simulacrum, who immediately teleported into the vicinity. Just as she was about to turn her ectoplasmic claws towards the simulacrum, her mind swam in sudden vertigo and her vision grew blurry. When she finally regained her clarity of mind, she found a glittering crystalline spear flying at her, courtesy of Zach. Arcs of red light sparked dangerously on its surface, promising pain and disintegration to anything hit by the spear.

Invasive the mind of a dragon was not an easy thing to do... but it was within Zorian's capabilities, if only for a moment.

Roaring, Violeteye conjured an omnidirectional sound wave that hurled all of the simulacra away from her like a bunch of rag dolls and destroyed all nearby obstacles. The spear continued to fly, but it was knocked off course and only glanced off her flank, tearing out a chunk of her flesh but largely leaving her intact.

She launched herself in the air and tried to flee. She didn't teleport away like she had the first few times Zach and Zorian had tried to corner her, presumably because the staff she was using had run out of charges by now. However, she was still a dragon, and few things could catch her in flight if she fled at maximum speed.

Zach and Zorian were nearly out of mana by this point, and Zorian was starting to run out of bombs and other items, too. Even Zach, with his immense mana reserves, could not compare to the stamina of the dragon. They could chase her down, but if she kept stalling and disengaging, she would eventually wear them down and maybe even turn the tables on them. She probably knew that and was deliberately using that as a tactic. Considering that she was armed with a convenient retreat in the form of the teleportation staff, this was probably how she usually fought. Wearing down the enemy by repeatedly retreating and coming back was likely second nature to her by now.

Unfortunately for her, Zach and Zorian weren't alone. Before she could get very far, she found Alanic, Xvim and Daimen waiting for her in the distance. A roar of frustration echoed across the entire mountain while Zach and Zorian sat down to recover their mana reserves and catch their breath.

"Ha ha, I bet she didn't expect *that*," Zach said, grinning. His face was smeared with dust and there was a thin line of blood running down his left arm where a piece of shrapnel managed to get through his defenses, but he appeared to not notice it. "Now she, too, can experience what is like to be worn down by repeated attacks while her opponents take a rest every once in a while."

"Didn't you kill Oganj, who is a famous dragon mage, all by yourself in one of the early restarts?" Zorian asked curiously. "I know he couldn't teleport around and was less annoying to fight, but he shouldn't be any weaker. How on earth did you manage to tackle him on your own?"

"Trial and error," Zach chuckled awkwardly. "Lots of trial and error. I honestly do not recommend it."

They fell silent after that, simply watching the battle unfold in front of them.

- break -

"We've done it," Zach breathed.

Laid on the ground in front of him were five objects: a glass orb, a plain metal ring, a gleaming dagger, an ornate crown and a simple staff.

All five pieces of the Key, gathered in one place.

The staff Violeteye had been using was indeed the imperial staff they were looking for. They had already brought it to the Guardian of the Threshold for inspection and found out about its powers. It had the ability to place up to six undetectable recall points and allowed the user to teleport back to their recall points... regardless of the distances involved. Each recall point could only be used once every 24 hours, but this was still a very potent ability.

That was for normal users. For the time loop controller, the staff was even more useful, since the recall points remained in place across restarts. That meant that if one began a restart with the staff in their hands, they could potentially travel anywhere on the planet in the blink of an eye.

Zach and Zorian didn't begin their restarts with the staff in their hands, though, so the item's usefulness was nearly nonexistent. They had to travel so long and search so far for an item that gave godlike movement capabilities to people... there was some dark humor in the situation, but Zorian didn't feel like he could appreciate it at the moment.

In any case, at this point the whole thing didn't matter. The staff was important because it was part of the Key needed to unbar the exit of the time loop, not because of its innate properties. Of course, by the time they acquired it, they already had the orb and the ring, so they were only missing two more items to complete the set. The dagger and the crown.

The dagger was... well, not exactly easy to acquire, but it was entirely doable at this point. They had familiarized themselves enough with the wards on the royal treasury that they could break into it and steal the dagger on their own, without any help from Quatach-Ichl. So they did just that. It caused a terrible uproar, and everyone was still searching for the thieves, but Zach and Zorian were fairly sure they had covered their tracks well enough.

Getting the crown, on the other hand, had been something they had agonized quite a bit over. They succeeded in the end, but now they had Quatach-Ichl after their heads and the restart was not even halfway over. The ancient lich had plenty of time to track them down and make them pay for what they did, which is something they never let him have in the previous restarts.

Still, with only one piece of the Key missing, how could they possibly resist the temptation to complete it? There was no way they could have waited until the end of the restart to do this. For all they knew, using the Key may give them options that hadn't existed until now.

Numerous people crowded the space around Zach and Zorian, peering at the items on the ground. Pretty much everyone had arrived to take a look at them, even though they were nothing special in terms of appearance. Scattered whispering and quiet speculation filled the air and people speculated what would happen when they were brought before the Guardian of the Threshold.

After some quick discussion, Zach and Zorian decided to bring the Key to the Guardian of the Threshold right away to see what would happen... and they would be taking everyone with them to witness it as well.

Previously, they had already tried to bring a temporary looper into the space of the Sovereign gate and failed. The Guardian of the Threshold later confirmed that temporary loopers are unable to access the space. However, this security measure was childishly easy to bypass through a short duration soul bond that allowed the Controller to simply 'pull' outsiders with them as they entered the Sovereign Gate. Once inside, the Guardian of the Threshold largely ignored their presence, recognizing them as temporary loopers, but completely unconcerned about the fact that Zach and Zorian were breaking the rules. Zach and Zorian had used this method to bring various people into the Sovereign Gate at multiple occasions, so they did not foresee any problems.

Thus, the whole group made way into the secret time magic research facility beneath Cyoria and, after some small preparations, entered the Sovereign Gate.

The Guardian of the Threshold soon popped into existence in front of them, just like he always did. He was still the same human-like glowing

entity, his face emotionless like a sculpted statue.

“Welcome, Controller,” the Guardian greeted.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Zach. “I’m glad to see you too, you lovable idiot. Did you notice we’ve brought the Key to you?”

The Guardian was silent for a moment.

“One moment, please,” it eventually said, before becoming silent again.

In the dark void of the Sovereign Gate space, there was only a silent glowing humanoid and a small throng of people anxiously waiting for his reaction. The Guardian of the Threshold did not appear to mind the large number of visitors, continuing his mysterious pondering with not a care in the world.

The temporary loopers around Zach and Zorian simply squirmed nervously, not saying much. They had learned by now that the Guardian of the Threshold utterly ignored temporary loopers, refusing to answer their questions or even acknowledge their existence. Watching Daimen and Silverlake getting progressively more angry as the entity ignored their comments had been rather amusing for Zorian the first time he witnessed it, but thankfully this time nobody lost their temper.

In any case, the Guardian eventually finished whatever it was doing and started speaking again.

“Everything is as it should be,” it said. “The Key is valid. Do you want to claim your privileges now?”

“Privileges? Why, I love privileges,” Zach said, grinning. “Yes. Give me all of those.”

“Done,” the entity immediately said.

“Can I unbar the gate now?” Zach asked.

“Yes,” the Guardian of the Threshold confirmed. “Do you want—”

“Yes, damn it, yes!” Zach said, voice full of exasperation. “Do it now.”

“As you wish,” it said. It paused for a few moments, silently performing some kind of task again. “It is done. The gate is now unbar-ar-ar-ar-ar--”

Zorian watched in growing horror as the Guardian of the Threshold suddenly started twitching and stuttering as if it was having some kind of seizure. His head rolled around at impossible angles, rotating a full 360 degrees, his entire torso squirming and bulging as if something was trying to burst out of it.

He had a very bad feeling about this.

“What the hell is happening?” someone asked behind him.

“I don’t know,” Zach said, frowning. “This has never happened befo—”

Everything suddenly became quiet. At first Zorian thought Zach had just stopped speaking because he noticed or realized something important, but when he glanced towards him he found Zach gone.

Everyone but Zorian was gone. It was just him, a madly twitching Guardian of the Threshold and a quiet, featureless black void all around them.

He immediately tried to return to his body, but failed.

Shit... Well, at least the Guardian of the Threshold was starting to calm down. He was twitching less, and no longer twisted his head and limbs at impossible angles. Maybe—

A multitude of eyes suddenly snapped open all over Guardian of the Threshold’s body, blinking rapidly for a few moments before focusing straight at Zorian. Each one was different. Different sizes, different color, different internal structure. Some of them had multiple irises. Some of them glowed. Some of them were multifaceted, like those of an insect. Some of them made his mind feel numb just looking at them.

“**Zorian Kazinski**,” the Guardian of the Threshold said. Was it still the Guardian of the Threshold? Freaky eyes aside, even his voice was different. It was booming and resonant, with not a trace of humanity in it. “**I have a proposition for you.**”

“Who are you?” Zorian immediately challenged.

“**You call me Panaxeth**,” it immediately answered.

Zorian’s mind froze for a moment. What... how...

“The primordial?” he asked numbly, his voice filled with disbelief.

“Yes,” it answered.

Suddenly, some of its eyes closed and disappeared. The ones that made Zorian hurt to look at, as well as some of the freakier ‘normal’ ones.

“You can talk?” Zorian asked. It was a dumb question, but he was still in shock and couldn’t help himself.

Panaxeth seemed to think so too, because he ignored the question.

“**I can get you out of here,**” Panaxeth said. Its form changed again, additional eyes closing and his form becoming more humanlike in both color and texture. “**All you have to do is make a contract with me.**”

A contract?

“No thanks,” he said immediately, shaking his head in denial.

“You will never get out of here alive without me,” it told him. Its voice acquired a human-like quality by this point, and most of the eyes were gone. “The other person didn’t either.”

“Red Robe?” Zorian asked.

“I never asked his name,” Panaxeth said. He looked entirely like a man by now, though his features seem to shift all the time – male and female, old and young, all kinds of skin tones and facial features… “Does it matter? We’re talking about you, now. Swear on your life you will help free me and I will incarnate you outside of this crumbling world.”

“Why would I do that, though?” Zorian asked.

“You get to live?” Panaxeth asked, sounding a little mystified by his response.

His constant shifting of his appearance slowed down greatly at this point. He seemed to have settled on a female form now, tall and good-looking, with long black hair and a body to die for.

Zorian scowled. The damn thing was slowly changing its appearance to appeal to him as much as possible, wasn’t it? It constantly cycled through different appearances, all the while paying attention to his body movements and facial expressions to see what evoked a good response in him.

It was showing him what it thought he wanted to see.

Suddenly, the entity shifted into a perfect copy of Kirielle.

“I just want to live and be free!” she said, her lip quivering and her voice on the verge of tears.

“You are not Kirielle!” Zorian shouted at it, his temper rising.

Panaxeth immediately changed forms again, copying Taiven. Then Zach. Then Xvim, Daimen, Ilsa, Imaya…

Some of these people… how did it even know how they looked and sounded? Was it reading his mind?

He immediately strengthened his mental defenses, even though he could detect no intrusion.

“Why are you talking to me now?” Zorian asked. “I was here plenty of times before.”

“The gate was barred until now, so there was no point in speaking to you,” Panaxeth answered. “I can only get people out when the way is open.”

“But you could have contacted me like this all this time?” Zorian asked.

“Yes,” Panaxeth confirmed. “The Sovereign Gate has been damaged over the years, some of the safeguards failing. That is why they stopped using it for a long time. However, there is no point in speaking to most people unless they are strong enough to help me and unless the way is open. I did not think you could gather the entire Key before the world crumbled, but I’m glad to be proved wrong. We can help each other, Zorian. We can even discuss additional rewards once I am out of my cage.”

“But what if I fail?” Zorian asked.

“You die, of course,” Panaxeth said, as if it was the most normal thing in the world. “That’s what the contract is for.”

“So you get me out of here and in return I must help free you or die?” Zorian asked.

“Exactly,” Panaxeth confirmed.

“I’m going to have to say no,” Zorian sighed.

Panaxeth stared at him for a second. It seemed to realize it would never be able to convince Zorian to take this sort of deal, no matter what it used to entice him.

“You will regret that,” it said. “This was a one-time offer. I will not bother contacting you again.”

Zorian was of two minds about this. On one hand that was a bit disappointing, since he would like to have more talks with a primordial to see if he could get something substantial out of it. On the other hand, it was a freaking primordial and it seemed to be reading his mind in some way he couldn’t detect!

It was probably for the best that it never wanted to see him again.

“You gave up pretty quickly,” Zorian commented. “How are you so sure there is no chance to convince me in the future?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” Panaxeth said. “Someone else has already taken my offer.”

Zorian’s eyes widened at the comment. Before he could ask Panaxeth what it meant by that, the generic female form in front of him disappeared and he was surrounded by noise again. He was once again standing next to Zach, with temporary loopers standing around him. All of them were screaming, shouting and talking at once. It was abundantly obvious that Zorian wasn’t the only one who had found himself alone, facing a terrifying primordial entity.

And after the situation had calmed down somewhat and he had done a quick headcount, a terrifying realization suddenly dawned to Zorian.

Silverlake was gone.

90. Change of Plans

Chapter 090 Change of Plans

It wasn't long before the group decided to leave the Sovereign Gate space and return to their bodies outside. Partially this was because the Guardian of the Threshold was gone, leaving them on their own in the silent void. When Panaxeth ended his interaction with Zorian and others, he took the Guardian he had been possessing along with him. Or maybe he *was* the Guardian in the end, who could know? Regardless, with the Guardian no longer present, there was little point in them staying there either.

The second, more important reason, was that Silverlake was gone and they desperately wanted to check if she was outside, waiting for them. Although Panaxeth's statement that someone had already taken his offer and her subsequent disappearance strongly suggested she had betrayed them, Zorian held on to the hope that she had merely left the Sovereign Gate on her own. Somehow.

It was a hope that would not last long. Whatever force Panaxeth had used to stop Zach and Zorian from returning to their body had dissipated with his disappearance, so getting out of the Sovereign Gate was done without incident. Once outside, they found Silverlake's lifeless body lying on the floor.

She was dead. There was no evidence of struggle. No wounds, obvious or subtle. No indication of any sort of foul play from the facility staff or hidden enemies. It was as if her soul simply disappeared from her body all of a sudden, painlessly killing her.

It was the same kind of dead that they had already seen in the aranea beneath Cyoria and the other 'soulkilled' individuals they'd come across over the restarts.

A grim atmosphere descended upon the group. Zach was so enraged he incinerated Silverlake's body into ashes before anyone could stop him. Zorian wanted to scold him for destroying critical clues as to what happened, but Alanic placed his hand on his shoulder and shook his head, silently telling him to let it go. Maybe it was better that way. This wasn't the time for starting arguments and they probably got all they would have gotten out of her corpse anyway.

They didn't stay in the time magic research facility for long. They needed to talk to everyone about what they had seen and heard, about what Panaxeth had told them in private, but that was best done in the privacy of their base at the Noveda Estate. However, an issue suddenly rose up when they tried to leave the facility. Apparently, while the facility staff accepted their mysterious orders without complaint, they still paid close attention to everyone coming and leaving from the facility. They knew exactly how many people their group had, and they knew that Silverlake had suddenly gone missing.

That was a surprisingly thorny situation to get out of. Zach was still visibly fuming and looked like he was going to start throwing around fireballs at all these people questioning him where their companion had suddenly disappeared to, but Krantin refused to let the matter drop. Unfortunately, explaining that Silverlake was dead and that Zach had already incinerated her soulless body was not an option. In the end, Zorian had to memory edit roughly half of the facility personnel to make them forget Silverlake had ever entered the place that day and then make alterations to the physical records which also kept track of that kind of thing.

Strange as that sounded, altering physical records turned out to be a lot harder than editing memories. Those records had some very inventive protections against such tampering, whereas the minds of facility staff were largely unprotected against mental tampering.

Still, although the immediate issue was dealt with, Zorian could already see that their headaches in regards to the facility and Silverlake's presence there were only starting. Silverlake had been one of the crucial people in regards to their project of turning the imperial orb into a better Black Room. The void left by her disappearance was going to be keenly felt in the near future.

He still had trouble believing this was actually happening, to be honest. He had fully expected their circumstances to change once they brought the key to the Guardian of the Threshold, but not like this. How could Panaxeth even contact them through the Guardian? Even if the Sovereign Gate was made from a primordial, that primordial was clearly not Panaxeth. He of the Flowing Flesh was imprisoned inside the Hole, the massive circular abyss around which Cyoria was built. He had been stuck there since the time the primordials had been sealed away, presumably. The Sovereign Gate, on the other hand, had been primarily used in northern Miasina before its current use. It didn't make sense... how could Panaxeth infiltrate the time loop mechanism to appear before them? How could he take people out of the time loop? And what had he offered Silverlake to make her swear some kind of death pact with a godlike primordial entity that considered them useful tools at best?

He didn't know. He hoped other people had managed to get something useful out of the primordial, unlike him.

Having finally left the facility, the group gathered in the Noveda Estate. They left people some free time to collect their thoughts and calm down, and then started discussing what happened.

The first issue, of course, was Panaxeth. Or something that claimed to be Panaxeth, anyway. They had no proof that the unknown entity was telling the truth, but then again it had no reason to lie about that either. Identifying as Panaxeth would not set anyone at ease. In any case, talking to the rest of the group confirmed what everyone had suspected by now – 'Panaxeth' had somehow dragged each of them into their own individual space for a private conversation.

Everyone except Zach, that is. Zach alone did not merit a meeting with the primordial, it seemed. While everyone else disappeared into their own

private space, Zach was simply left alone in the darkness of the Sovereign Gate's area. Even the Guardian of the Threshold was gone, leaving him simply floating in the silent void with no way out until Panaxeth was done with the others.

As for the others, they'd all found themselves in front of the warped, twisted Guardian of Threshold, though most did not see the same eye-covered humanoid that Zorian had. In Kyron's case, for instance, the Guardian grew another two pairs of arms while his torso split open into a giant vertical mouth lined with predatory teeth. Nora saw the Guardian's limbs lengthen while bone spikes erupted from its head, causing it to look like it had a bony sea urchin growing out of its neck. This initial monstrous form was then gradually changed into a more inoffensive, human form through a process of constant shapeshifting reminiscent of the one Zorian experienced.

After that, though, the experiences of different people wildly diverged. Not all received the offer of making a contract with the primordial. Taiven and Nora were almost completely toyed with, for instance. Panaxeth simply shifted between different forms while occasionally spouting total non-sequiturs like 'I like dogs' or 'your mother would be ashamed of you', seemingly studying their reactions. Daimen claimed that Panaxeth had never offered him anything, instead simply trying to question him about what he knew about Zorian – his likes, motives and preferences. Something that visibly infuriated his older brother, though Zorian was unsure how much of that was because Panaxeth was basically trying to get him to betray his family and how much it was the fact that Panaxeth clearly didn't see him as important outside of being 'Zorian's brother'. If the situation weren't so dire, Zorian might have been amused about that.

It also quickly became clear that, even though everyone was reunited at roughly the same time, they did *not* spend the same amount of time talking to Panaxeth. Some, like Zorian, only interacted with the primordial for a short while before being dismissed. Others, especially ones that pretended to actually consider its offer, spoke with the entity for quite a while before Panaxeth tired of them. The primordial employed some kind of time dilation during its interaction with people, lengthening the meeting with ones that seemed like they could be convinced, while spending only a token effort on others.

This probably explained how it managed to convince Silverlake so relatively quickly. If she showed the greatest amount of interest in its offer out of them all, the primordial would have likely extended her meeting as much as it could. Plus, considering how powerful and experienced Silverlake was, she was probably considered one of the most prioritized targets to begin with.

"Were you not worried that the primordial was reading your mind?" Zorian asked them, frowning. "I mean, it seemed capable of lifting people's appearances straight out of my head when I talked to it. It was one of the big reasons I was so eager to get out of the meeting as much as possible."

"He did no such thing while talking to me," Xvim said, shaking his head. "Then again, Panaxeth did not try to copy *any* people while talking to me. He just shifted from one generic form to another throughout the entire talk."

Zorian found it a little interesting how some people, like him, referred to Panaxeth as 'it', while Xvim and others referred to the primordial as 'he'. The cultists did call Panaxeth 'He of the Flowing Flesh', so one could indeed argue that the entity was male in some sense, but it was debatable how much normal gender applied to a monstrous shapechanger like that. The entity assumed a female form when speaking to him, male form in front of others, and an aranea form when speaking to the aranea... it clearly thought little of such things.

"I actually did ask the thing about that when it tried to shapeshift into Kana," Kael said, pausing slightly. "Well, more like I blew up at it and demanded an explanation. Sparingly, it actually gave me one. It said no mind reading was taking place... it was 'just' watching everything we did inside the time loop and taking note of people close to us. That's probably why it tried to convince me while looking like Kana instead of Namira, even though the latter would probably be more effective. Since my wife had died long before the start of the time loop, Panaxeth had no idea what she looked like, and thus couldn't copy her appearance."

"Yes, that is what he said to me as well," Ilsa said. "He tried to tempt me with the secrets of true creation, and I asked how he knew about that. He said the same thing he had to Kael, but he also expanded on it a little bit. Panaxeth claims the Sovereign Gate is not made from a primordial like we thought – it is more like an attachment, or maybe a shell, which must be bonded to a specific primordial in order to work. This can potentially be any primordial, but currently it's Panaxeth."

"That's why he could appear in front of us like that," Zach said gloomily.

"Yes," Ilsa said, nodding. "The Sovereign Gate somehow twists the primordial in question into the time loop as we know it. In a very real sense, Panaxeth is the time loop... which means he is aware of everything that occurs inside of him."

"So Panaxeth is watching us even now?" Taiven said, sounding disturbed.

"Probably," Ilsa shrugged. She seemed to take the idea in stride. Or maybe she'd just had more time than the rest of them to come to terms with it.

Zorian was personally very disturbed by this discovery. How were they supposed to subvert the time loop mechanism in order to leave this place, if the time loop was basically a sapient being that was always watching them? It was quite likely that Panaxeth could actively sabotage any escape attempt it did not like. Perhaps it was limited by the safeguards built into the Sovereign Gate, but those safeguards probably wouldn't protect people like him, who were trying to break the system.

No wonder Panaxeth claimed he was never leaving this place without its help. Back then, Zorian thought that meant 'without its help', but perhaps what Panaxeth really meant was 'without its approval'...

"If he is that all-knowing, I wonder why he had not been more effective at tempting us," Xvim mused. "One would think he would have a far better

grasp on our character if it could perceive everything we did so far.”

“Awareness is not necessarily total awareness,” Orissa offered. “I am technically aware of everything my bees do, but if you were to ask me about one particular bee, there is only so much I could tell you.”

“The various elementals we consulted did say that primordials view us all like animals, maybe even mere bugs,” Zach said. “How much do you really understand the sparrows living in the city or ants digging up your garden? We may be greater than them, but they are still alien to us. Hell, Zorian can read their minds and memories, and he still has trouble leading them from place to place without using any magical coercion.”

“You’re talking about that one time he tried to literally herd cats, right?” Kael said, smiling slightly. “I remember that one.”

“It wasn’t a serious attempt,” Zorian complained. “It was just an amusing idea I had when I was bored.”

“This isn’t the time for this,” Alanic said, a little annoyed. “Zach brings up a good point with primordials seeing us all as animals. You don’t discuss things with animals, you manipulate them into doing what you want. We should be wary of trusting that creature too much. Although there is probably some glimmer of truth in what it’s saying, I suspect it is willing to say *anything*, true or false, if it thinks doing so will increase its chances of escaping its prison.”

“I don’t know. He seemed pretty honest and forthright to me,” Ilsa said, looking at Alanic. “Clearly you also thought there was some value in listening to it, since you were one of the people that managed to engage it in a lengthy conversation. What did you speak about, then?”

Ultimately, only a few people managed to keep their cool and get something substantial out of Panaxeth. Alanic, Xvim, Orissa, Ilsa, Kyron and an aranea named Night Dream were the only ones that managed to interest Panaxeth enough for him to engage them in a lengthy back-and-forth. It made Zorian a little self-conscious to realize he had essentially bungled that meeting. He might have gotten some important answers out of the primordial if he had been a little better at acting.

Then again, were these people really so good at acting or were they actually somewhat tempted by Panaxeth’s offer, and the primordial could sense that in their exchange? He could tell that Ilsa, at the very least, was lying when she claimed she had only been pretending to be interested in the primordial’s offer. The others were harder to read.

In any case, Alanic did not appear in the slightest bit uncomfortable about being put on the spot like that.

“We had a big talk about faith, risk-taking and the duty of the individual towards their community,” Alanic said.

Zorian raised his eyebrow at him. So did a lot of other people, from what he could see.

“And you were scolding me and Zorian for not taking things seriously just a little while ago,” Kael scoffed.

“It’s the truth,” Alanic said. “Rather than just refuse the creature, I asked it why I would ever agree to such a deal. The consequences would be so apocalyptic, especially for Cyoria, that I couldn’t imagine how this would be a good idea. Even if I was selfish to the extreme and only cared about myself, the primordial was a threat to all of humanity.”

“Oh, I asked him the same thing,” Orissa interjected. “He said he had no intention of destroying the world or menacing humanity. All he wanted, he said, was to be free and to free the rest of the imprisoned primordials as well. He would only destroy those who tried to prevent him from achieving those two goals.”

“Ha. Well, it said no such thing to me,” Alanic said. “Probably because it knew I would not believe that. Instead, the primordial countered my concerns by telling me that the gods had left numerous ‘contingencies’ in regards to primordials, should they ever successfully escape. If I truly had faith in the gods, it said, what was the harm in setting it free? The contract would be fulfilled the moment it was out of prison, even if it died immediately afterwards. I should have faith in the divine and their works, in which case there was nothing wrong with taking the deal, releasing it out of its prison and then watching it die immediately afterwards.”

“Do these contingencies of the gods truly exist?” Zorian asked. He heard nothing about that, but Alanic was a priest, so...

“I don’t know,” Alanic admitted. “Even if they did, it is said the gods imprisoned primordials because they had trouble truly killing them. If the gods were incapable of dealing with them in person, I rather doubt a mere contingency could do it. Clearly this Panaxeth did not believe this either, otherwise why would it even make the offer? We then got into a lengthy philosophical discussion about what constitutes true faith and various other things. I doubt you really want to hear about that.”

“Maybe later,” Zach said. “Orissa, you said you also talked to Panaxeth about what he’d do once free?”

“Yes. Aside from what I already said, I think he alluded to these divine contingencies Alanic spoke about at one point,” she said. “He mentioned that, in the process of tearing himself free from his cage, he would likely end up ‘weakened and grievously wounded’, and that it would take him centuries to fully recover. During that time, he would just hide somewhere and wait until he was fully healed. He was suggesting that I had no reason to care about his goals, because by the time he was ready to make his move, I would have died a long time ago.”

After some more back and forth, they confirmed some details with the other members of the group. For instance, it seemed that nobody had been presented with an image of a person that had died before the time loop had begun. In fact, the primordial didn’t even bother copying *living* relatives, if the temporary looper hadn’t interacted with them within the bounds of the time loop. This led some credence to his claim that he

couldn't read minds and 'just' relied on seeing everything that ever happened in the time loop.

This done, they turned to the last three people who had spoken to Panaxeth at any real length. Xvim, Kyron and Night Dream had all asked similar questions, however: they wanted to know the details of what the contract with Panaxeth actually entailed. Thankfully, this appeared to be a topic that Panaxeth was really eager to talk about.

"So if I understood you three correctly, the contract is as follows..." Zorian said. "You make a death pact with Panaxeth, swearing that you would either free him within a month or die trying. He then takes your soul and 'incarnates' it in the outside world. That is to say, he creates a brand new copy of your body in the real world, at the start of the month, in effect physically ejecting you out of the time loop. Included in the created body is some kind of kill switch that will kill you if Panaxeth is still imprisoned at the end of the summer festival."

"Yes," Night Dream said, her magically produced voice clear and smooth. "It doesn't matter whether you tried your best or why you failed – if Panaxeth isn't free by the end of the deadline, the 'death seal' activates and kills you. No excuses."

"And if Panaxeth is freed at any point before the deadline, this kill switch dissolves into nothingness and you are free to do whatever you want?" Zorian asked.

"Yes, even if Panaxeth dies, our part of the agreement is done," Xvim confirmed. "I asked several variations of that question just to be sure, and he always answered the same. We only needed to get him out, nothing more. Our original selves were not part of the agreement, either, and would not suffer if we failed in our task."

"Probably because their bodies hadn't been created by Panaxeth, so he cannot place his 'death seal' thingy on them," Kyron remarked. "Even if he wanted to make them die with us, he cannot."

"What stops you from taking the deal and then working against Panaxeth? Assuming you don't mind dying in a month, of course," Alanic asked.

"When I asked a question along those lines, the shapeshifting asshole immediately ended our conversation and sent me back to the group," Kyron said. "I guess he really didn't like that question. From what I can tell, though, the answer is nothing. Nothing stops you from doing just that."

"Then," Kael said hesitantly, "do you think that Silverlake—"

Kyron let loose a short, loud laugh.

"Boy, get real!" he told Kael. "Do you think a selfish, self-centered bitch like that would agree to sacrifice herself for our sake? For *anyone's* sake!?"

You could be reading stolen content. Head to Royal Road for the genuine story.

Kael sighed, saying nothing.

A quiet murmur rippled throughout the entire group as they discussed the topic among themselves. Zorian listened to it with half an ear while lost in his own thoughts. Truthfully, now that he had heard about other people's experiences with Panaxeth, her choice was... predictable. It wasn't that they had trusted her because they had thought that she was better than this, they had just never realized making a deal like this was even an option. If Zorian had known about this before, he would have been the first one to veto any involvement with her, no matter how useful she could have been to their efforts.

And she had been very, very useful. Without any exaggeration, she was one of the pillars of the group on which their entire plan rested. Zorian wasn't even sure if they could do this without her. Certainly, without Silverlake, their current exit plan was completely unworkable...

"I have to agree with Kyron," Alanic said solemnly. "Silverlake did not keep her attitudes hidden, so this decision should not surprise anyone here. You heard what everyone said on this meeting. The primordial offers people a guaranteed way to save their lives, as opposed to the uncertain odds of survival that we can offer her. She probably wouldn't care if every single person in Cyoria ended up dead as a result of Panaxeth's release, and it might be centuries before the wider consequences of his unsealing became apparent. Plus, there is no telling what kind of prize the creature offered her to entice her further."

"She was also clearly already interested in primordials even before the time loop. Including Panaxeth's prison, specifically," Zorian said. "She might have felt more confident about being able to come out on top when dealing with one of them."

"But she's immortal, right?" Taiven protested. "Shouldn't she take the long view in this? Even if Panaxeth takes several centuries to start wrecking everything, she'll still be alive by that point!"

"You have to look at it from her eyes," Zach said. He had calmed down greatly from his initial rage, and was now thinking much more rationally about the situation. "What's the alternative? Dying immediately because you couldn't get out of the time loop? That's even worse."

"But if Panaxeth remains sealed, her original self can continue to live in peace indefinitely," Taiven pointed out. "She's risking the long-term future of her original in exchange for a little more life for herself."

"I don't think she cares about that," Zorian said, shaking his head. "That Silverlake is not *her*."

"Yes. Did you ever notice she never created any simulacrum? Even when it would have been very useful?" Zach pointed out. "I don't think for a moment she was unable to learn the spell. And I don't think she would sabotage our attempts to escape from the time loop by not creating more skilled manpower. I think she's one of the people who can't use them because they would freak out when they realized their lives were fleeting and do something stupid."

"Well, when you all put it like that, why did we ever agree to work with her in the first place?" Kyron suddenly demanded, throwing his hands in the air in discontent.

"Yeah!" one of Xvim's academic friends piped in. "She was a bad idea right from the start! Whose bright idea was to include her, anyway?"

"What was the alternative?" Xvim challenged, alternating his gaze between Kyron and the other speaker. "Silverlake was brought into the group because she had critical skills that no one else possessed. The only reason we got as far as we did was because we had her working along with us. Even if she betrayed us in the end, it's hard to say whether we would have been better off without her."

No one had anything to say to that.

"Zorian, you're the only one Panaxeth told anything related to Silverlake," Zach said. "Can you tell us anything else?"

"All he said was that someone had already taken his offer, so convincing me didn't matter anymore," Zorian said. He was the only one Panaxeth had felt the need to tell that. "I had no idea what that meant back then, but when I saw Silverlake was missing..."

"Yeah," Zach said, clacking his tongue. "Doesn't take a genius to figure out what happened. So, what now? Now we have *two* hostile loopers to deal with once we get out of the time loop?"

Zorian had to admire Zach's spirit sometimes. Even now, with all their plans being thrown into total disarray, he was still confident they would get out of this alive. It was nice to have someone like that, sometimes.

"Panaxeth's statement was a little confusing, but I think that's right. He was implying that Red Robe had also taken his offer and made a contract with him in order to leave the time loop. Presumably, this is why he spent so much time optimizing the invasion. His very life depends on its success. Presumably, once outside, Silverlake will work with him to make sure Panaxeth's release goes off as smoothly as possible."

"Why does Silverlake accepting his offer mean there is no point in convincing you, though?" Kael asked. "You'd think Panaxeth would want as many agents as possible."

"Probably because every time he transports someone out the gate becomes barred again," Zorian said. "Remember, the whole point of gathering the Key was that the gate was inexplicably barred, even though it shouldn't have been. 'The Controller has already left', Guardian of the Threshold told us. That probably means that when Panaxeth got Red Robe out of the time loop, it got stuck. The same probably happened now. Even if Panaxeth wanted to transport more than one person, he couldn't."

"But you still have the Key," Ilsa pointed out.

"We do," Zach confirmed.

"So you can probably just unbar the gate again," Ilsa stated.

"Probably," Zach agreed.

"They'd have to be pretty stupid to take any of us into the Sovereign Gate again," Alanic said pitilessly. "I would never do so in their place."

"All of us present refused that thing's deal," Kyron pointed out, a little incensed.

"Or maybe we were just too slow and Silverlake hammered out her deal before we had a chance to do the same," Xvim said. "I agree with Alanic. Now that Silverlake betrayed us, the pressure on the remaining people is all the greater. It's a pointless risk."

Zorian watched the argument in silence, not knowing what to say.

This was going to be a long evening...

- break -

After finding out what everyone had experienced in the Sovereign Gate, Zach and Zorian departed from the Noveda Estate and went to ransack Silverlake's dimensional refuge for any clues. Of course, Zorian fully intended to also steal any magical secrets or notable resources he found there. Since Silverlake had betrayed them so utterly, he did not feel bad about robbing her blind in the slightest.

Unfortunately, it seemed that Silverlake's spite and paranoia knew no bounds. When they finally managed to subvert her defenses and break into her pocket dimension, they found it utterly wrecked. It had been reduced to a smoking crater for quite some time before they arrived, most likely because some dead man's switch had activated when she died and destroyed everything. Zorian left a couple of simulacra to sift through the wreckage for anything of value, but he didn't have much hope they would find anything. The destruction was quite thorough.

The only things that survived relatively intact was a curious arrangement of stones that was apparently responsible for powering her pocket

dimension. He had long wondered how she was doing that, since the location itself could not support the dimensional magic she was using to isolate it from the rest of the world. Now he knew. Each of the heavy linking stones, which were built right into the walls of her hideout to disguise them better, had a matching counterpart deep in the underworld below her base. The underworld stones siphoned ambient mana from the Dungeon and sent it straight into Silverlake's hideout through the paired stones in the pocket dimension.

He supposed that if he ever wanted to destroy Silverlake's pocket dimension, he now knew a really easy way to do it. He just had to wreck the mana siphoning stones in the Dungeon below her sanctuary and the whole place would soon fall apart on its own.

In any case, with this matter currently being dealt with, Zach and Zorian turned their attention towards the next thing that had to be done as soon as possible.

They had to go back to the Sovereign Gate and talk to the Guardian of the Threshold.

There was danger in doing that, of course. However, it had to be done. They had to confirm their suspicions. First, they had to see if the Guardian would still be there at all when they came back, since it had gone missing when they had last left the Sovereign Gate. Secondly, they had to see if the gate really was barred again like they suspected. If so, a lot of their speculation would be all but confirmed.

Finally, they had to see if the Guardian could shed some light on what happened during their last visit. While it had seemed like nothing more than an automated puppet in the past, there was clearly something more complex going on in regards to that thing.

Only the two of them would be going there this time, of course. Considering Panaxeth completely ignored Zach the last time around and told Zorian he would not bother with him in the future, they probably wouldn't be seeing him on this visit. Even if they did, though, Zorian was far less afraid of him now that he knew he couldn't just reach into his head and start editing things. Whatever restrictions the primordial was laboring under, they clearly prevented him from coercing people into anything.

When they entered the Sovereign Gate, they were relieved to see the familiar figure of the Guardian of the Threshold floating in front of them.

"Welcome, Controller," the Guardian greeted.

"So Panaxeth didn't break everything with his little visit," Zach commented, loudly exhaling in satisfaction. "That's great. Finally some good news."

"Yes," Zorian agreed. He turned towards the floating humanoid of light, giving him a complex look. What was this thing really? "Guardian, is the gate still open?"

They waited for several seconds, wondering why it took the Guardian so long to answer that. Usually he was really prompt with his answers, only occasionally waiting while it looked up something in the background. As the seconds ticked by, though, they realized he wasn't checking up on things before giving them an answer.

Instead, the Guardian ignored Zorian's question completely.

Uh oh...

"Hey Guardian! Is the gate still open?" Zach said, repeating Zorian's question.

"No, Controller. The gate is barred," the Guardian immediately answered.

Zach and Zorian shared a complex look with each other. On one hand, they just confirmed their speculation about what happened. This was good. It meant they were of the right track. On the other hand...

"Guardian, why did you answer his question and not mine?" Zorian asked the glowing humanoid.

But the Guardian ignored his question, just like he did the previous one. In fact, Zorian realized that, although the Guardian was facing them, he was subtly tilted towards Zach. It was like he was completely ignoring Zorian's very existence.

Just like he had been ignoring the temporary loopers in the past.

"Guardian, why are you only responding to me and not him?" Zach asked, a bit of frustration bleeding into his voice.

"I only respond to the Controller," the Guardian stated placidly.

"I knew it," Zorian said quietly, followed by a small sigh.

Zach stared at the Guardian, getting visibly more and more upset as time went by. Zorian just felt a sinking feeling of defeat, instead. When it rained, it poured.

"This is bullshit," Zach stated angrily, pointing with his finger at Zorian. "He entered this space on his own, by activating his marker. Only a controller can do that!"

"Yes," the Guardian agreed. "He is an anomaly. Those happen sometimes. Something or someone has managed to get past the safeguards and disrupted the integrity of the mechanism. The anomaly can access Controller privileges even though he is not one. I am unable to do anything about

that at the moment, but do not worry – the mistake will be corrected at the end of this cycle, when the world is recreated again.”

Lovely. Zorian did not need a detailed explanation to understand what the Guardian was implying.

“But why now?” Zach demanded. “How did you figure out he was the anomaly all of a sudden? He had been coming and going here for ages now!”

“Yes. Regretful,” Guardian said blandly. “However, you have presented me with the Key recently, which triggered a complete analysis of the existing situation. During this inspection, the anomaly was identified and correction procedures were scheduled to be performed at the first possible opportunity.”

“Why?” Zach asked. “What is it about the Key that triggers this?”

“Activating the Key signifies that something has gone wrong with the time loop mechanism,” The Guardian answered, as if that was the most obvious thing in the world. “Of course a thorough check of everything is in order.”

“It does? You never mentioned this when we asked you about the Key,” Zach stated accusingly.

The Guardian ignored the statement. Zorian was actually a little taken aback by this, since it meant the Guardian had probably kept them deliberately in the dark about that when they had talked to him in the past.

He supposed it made sense. The key was a security measure meant to confirm the Controller’s identity. It made sense not to discuss the details of its operation unless the Guardian felt he had to, for some reason.

“What about those privileges I claimed, then?” Zach asked. “What does that get me?”

“It affirms your status as the one true Controller and locks out all the other pretenders that may be walking about,” the Guardian said.

“What!?” Zach protested incredulously. “That’s it? No new functions or abilities or anything like that?”

“As a Controller, you already have all the privileges,” the Guardian told him. “You have simply ensured others do not infringe on this.”

“Why can Zorian even access this place, then?” Zach demanded.

Hey!

“He is an anomaly,” the Guardian said.

“These ‘privileges’ are such a rip-off,” Zach complained. “It doesn’t even do what it’s supposed to properly.”

“I’m sorry,” the Guardian said, sounding honestly apologetic. “He’s a very frustrating anomaly.”

‘And thank the gods for that,’ Zorian thought.

He wasn’t panicking, strangely enough. He didn’t know why. Maybe because he already faced a very dire situation today and was rather emotionally drained at the moment, but finding out he was going to be deleted at the end of the month only brought a dull mixture of dread and determination to his mind.

So what if Silverlake had betrayed them? So what if Panaxeth was actively working against him? So what if he would get erased at the end of the month? Hadn’t they already planned to make an escape attempt in this restart?

They just had to make sure it worked.

He looked over at Zach, who had stopped arguing with the Guardian and was instead looking at Zorian like he was a dead man. A mixture of horror and guilt was etched clearly into his face.

“Don’t beat yourself over this,” Zorian told Zach. His voice was so calm and even that even he was surprised how confident he sounded. “There was nothing else we could have done. You heard what the Guardian said – the moment we presented the Key to him, I was marked for erasure. It was always a given that we would do that the moment we gathered all the pieces. We should be grateful it was so difficult and took us that long to do it, or else we would have ended up in this situation at a much earlier and far less favorable restart.”

“But, Zorian!” Zach protested. “You, you...”

“This just means I need to get out of here before this month ends. It’s the same situation the rest of the group is laboring under, really,” Zorian said. “Don’t tell me you’ve already given up?”

“N-No... no...” Zach said slowly, taking a few deep breaths. “Damn it. I really hate this.”

“Ask the Guardian if the Key still works. Can you unbar the gate again?”

He could, it turned out.

“Do you want to do it now?” the Guardian asked.

“No!” Zach shouted at it. “No. Do nothing until I tell you, you useless thing.”

“As you wish,” the Guardian said peacefully, completely oblivious to their emotional turmoil.

There was a few seconds of silence as neither Zach nor Zorian said anything.

“Well...” said Zorian finally. “We should probably end this for now. We need to come here later to ask more questions, but I don’t think either of us is in the right frame of mind to do so at the moment.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Zach gloomily agreed. “I just—”

Suddenly, the Guardian started convulsing again.

“Oh, not this shit again!” Zach protested in an exasperated tone.

Zorian made no moves to exit the Sovereign Gate this time. He probably couldn’t even if he wanted to, but this time he actually wanted to have a talk with Panaxeth, so he didn’t even try. Interestingly, Panaxeth did not bother to separate Zach from Zorian this time around and simply possessed the convulsing Guardian in front of them both. The glowing humanoid erupted into a forest of blood-red branches and tentacles before shuddering and contracting into a more human-like mass. It then quickly shapeshifted into the same female form that it had chosen for Zorian the last time they spoke. It did so far quicker than last time, apparently having gotten more proficient with the process.

It took a step forward, seemingly intending to walk over to them, before pausing and stopping in place.

“Hello, Zorian,” Panaxeth said in a pleasant female voice. “We meet again.”

“I thought you said you would not bother talking to me again,” Zorian immediately pointed out. “That it was a one-time offer.”

“Bah, I told you it was just playing hard to get,” Zach stated.

“Getting past the safeguards on this mechanism is not an easy thing to do,” Panaxeth said. “It is not easy for me to appear before you like this. I meant what I said last time, but I decided you are more interesting than I first realized.”

“Last time you didn’t even dare show your face in front of me,” Zach said loudly in a challenging tone, folding his hands over his chest.

“As the Controller, you are especially well protected from any tampering,” Panaxeth said, shifting its attention towards Zach for a moment. “And you can leave at any time. You do not require my help, nor am I able to stop you from leaving. You are of no use to me.”

“But here you are, showing yourself in front of me anyway,” Zach pointed out.

“I need to conserve my power,” Panaxeth said. “Isolating you in a separate space is costly and unnecessary. I do not care if you hear us.”

The female form Panaxeth was wearing turned its attention back to Zorian, staring at him intently.

“You still have a chance to survive this,” Panaxeth said. “I have managed to stop the Guardian from rescinding all your Controller privileges. Wreck the Controller’s mind as much as you’re able, use the key to unbar the gate, and I will incarnate you in the outside world. I do not even ask that you make a contract with me. Grievously sabotaging the Controller and preventing him from exiting the time loop will be payment enough for your salvation.”

Zach actually floated a few steps back when he heard that.

“You don’t want me as an agent?” Zorian asked, frowning.

“I already have two of them. That’s more than enough,” Panaxeth said. “If I can ensure that the Controller dies here when the time loop collapses upon itself, it will be far more valuable to me than any additional number of agents.”

Neither Zach nor Zorian said anything for a few seconds, but Zorian was furiously thinking about things. If Panaxeth was so desperate to take Zach out of the picture... that probably meant this entire time loop had been made specifically to help him find a reliable way to stop Panaxeth’s release. Even if Zach could not remember so, the two of them were mortal enemies.

“Before I helped Zach gather all the pieces of the Key, you were already winning,” Zorian realized. “You had already sent one of the temporary loopers out as your agent, and Zach had mostly forgotten his mission to stop you. He only had vague feelings to guide him in what he must do. Even if he figured out how to come here, the gate was barred and he couldn’t leave.”

“Yes. It would have been better for me if the Key had never been found,” Panaxeth admitted readily. “However, I am the very embodiment of adaptability. I do not blame you for looking out for your best interests. I simply recruited one of you as my agent, thinking that was the best way to make use of the situation. It was only later that I found out how capable you are at mind invasion, and how the original plan could still be salvaged.”

“You didn’t know that before?” Zorian asked.

“I’m always watching,” Panaxeth said. “Everything, everywhere. But my consciousness is a lot like yours, in that I can’t pay attention to every little detail I see. When you observe an anthill, you perceive a lot, but can you really remember what one particular ant does at any point of time? But I remember it all with perfect clarity, and I can review it all later as I wish. Just like *you* can remember things with perfect clarity when you want to. See? We’re a lot more alike than you might think, Zorian.”

The female shape Panaxeth was using as his avatar smiled. It was a bright, sunny smile that was probably meant to put him at ease but which Zorian found inexplicably terrifying.

“We’re both trapped in this cage, doing anything we can, even distasteful things, in order to get out,” Panaxeth continued. “Do you think I want to destroy your city? Its destruction is simply an unfortunate consequence of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I never asked your kind to build a city around me. Just like you are willing to kill your outside self to live, I am willing to obliterate everything around me to get free. It is not my fault my fatality count is higher than yours.”

“I will die if I don’t get out of here in time,” Zorian pointed out. “You won’t.”

“The cage that binds me is torture you can barely imagine,” Panaxeth countered. “Imagine being entombed for centuries, alive, but starving and thirsting, and unable to move a finger. If that was your fate, would you not do anything in your power to get free?”

That... was a good argument, actually. Zorian had nothing to say to that.

“And then there is him,” said Panaxeth, suddenly pointing towards Zach.

“Me?” Zach protested. “I’m just sitting here quietly, listening to you two talk. What about me?”

“I am heavily restricted in regards to the Controller and cannot speak about things freely, but I can tell you this – no matter what you think about that person, no matter how friendly he seems, you are ultimately enemies. In the end, one has to kill the other.”

“That’s... That’s bullshit!” Zach exploded. “What the hell do you mean by that!?”

“He is good at pretending,” Panaxeth said, not even bothering to look at him. “However, you should have noticed the signs by now. Don’t let your emotions overpower your reason.”

Angry and ignored, Zach tried to ram himself into Panaxeth’s form, even though he knew no fighting was possible here and that this was probably a bad idea.

Panaxeth’s form simply blurred for a moment, causing Zach to harmlessly pass through it.

“I have said all I that needs to be said,” Panaxeth said. “Make the right choice, Zorian. You have until the end of the restart to make a decision. I will be waiting.”

Then they were outside, back in their real bodies. They hadn’t even activated the exit function in their marker – it was another thing that the primordial could apparently do on its own initiative.

“Damn it, damn it, damn it!” Zach raged, throwing around everything in the vicinity to vent his frustration. Zorian winced when one of the sensitive instruments that the facility staff used to study the Sovereign Gate impacted the nearby wall and broke apart. That was going to be a real bitch to explain to Krantin. “Damn it all to hell! Why has everything suddenly going so *wrong!*?”

“Zach, you really need to work on your temper,” Zorian said, thrusting his hand towards another device Zach just threw across the room. It immediately ceased flying through the air, stopping just before it hit one of the cabinets.

Zach paced around the room angrily for a while, not saying anything but thankfully no longer destroying expensive equipment either. After a while he marched up to Zorian with heavy, purposeful steps and grasped him by the shoulders with both of his hands.

“Zorian,” he began, “you don’t really believe that nonsense Panaxeth was spouting there at the end, do you?”

Zorian stared at him, stony-faced, for several seconds.

He knew that there was something to Panaxeth’s accusations. Zach’s mind... it clearly had been tampered with somehow. Maybe by Red Robe. Maybe by the angels, when they had given him his task. Maybe by both. Everything pointed towards that conclusion. Even if Zach was genuinely friendly and wished him nothing but good, there could be all sorts of restrictions, compulsions or contingencies placed in there, just waiting for some trigger to activate them. Perhaps once they were out of the time loop, the smiling boy in front of him would suddenly turn hostile and try to kill him for no reason. He still remembered how quickly Princess switched from seeing them as mortal enemies to following one of them like an overgrown puppy, just because they managed to scratch her a little with her control dagger.

However, he also knew it would be a mistake to say that out loud. For one thing, Zach just listened to Panaxeth telling Zorian to scramble his mind in exchange for a ticket to outside. In light of that, any argument Zorian might use to convince Zach to let him rummage inside his mind would seem very suspect.

“No,” Zorian said. “I don’t believe that at all.”

Zach stared at him for a second before finally letting go of his shoulders and straightening himself a little.

“Good,” he said, patting Zorian on the shoulder in a friendly manner. “That’s good. We can’t let that thing divide us like that. We need to trust each other, now most of all.”

“Right,” Zorian said. He actually agreed with that. “And by the way? *You’re* the one explaining to Krantin why you totally trashed the room like that.”

Zach froze for a second and then looked around him, assessing damage.

“I guess you’re right,” he said with a groan. “I really do need to work on my temper.”

91. A Path Paid in Blood

Chapter 091 A Path Paid in Blood

“This isn’t going to work.”

Zorian stopped staring at the pile of blueprints and notebooks in front of him and looked at the speaker. It was Xvim. He and Alanic had snuck up to him while his attention was absorbed into his task and were currently staring at him expectantly.

Zorian tapped his pen on the table a couple of times before throwing it aside and leaning back in his chair. Perhaps it would be a good idea to take a break. His work had stalled for a while now.

“I’m not sure I understand,” he told his old mentor.

“We can’t keep going like this,” Xvim clarified. “This path we’re on... it’s not going to work. When we planned this out, we were counting on having Silverlake on our side. Now we don’t, and no amount of increased enthusiasm and minor adjustments is going to make up for it. I know you’re still under the impression of what Panaxeth told you, but something has to change. At this rate we’re simply blundering into an obvious failure.”

Zorian stared at Xvim for a second before glancing at Alanic. However, the scarred battle priest was silent, simply staring back at him without saying a word. Clearly he agreed with Xvim’s words, then. They had probably discussed things between each other before approaching him.

He looked around the room instead of immediately answering. It gave him a way to stall and gather his thoughts, but he was also curious about people’s reactions to the conversation. They were inside one of the Noveda estate’s rooms, and there were quite a few people gathered here. Most of them pretended to be absorbed into their own work, but Zorian could tell that all of them were paying close attention to what was happening.

Well, except for Zach. His fellow time traveler was sitting cross-legged on the floor with his eyes closed, trying to sense the divine energies of his divine blessing and Controller marker. Zorian was not sure why he was doing that, to be honest. Both he and Zach had already succeeded at perceiving these divine energies, and it was unlikely he would develop the skill much in what little time they had left before the end of the restart. On top of that, they had basically given up on trying to modify the temporary markers. There was little point to that now.

He took a deep breath but resisted the urge to sigh. They had informed the whole group about their second encounter with Panaxeth and what it meant for Zorian. Strangely, the group took another bout of bad news in stride. In fact, the knowledge that Zorian now shared fates with them seemed to significantly improve the mood of the group. He was one of them now, and the fact that he didn’t panic and break down after finding out this was his last chance to live seemed to inspire them somewhat and calm their fears. They worked harder, grumbled less, and were less dubious about his motives and logic.

For a while, he thought that would be enough... that with some renewed enthusiasm and some clever workaround they would be able to make up for Silverlake’s absence and proceed as planned. However, Xvim and Alanic were right. This wasn’t going to work.

They needed a new plan.

“What are you suggesting?” Zorian asked them.

“First of all, we should tell Krantin and his team that we’re time travelers,” Xvim said.

Zorian cocked his head to the side curiously. Not really what he was expecting to hear.

“Wouldn’t that be rather counterproductive?” Zorian asked. “Krantin and his team have been remarkably cooperative with us, all things considered. If they knew the truth, I imagine their enthusiasm for helping us could only plummet as a response.”

“I said we should tell them we’re time travelers, not the full and total truth,” Xvim said. “Truthfully, they already suspect this. The documents we are providing them with are too similar to their own existing work for that to escape their notice. They have been talking amongst themselves about our identity for a while now, and the most common theory is that we’re literally from the future. It isn’t that far from the truth, really.”

“They actually hit upon such a crazy theory as the most likely one?” Zorian asked, surprised.

“They’re working in a time magic research facility,” Xvim said. “Even though actual time travel is said to be impossible, the topic is likely to come up with some regularity among the staff. They are being paid to push the boundaries of time magic as much as they can, after all.”

Zorian stayed quiet for a few seconds, mulling things over. He supposed the idea was workable, all things considered, and it might eliminate some of the inefficiencies they’d encountered when working with Krantin and his team. However...

“Although this would be useful, I’m not really sure it would do that much,” Zorian said finally. “The facility staff is already working hard on the project of turning the imperial orb into a Black Room. Even with their limited information, they seem appreciative enough for the funding and opportunities we’ve given them. I doubt we could drive them to work harder with this.”

"No, probably not," Xvim agreed, propping his elbows on the table and folding his fingers into a triangle shape in front of him. "This is merely an attempt to make them fine with the second step of the plan."

"Which is?" Zorian prompted, feeling just a little bit apprehensive all of a sudden.

"Kidnapping everyone skilled and possibly useful and forcing them to work for us," Xvim stated calmly, as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

Must resist the urge to sigh. Must resist the urge to sigh. Must resist...

Zorian rubbed his chin in a frustrated manner before focusing back on the two people in front of him. Alanic was still not saying anything. They were both staring at him and waiting for a response.

"And just how—" Zorian began.

"Through any means necessary," Xvim said, cutting him off. "Blackmail. Threats of death and bodily harm. Rampant use of mind magic."

"My mind magic is not that capable," Zorian said, frowning. "The kind of work we need from them has never been done before. They would need to work with us to invent entirely new spells and rituals."

"I know," Xvim said.

"I can't force someone to perform creative work for me with mind magic," Zorian pointed out. "I don't think anyone can. At best we'd get a bunch of dazed zombies."

"They don't know that, though," Xvim said. "Mind magic is terrifying, even for mages, and few people are experienced enough to guess your limits. Ignoring that, what you can do is already terrifying enough for most people. If you demonstrated your memory manipulation abilities, most people would be very intimidated. Even I'm afraid of you sometimes, and I'm both familiar with your limitations and relatively certain you will not target me with your abilities. Finally, even if someone is not intimidated by your ability, you can always use your memory modification abilities as a limited retry button for convincing people. You've used your powers in that manner before, I am told."

"But only on enemies," stressed Zorian.

"And I'm very grateful you retain that sense of morality and restraint in regards to your powers," Xvim said patiently. "But we're running out of time and desperate times call for desperate measures. Don't think we're just selfishly asking you to discard your ideals. This is a burden we're all willing to take upon our shoulders."

Zorian gave him a surprised look.

"Somebody will need to keep this mass of resentful, forcibly recruited mages in line and focused on their duties instead of plotting our downfall," Xvim said. "That's going to be our job. Your job is simply to gather the people we need and intimidate them into cooperating with us, however reluctantly."

Zorian stared at the man for a while, considering what he had been told. Xvim was essentially saying that all or most of the other temporary loopers already agreed that this was an acceptable course of action. That they were just going to... kidnap random people and force them into working for them. And here Zorian was thinking he was being too carefree about reaching for the darker, unethical methods to tackle their problems.

"Well," he said. "I see we're turning into a proper villainous organization. All we need now is a mystical artifact that will allow us to remake the world in our image and we're set to go."

Xvim's lips twitched slightly.

"If you really think about it," he said, "a large group of people armed with knowledge of things to come and all the things we've gathered in the time loop would be more than enough to—"

"Please don't," Zorian implored him. "Just... tell me once again how this is supposed to work."

"Alright," Xvim said, reaching into his bag and handing him a map with a bunch of locations marked on it. Colorful paper notes densely filled with text were pinned next to each of the indicated locations.

"Our main problem right now is that we don't have enough time," Xvim continued after Zorian had a chance to glance at the map. "The only way we're going to get that is by pushing our Black Room modification project to its utter limit. Therefore, we should drop virtually everything and focus on that. However, the biggest problem the project has is the lack of qualified mages to work on it. Most of us are not really qualified to help with it. However, this facility is not the only one of its kind. There are other facilities in other countries, and though they have not gotten as far as the one in Eldemar, their staff is no less qualified than Krantin and his researchers – they just suffer from a lack of funding and opportunities."

The places on the map marked with blue upturned triangles were locations of all known Black Room projects in Altazia, Zorian realized. He knew about these, of course. They had been making use of their facilities for quite some time now. Not just in the sense that they were using them to extend their time in the restarts, either. They had long ago raided these places for any information about time magic, as well as handed them

collected research notes from other facilities to see if they would come up with something novel when presented with such information. Although these initiatives were moderately successful, they had stopped yielding results by now, and so they no longer bothered with them. They simply made use of the facilities in each restart and then left them alone.

Although these places were much smaller than the time magic research facility beneath Cyoria, there was a fair number of them. If they forcibly took all their staff, that would be a lot of people. Plus, there might be some useful equipment there, now that he was thinking about it.

If they were raiding these places for people, they might as well take everything that wasn't nailed down as well.

"So we just raid those places, taking everything and everyone in sight," Zorian said, clacking his tongue. "What about those who just won't cooperate, no matter what carrot and stick we use? Kill them?"

"Push them through a portal to Blantyre and strand them in the jungle for a while," Xvim said. "I think most will reconsider after a few days, but if not, they can just spend the rest of the month there."

And probably get eaten by a flying snake or something, Zorian thought, though he did not say it out loud.

"In any case, with this sudden influx of new people and with Krantin's hopeful acceptance of our time traveler story, we can then move on to the next step," said Xvim, handing him another map.

This one was a very detailed map of the underworld beneath Cyoria, centered around the time magic research facility. However, the facility in the map Xvim gave him was larger than the one that currently existed beneath their feet. Much, much larger. It was a huge, sprawling complex that circled the Hole like a giant torus and then extended into the surrounding land through a spider web of rooms and corridors.

Zorian gave Xvim a dubious look.

"There is no way this kind of development can be hidden from the city," Zorian said dubiously. "Never mind Krantin and his reaction, this would bring the Eldemar military on our heads. Do we really have enough influence to make the city authorities overlook this sort of thing?"

"Yes, that... that is certainly a problem," Xvim tapped his fingers together and looked away uneasily for a second. "We think we have a solution for that, though."

"I'm not going to like this, am I?" Zorian asked rhetorically. "Can it really be worse than the whole 'mass kidnapping' thing?"

"We should work with the Esoteric Order of the Celestial Dragon and its leaders," Xvim told him.

Zorian scowled at the suggestion. He had nothing but disgust and contempt for the Cult of the World Dragon. At least Ibasans had a relatively understandable goal of sabotaging their national enemies. The cultists were traitors and seemed to operate purely on a mixture of delusion and insatiable greed for power. Most of the lower-level members didn't even know what exactly they were fighting for. Plus, he could never quite forget the sight of the shifter children they sacrificed in order to crack open Panaxeth's prison.

He did not like the idea of cooperating with these people in the slightest.

"You can't be serious," Zorian told him, voice tinged with annoyance.

"I really am serious... and not just because they can help us make the city authorities look the other way while we rearrange the local underworld in our favor. With the loss of Silverlake, we have lost our expert on the primordials and their cages. Aside from Silverlake, the cult's leaders are probably the people most qualified to help us understand Panaxeth's prison... and how to exploit it to get out of the time loop," Xvim explained.

"We already took everything they had," Zorian pointed out.

In fact, they had been exceptionally thorough in raiding the cult for every secret they had. Zorian may have compunctions about delving into the minds of random people to steal their secrets, but he had no such compunctions about the cultists. He could not claim to have gotten every scrap of knowledge they had, since he could only look for things if he knew what to look for, but he was quite sure he got everything truly important out of them.

"What they already have, yes," Xvim said. "But not what they could have, if we teach them all we know and give them a chance to look at the problem with increased skills and perspective."

Zorian's eyes widened in realization.

"You want to teach them!?" he asked, aghast at the idea.

"Everything, yes," Xvim confirmed, nodding. "We would not inform them about the time loop, of course, but other than that? We will bring them into our improved Black Room and teach them everything we can about divination, about dimensionalism and about the structure of the primordial prison in the Hole. We will then let them analyze the structure and either ask them to answer our questions or you can just rip the answers straight out of their minds. It depends on how cooperative they are and what is more convenient."

Zorian remained silent for a while. On one hand, he really didn't like the idea of teaching these people anything, especially since that would involve them being close by for several months – plenty of time for things to go seriously wrong. On the other hand, he found the idea of the cultists

unknowingly helping them get out of the time loop so they could sabotage their plans in the real world to be rather amusing. And Xvim was right that, other than Silverlake, these people were the ones most familiar with the primordial's prison. They had been studying it for quite a while now in their attempt to open it, after all.

There was, of course, a small matter of why in the world would the cult leaders agree to work with them on this. However, they were already considering kidnapping people and using blackmail and intimidation to make them cooperate, so this was probably not as difficult of an issue as it appeared. They just had to point out that the invasion could not possibly succeed unless Zach and Zorian *allowed it* to happen, and then prove their words with a demonstration of their power.

He looked at Alanic, who had still not said anything up until now.

"I'm surprised you're willing to entertain this idea," Zorian told him.

"I was willing to work with Silverlake, wasn't I?" Alanic said. "She may not have done anything particularly heinous in front of you, but I assure you she has done plenty of odious deeds in the past. I understand the necessity. It would be playing with fire, but it isn't like this is the first time we're doing that. Isn't it?"

"Indeed," Zorian said quietly. He paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts.

Alanic never really talked about his past with Silverlake, or of his time before he became a priest. Zorian had long figured out by now that the scarred battle-priest had been a very different man back then, and did a lot of things he later regretted, so he refrained from pushing the man on the topic. Alanic had been incredibly helpful towards him throughout all these restarts, and Zorian felt it would be ungrateful of him to dredge up painful memories and old grudges unless he really had to.

If Alanic had some information about Silverlake that he felt was important, he would have told them about it by now.

After a while, Zorian picked up a pen and threw it at Zach's head. Though he had his eyes firmly closed, Zach immediately raised his hand and caught the pen out of the air before opening his eyes.

"How much did you hear?" Zorian asked him.

"Most of it," Zach admitted.

"And?" Zorian prompted. "What do you think?"

"I don't have any better idea," Zach said with a shrug.

Neither did Zorian, in all honesty.

Well, that wasn't *entirely* true...

"Alright," said Zorian, rising from his seat. "I guess we're doing this, then. However, I think a slight modification is in order."

"Slight, huh?" Zach said with a grin.

"If we're going to get the maximum amount of time out of the modified Black Room, the extra manpower is not enough," said Zorian. "We need a dimensionalism mage of the highest caliber if we're going to get truly spectacular results."

"So? Those don't exactly grow on trees," Zach pointed out, throwing the pen back at him. "Where are we going to find one of *those*?"

Zorian caught the pen flying at him with practiced ease.

"How attached are you to that crown we took from Quatach-Ichl?" Zorian asked Zach with a knowing smile.

Zach's expression immediately fell.

"Oh, you can't be serious..." Zach complained.

Oh, but he was. He really was.

"Come on," Zorian told him, motioning him to get up from the floor. "Let's go talk to our favorite lich."

- break -

Somewhere in Eldemar, a field was burning.

Two masked teenagers were engaged in a vicious fight against an ancient Ibasan lich, and the landscape around them was devastated in their passing. Once this had been a wheat field in full bloom, but it was now just an ashen land covered in craters. Broken remains of undead servants and golems littered the ground, and strange rock formations rose out of the ground in places where the two sides tried to entomb each other in solid stone.

Somewhere out there, Zorian mused, a farmer was going to be very devastated when he saw what had happened to his harvest.

This was the third time he and Zach had clashed with the lich like this in the last few days. However, this was fine as far as Zorian was concerned. He considered this to be simply a part of their negotiation with Quatach-Ichl, rather than as a waste of time. They were proving to the lich that they were legitimate threats and that he should take them seriously. Earlier, when they had taken the crown from him in this restart, they had done it through an ambush and by employing something that could be dismissed as a mere trick. Through these fights, they were showing Quatach-Ichl there was more to them than that.

Quatach-Ichl had never stopped looking for them all this time, of course. He had no idea it was Zach and Zorian who had stolen his crown, since they had worn disguises when they had ambushed him and covered their tracks extremely well, but he had somehow managed to find out about the existence of their group in general. He seemed to have identified Xvim, Alanic, Ilsa and Kyron as the leaders of the group, possibly because they interacted with the authorities relatively often. He had tried to target them by ransacking their homes and such, but this hadn't been very effective. All temporary loopers had vacated their usual homes by now, and were not that easy to catch. Plus, he couldn't be too brazen about wrecking things or he would put his own invasion plans into danger.

This sort of situation must have been rather frustrating for the ancient lich, because he had attacked them immediately when they had shown up in front of him again. He hadn't even given them a chance to speak! Rude.

A giant, scintillating ball of red light screamed through the air towards Zorian. He thrust his hand at it, causing a conical wave of barely visible rainbow light to wash over it. It unraveled instantly, revealing a dimmer, but much more dangerous arrow of green energies hurtling at his chest.

The simulacrum standing beside him immediately thrust his arm into the path of the arrow, sacrificing it to shield Zorian from the blow. The arm exploded at the mere touch of the magical projectile, negating the attack but showering Zorian with a rain of metal shrapnel. Zorian didn't try to defend himself against the flying metal pieces, opting to keep casting his counterattack instead. The shrapnel was stopped by his shield, a faint honeycomb pattern momentarily becoming visible around him as it absorbed the attack, and then Zorian finished his spell.

Nothing visibly happened, but this was because his projectiles were utterly invisible – a pair of circular discs of severing force made their way towards the lich, who was currently busy dodging massive boulders and fireballs that Zach was sending his way.

Beside them, Princess released a loud roar into the air with six of her many heads, the last two being busy chewing through the throat of a giant eagle she managed to snatch straight out of the air. The great bird hung limply from her jaws, its riders nowhere to be seen. The fight had been going on for long enough that an Eldemarian response group had reached them and tried to involve themselves into the fight. Unfortunately for them, neither group had appreciated their interference. Their eagle riders had lost at least half of their numbers – one could see the charred husks of their eagles and mages mixed among the wreckage of the battlefield if one looked closely enough. The remaining eagles now circled uneasily in the sky above, keeping their distance and simply observing things.

Several sites in the distance were also smoking. These were the places where Eldemarian forces had tried to set up artillery positions to pick them off from a distance. Quatach-Ichl hadn't liked that idea, though, and after he had finished wiping them all out, they did not bother trying a second attempt at it.

Zach shouted an order at Princess, and she roughly threw the dead eagle aside and disappeared. Well, teleported to be more exact. She reappeared instantly at Quatach-Ichl's side, where she instantly tried biting and trampling him. Even the ancient lich had trouble putting down such a large, regenerating beast... especially when Zach and Zorian were there keeping him from being able to focus solely on dealing with her.

Distracted as he was by the hydra and Zach, Quatach-Ichl did not notice the severing discs until it was too late and ended up losing one of his arms. This, in turn, placed him at an even bigger disadvantage and forced him to burn through a lot of his mana reserves to fend them off and stabilize himself. Now that he had no imperial crown on him, his mana reserves were no longer quite as ridiculous as they once were. He could no longer just outlast them by default. Now Zach proudly wore the crown to battle, which meant it was Quatach-Ichl who had to worry about a war of attrition.

The battle continued on for another five minutes before eventually slowing down. Eventually, the two sides found themselves staring at each other over an expanse of barren land, waiting for the other to make a move. Zach and Zorian could press their advantage, of course, but that would only cause the lich to flee. There was no point to that, really.

The seconds slowly ticked by with nothing to show for it. The only sounds were occasional screeching of giant eagles circling overhead and Princess hissing at them and at Quatach-Ichl in response.

"Hey," Zach finally said, his voice magically distorted and his face hidden behind a blank white mask. He pulled the imperial crown off his head and twirled it around his finger playfully. "Are you looking for this?"

Quatach-Ichl's response was to fire one of his signature red disintegration beams at him. However, Zach did not move a finger to dodge or block it. The beam just curved unnaturally around him and missed.

"We might be willing to give it back," Zorian pointed out, his voice also distorted.

Quatach-Ichl cocked his head to the side curiously, saying nothing.

"Or we can just continue this for another couple of days, I guess," Zach added. "I don't know about you, but I kind of enjoy these clashes

between us. A bit of excitement to spice up the day, you know?"

"So. You want to talk, huh?" Quatach-Ichl observed. He looked up at the Eldemar eagle riders circling above. "This probably isn't the best place to do it, though."

"Pick a time and place, then," Zach said. "Just don't keep us waiting for too long. We're on a bit of a time limit here. You drag your feet too much and we'll just keep the crown and be done with it."

Quatach-Ichl didn't bother answering him. He simply picked up a rock from the ground and squeezed it in his skeletal hand. Bright orange lines burned themselves into the surface of the rock before fading away. The lich then threw the rock at their feet and then teleported away.

Zorian picked the rock up. It was still warm, and there was a time and address carved into it.

Plus a single sentence at the end.

'Don't be late.'

- break -

Zorian had no intention of telling Quatach-Ichl about the time loop or trying to talk him into helping them get out. That would obviously just blow up in their faces. The ancient lich had no motivation to sabotage the plans of his original self by helping them escape into the real world. The last time he'd realized he was just a copy in a duplicate world, he'd had no compunctions whatsoever about sacrificing himself to advance the cause of his original by crippling them. A person like that wouldn't help them just to save his own hide, and they had nothing to really offer him.

But they did not have to tell him about the time loop. They did not have to ask him to help them to escape. What they needed at the moment was more time, and to get that they needed their Black Room project to succeed.

And with Quatach-Ichl's help, it could very well succeed *spectacularly*.

At the moment, they were in a private room in one of Cyoria's many restaurants, discussing this idea with the Ibasan leader. Quatach-Ichl was in his human disguise, and Zach and Zorian had agreed to come unmasked as a show of trust.

"So let me get this straight," Quatach-Ichl said, playing around with his glass. "You want me to help you improve Eldemar's time dilation room to a completely ridiculous rate of dilation—"

"Specifically, we need another five months," Zach said, cutting into his speech.

"—and in exchange you are going to give me my own crown back?" finished Quatach-Ichl, pretending he didn't hear him. "Doesn't that strike you as incredibly brazen and a foolish thing to ask for? I mean, I *will* get that crown back. It's just a matter of time."

"See, that's where you're wrong," said Zach. "Zorian, do your thing."

Zorian nodded and started casting the gate spell. Quatach-Ichl was instantly on guard, but he only tensed imperceptibly and did not attack them or voice any protest. He watched curiously as Zorian finished casting the spell and opened a miniature dimensional gate just above his palm.

If one looked closely, they could see a featureless patch of water by looking through the gate.

"Well... done?" Quatach-Ichl said dubiously. "You can cast the gate spell. Not something many people can brag about but—"

"Scan it," Zach told him. "See where it leads."

Frowning, Quatach-Ichl did just that, casting a bunch of divinations to determine the location of the other side of the portal. After a full two minutes of tinkering, he leaned back in his chair and gave Zach a strange look.

"It's just a random patch of the ocean, as far as I can see. Very far away from any land," he said.

"Precisely," Zach said, grinning from ear to ear. "Now... what do you think would happen if we just chucked this crown through that portal and closed it?"

Quatach-Ichl's eyes widened in shock and realization. The truth was that the deep sea was utterly unreachable from the perspective of humanity. Even the most powerful of mages would have no hopes of finding something that had been thrown away into the middle of the ocean. Even a lich like Quatach-Ichl, who had no need to breathe and potentially lived forever, would balk at the idea of searching through the ocean floor for a needle in a haystack.

If Zach and Zorian really did pick a random spot in the ocean, far away from any land, and threw the crown there... it would be scarcely different from destroying it utterly.

"You wouldn't," Quatach-Ichl said severely. "The value of that crown—"

"If we can't get this Black Room to work, we're dead," Zach said, leaning forward towards the lich. "There, I said it. We're desperate and our

lives literally depend on this working. So if we fail, this crown is utterly useless to us. Why keep it around, then? Anyone we give it to would just become a target for you. Better to throw it into the sea so you can't have it."

"You..." said Quatach-Ichl, speechless for a moment. He shook his head. "I see. So I either get the crown back from you now or I lose it forever. Is that what you're saying?"

"That is what we're saying," Zach said, leaning back into his chair with a bright smile.

Stolen from its rightful author, this tale is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

"Besides, don't pretend you aren't interested in the Black Rooms and that helping us with this is just a chore for you," Zorian pointed out. "We know for a fact that you have been interested in the time magic research facility beneath Cyoria for quite some time. Black Room projects require a great deal of funding and manpower to be developed, and Ulquaan Ibasa is probably not very abundant in either. This is a bit unfortunate since, as a place full of undead, you are the nation most able to exploit this sort of thing to its full potential. No need to worry about lifespan limits if you don't age. And you definitely need every advantage you can get, if you are to really compete with Eldemar and other Altazian powers. Am I right?"

"Hm. Maybe," said Quatach-Ichl after a short pause. "You're saying I would get all the information regarding the Eldemarian Black Room project?"

"How else can we expect you to help us improve it?" Zorian asked. "However, you're thinking too small. It's not just the Eldemarian project that you would have access to. It's also the Sulamnon project, and the Falkrinean projects, and everyone's project. Every Black Room project on the continent."

He took out a bright red folder out of his bag and handed it to Quatach-Ichl. It did not hold any comprehensive notes, of course, but it held enough to make it clear what kind of information Zach and Zorian had at their disposal.

Quatach-Ichl leafed through the folder, slowly at first but picking up as he saw more and more. His eyebrows also got higher and higher as he got closer to the end.

"This... how did you even get this?" he asked them. He sounded honestly impressed.

"We raided every Black Room facility on the continent and stole their notes and research data," Zorian said.

"Hmm," Quatach-Ichl hummed lightly. "I guess this really *is* very important to you..."

They spent the next fifteen minutes discussing the details of the proposed agreement. Though Quatach-Ichl never really agreed to anything and did his best to look uninterested, Zorian could tell they were gradually winning him over.

"So, there is one thing I'm really concerned about here," the ancient lich finally said. "If I agree to this and help you as we agreed... what motive do you have to honor your part of the deal in the end? Yes, I will admit a certain amount of interest in the information you have about Black Rooms, but the crown you stole from me is the real issue. What guarantee do I have that you'll actually hand it over to me at the end?"

"If you agree to help us, we will hand you the crown right now," Zorian said.

Quatach-Ichl raised his eyebrow at them. He had been doing that a lot in this conversation.

"Yes, really," Zorian confirmed.

Zach had already used the Key to unbar the gate. Now the only value of the imperial items was in their basic abilities, and while the crown was extremely useful... they needed Quatach-Ichl's help far more at the moment.

They could always steal the crown the original was wearing when they got to the real world.

"What makes you think I won't just take the crown and walk away laughing?" Quatach-Ichl asked curiously.

"You *could* do that, yes," Zach said. "We don't think you will, though. You are an honorable kind of undead."

"Huh. I don't know whether to feel pleased my reputation is so good or look down on you for being so foolish," the lich said.

"Does that mean you agree to the deal?" Zach asked him.

"Let me ask you a question," the Ibasan leader said. "What actually made you think you could work with me on this? I mean, yes, you clearly looked into me for quite some time before making your move. You even did that without me becoming aware that someone was plotting against me, and some part of me cannot help but be impressed by that. However, it still seems very strange you feel confident enough to propose this deal. Seems very risky."

"We live a very risky life," Zach said, grinning.

"Yet you're still alive," the lich noted with a more subdued smile of his own. "Clearly it is not just a matter of overconfidence, then."

"If we answer this question for you, will you answer one of ours?" Zorian asked him.

"Sure," Quatach-Ichl said, waving his hand in front of him carelessly. "Ask away."

"Why are you working with the Cult of the World Dragon to release the primordial trapped in Cyoria?" Zorian asked. "I refuse to believe someone like you would be ignorant of what exactly you are tangling with. This is not some fancy summon that will go away in a few hours, nor is it just a powerful monster. This is a creature that even the gods had trouble killing. Why would you set that thing loose on the world? I can see a regular rogue mage not caring about the consequences much, but surely you do. You have a homeland you care deeply for, and you probably intend to be alive for a very long time from now."

"Forever," Quatach-Ichl said. "I intend to live forever."

"Then why?" Zorian asked. "Why release a godlike entity that could very well destroy everything in a few centuries?"

The lich looked at him for a few seconds, looking amused.

"Ha ha!" the lich laughed. "So. You do know about the whole invasion business I'm a part of."

"Yes," Zach confirmed. "We do."

"As I expected," Quatach-Ichl responded. "I guess that kind of answers my question, doesn't it? If you know about the invasion plot, you already know I'm willing to enter into highly risky and insane deals if the benefits are big enough. But anyway, about your question... the thing is, I don't think the primordial is going to be allowed to run free that long. Never mind centuries, I don't think it is going to last two weeks!"

"Why?" Zach asked, frowning.

"Because I have faith in the angels," the lich said.

What?

"Sounds strange to have someone like me say that, doesn't it?" Quatach-Ichl said, smiling knowingly. "It's true, though. The gods may be gone, but the angels are still around and I have no doubt they would do everything in their power to either reseal or kill the primordial. Their restrictions limit their ability to meddle in the physical world, so it's easy to underestimate them, but they have some truly awe-inspiring beings and weapons on their side. I should know; I saw them personally fighting a few times. One primordial should not be impossible for them to handle."

"So you want to free the primordial, knowing the angels would take care of it long before it becomes your problem..." Zorian said.

"Yes," the lich confirmed. "Frankly, my main worry is not that the angels will not be able to handle it... my main worry is that they will take care of it too quickly and that the damage from its release and subsequent rampage will be too limited in scope. I ordered all the temples razed to the ground at the very beginning of the invasion, but I fear it may not be enough. The angels can be surprisingly subtle and underhanded when they want to be. For all I know, they may be working against me even now."

He had no idea.

"We are actually really fortunate," Quatach-Ichl continued, sounding very smug. "It is likely that the ability of the angels to interfere with our plans is even more limited due to the recent... hmm, *complications* in the spiritual spheres."

"You mean the fact all communications with the spiritual world have been severed lately?" Zorian asked.

"Hmm. Very well informed, indeed," Quatach-Ichl mumbled quietly. "Yes, that. It's rather unplanned, but not unwelcome. You could say the very heavens are helping me, ha ha!"

A small silence descended on the scene.

"So," Zach said. "Do we have a deal or not?"

"I suppose we do," the lich said. "I must be going senile in my old age, but I'll give you a chance."

"Oh yeah, one more thing," Zorian said. "We kind of also approached the Esoteric Order of the Celestial Dragon about this and some other things. Unfortunately, they have been more unreasonable about this than you have so we have kind of ended up kidnapping them."

He threw a small painting on the table. It was very realistic, depicting a group of bound and gagged men. There was no proof that the picture was real, of course, but Quatach-Ichl frowned when he saw it and stayed silent.

"Since we're working together now, we were hoping you could help us convince them to cooperate," Zorian said. "At the very least, we need their help to make this deal between us actually work. Otherwise, I fear we'll be forced to subject them to our... intense cooperation techniques."

"Hmph. Of course the incompetent idiots got captured," Quatach-Ichl muttered.

He threw the picture onto the table before giving them a more cautious, speculative look. He then thrust his hand towards them, palm pointing upwards.

“The crown,” he demanded, shaking his hand.

With a sigh, Zach reached towards one of his pockets and pulled out the imperial crown. He gave it a look of sad longing before slowly and carefully placing it in Quatach-Ichl’s palm.

The lich immediately placed the crown on the top of his head, a web of geometric lines immediately lighting up all over his skin and flashing dangerously. For a moment his disguise dropped and his black skeletal form became plainly visible, but then he was back to ‘normal’ and his human guise was intact.

The crown was no longer visible, hidden under whatever magic Quatach-Ichl used to keep himself looking like a living being.

“Right,” he said. “Take me to those clowns and I’ll talk to them. They’ll cooperate.”

- break -

Things developed very quickly after that.

Zorian was honestly surprised how well things turned out. He was afraid the kidnapped mages would refuse to work or drag their feet whenever possible. He was afraid Quatach-Ichl would just take the crown and just leave them to their devices while laughing at their stupidity. He was afraid the cult leaders would sabotage everything out of spite, resentful that they had been basically arm-twisted into agreeing with their plans.

None of these things happened. The kidnapped researchers mostly chose to work with them instead of being defiant. A surprising number of them were even enthusiastic about the project, once they realized what they had been recruited to work on. It probably helped that Zach and Zorian promised them they could take all the documentation related to the project back home with them when they were finished. Though somewhat skeptical about that, the sheer scale of the project seemed to put people at ease. There was no way they would kill so many people just to shut everyone up, right?

Quatach-Ichl was a skeleton of his word. Just like he had never tried to cheat them after agreeing to teach them his magical skills, he did not attempt to get out of helping with the project once he committed to it. Which was great, because his help was insanely helpful and they would never have gotten as far as they did without him. He was more than just a replacement for Silverlake – he was vastly better than her and Zorian was honestly kind of sorry they couldn’t recruit him to work on the time loop exit project as well. With his help, their odds would have improved immensely.

Alas, the idea of informing him about the time loop was still as foolish as it always had been.

“Even if Red Robe had left the time loop thanks to a deal with Panaxeth, he still had to find a way to make his temporary marker last past the six month time limit,” Zorian told Zach when they were discussing the topic at one point.

“You think it wasn’t Panaxeth who helped him modify that?” Zach asked.

“Maybe it did, but I doubt the primordial actually did any modification itself. It may have given Red Robe clues and instructions, but he still needed to find someone to do that for him.”

“And you think that someone was Quatach-Ichl,” Zach guessed.

“Yes,” Zorian confirmed. “Yet, if Quatach-Ichl helped Red Robe acquire a permanent marker, why would he not acquire one himself?”

“Perhaps he couldn’t,” offered Zach. “I mean, the fact that temporary markers do not work on people for six restarts after the previous temporary marker runs out clearly indicates it’s not the marker that does the counting. It’s the Sovereign Gate and the Guardian of the Threshold.”

“So?” Zorian asked.

“So that means modifying a temporary marker has to be done before the Sovereign Gate processes it in some way. In all likelihood, that means any change to them must be made before the restart in which they gained the marker ends. We know from your example that the Guardian can only do certain things at the end of the restart, and this is probably one of them. This would also explain why we never managed to figure out a way to modify them that worked. The moment that first restart ended the chance was lost, and we never even realized it.”

“Ah,” Zorian said. That did make a lot of sense... “So you think Quatach-Ichl was already a temporary looper for a while before Red Robe entered?”

“I don’t know. I’m just throwing the idea out there, I guess,” Zach said with a shrug. “What do you think happened?”

“I think maybe Quatach-Ichl didn’t even want to leave the time loop, even if he found out about it,” Zorian said. “I mean, definitely not through a method Red Robe and Silverlake used. Entering into a death pact with a primordial? Not a chance. And physically leaving on your own is very hard. I don’t think even Quatach-Ichl could have pulled it off, considering the amount of effort we had to put into it. Perhaps he simply made a deal with Red Robe, similar to what I have with Xvim, Kael and the others. Once he gets out, he gives Quatach-Ichl a mountain of notes and other

information, and in exchange he helps modify Red Robe's marker."

"He could have still demanded a temporary marker of his own and modified that," Zach pointed out. "Just in case, you know."

"Yeah, I guess," Zorian said after a while. "I don't know. Maybe it's as you say, and he just couldn't. I could see Panaxeth giving Red Robe a very specific solution tailored for him alone. It probably doesn't want anyone getting out without making a deal with him."

Their interaction with the Cult of the World Dragon was very adversarial at first. For one thing, they had kidnapped them and blackmailed them into working with them, so it was inevitable they were not too enthusiastic about cooperating. It also didn't help that Zorian evacuated all the shifters out of the city and informed the cult leadership that no child sacrifice would be allowed in their attempt to free Panaxeth from his prison. That led to a lot of shouting and even a brief exchange of combat spells.

However, the cult leaders would ultimately see the light when Zach and Zorian showed them the Sovereign Gate. They did not explain to the cultists what the object exactly did, but they did tell them it was a divine artifact that contained some of the essence of Panaxeth itself... and could thus be used as a key to open Panaxeth's prison. A much better key than the shifter blood essence they originally planned to use for the purpose, too.

Though their description was deceptive, the basic facts were entirely true – within the reality of the time loop, the Sovereign Gate could very much be used as a key to open Panaxeth's prison. In fact, using the Sovereign Gate was the key part of their plan to exit the time loop. This had been true while they had Silverlake's cooperation and it was true now.

Zorian had been a little worried that the cultists would figure out too much if given access to the Sovereign Gate, but thankfully that never happened. They were overjoyed with it, but only because it was a better, fancier key to releasing Panaxeth out of its prison. They never realized what was truly going on inside of it.

Considering it was a divine artifact, and that those were notoriously hard to figure out, Zorian probably shouldn't have been surprised at that.

In any case, their plans went off flawlessly. Better than they could have hoped, even. They had dug up a massive underground facility, reshaped the entire local geomantic web to fuel its creation, and then surrounded the imperial orb with layers upon layers of complicated wards and barriers made out of extremely expensive materials. The cost of the whole project was enough to bankrupt a small country and would give even a major nation like Eldemar and Falkinea pause if they had to pay for it. By the end of it, even Quatach-Ichl seemed to be getting a little uneasy at the amount of resources and effort being put into this thing.

It didn't matter though, because he stayed true to his word and the project was finished on time. Six days before the end of the restart, the improved Black Room was done. A large throng of people – time loopers, cult leaders and the more enthusiastic of the kidnapped researchers – piled on into the imperial orb and then the time dilation was activated.

They would spend the next five months inside the imperial orb. Outside, a single day would pass.

Quatach-Ichl did not join them in the orb, despite helping them make it. This was smart of him, because Zach and Zorian would have killed him the moment the orb was isolated from the outside world and stolen his crown again. Zorian wasn't sure whether Quatach-Ichl could have escaped back to his phylactery if he was killed inside the palace orb, but even if he could they wouldn't care. The important thing was that he could not escape when overpowered inside the orb, and that having him inside for the full five months was too much of a risk. The cult leaders were... manageable. Someone like Quatach-Ichl wasn't.

In any case, the next five months would consist of improving everyone's skills so they could help with the final exit plan, manufacturing the necessary ward stones and blueprints to prepare the terrain, and so on. It would be a bit of a challenge to hide the true meaning of all the preparations from the cult leaders and the like, but Zorian was not opposed to simply killing them if they ended up revealing too much to them, so whatever.

Zorian had another thing he wanted to do, though. Something he wanted to keep hidden from most people... including Zach.

Thus, he gathered most of the aranea loopers, plus Xvim and Daimen, and brought them to one of the isolated corners of the orb dimension for a talk.

"What a strange group you have gathered," Xvim remarked. "It seems you are still not satisfied with your mind magic skills, if I am reading the situation correctly."

"Seriously?" Daimen complained. "Aren't you good enough at that, already?"

"You can never get good enough at mind magic," one of the aranea responded.

"Indeed," Zorian said. "It's my best skill, and it's good to keep working on those. However, I didn't bring you here to work on my general mind magic skills. What I want... is to figure out a way to get past the Mind Blank spell and target a person with mind magic anyway."

A look of realization entered everyone's eyes. Even the aranea – their body language was a little hard to read but Zorian had gotten a feeling for it by now.

Then they all got to work.

The escape attempt had to happen at the end of the month, on the day of the Summer Festival. The reasoning for this was identical to the one the Ibasans and the cultists used to launch their invasion at that particular moment in time – this was the peak of the planetary alignment, when dimensionalism magic was at its strongest.

When the group left the imperial orb, only five days remained until the deadline. This was not much, but it was enough to make the necessary preparations. The time magic research facility was completely repurposed into a part of the exit ritual. Large sections of the Hole were covered in carved spell formula and embedded with strange metallic ward stones. The cultists they had spent five months training in dimensionalism and divinations had analyzed Panaxeth's prison and shared their results with the group. They seemed honestly grateful to Zach and Zorian for the 'help' they had given them, which made Zorian feel just a little bit guilty about intending to utterly betray them in the end. Not enough for him to do anything differently, but still.

Sadly, the final plan they had agreed upon had some unfortunate details. The original plan was to use Panaxeth's prison as a bridge, opening a dimensional gate that would connect a spot in the time loop with the same spot in the real world. That plan was now largely unworkable. Silverlake had been the only one who knew how to interact with the primordial's prison with sufficient finesse to make that possible. Despite their best efforts in trying to develop that skill in some of their people, they had failed to duplicate her feats. It did not help that they obviously could not experiment on the primordial prison itself while inside the imperial orb – they could only work on their general dimensionalism skills and try to guess what was necessary to interact with it properly.

Still, while the original plan was no longer possible, they did have an alternative. It was just that this plan required them to crack open Panaxeth's prison and then sacrifice the imperial orb to serve as a bridge they needed to connect the two realities.

There were two problems with this. The first was that it required them to destabilize the primordial's prison and make a crack in it – something that usually triggered a premature end to the restart and would allow Panaxeth to extend its influence outside the prison while they attempted to form the bridge. This would be solved by enclosing the area with multiple layers of dimensional membranes, so that even after breaching its prison, Panaxeth would not be truly 'free'. They weren't totally sure it would work, but it was the best idea they had and the theory was sound. Even if it worked, though, it would only stop the restart from ending immediately – it would do nothing to stop Panaxeth from rampaging about.

The other was that using the imperial orb that way meant they couldn't take it with them to the real world. It would have to stay behind to form a path for them, which would sharply limit the amount of things they could bring with them from the time loop as well as result in the total loss of all of the research notes and blueprints Zorian had stored in its memory bank.

That was... painful, to say the least. There was no other choice, however. The imperial orb was the only pocket dimension reinforced with divine power that they knew of. It was the only thing they knew of that could withstand the dimensional stresses involved in the procedure. Everything else would break in seconds.

Deciding what to bring with them and what to leave behind was stressful and led to a lot of arguments, but somehow they managed to cut their possessions down to a manageable level.

Days passed in a flash, until there was no more time. The Summer Festival was upon them, and the invasion was about to begin. Zach and Zorian had meant to kill all the cult leaders the day before, to make sure they wouldn't interfere with their work, but their unlikely allies surprised them by graciously agreeing to step aside of their own free will. The official reason was that they had 'figured out' that their group planned to release the primordial too, and that thus there was no need for them to get involved. Zorian did not believe that for a second, of course. The leadership of the cult wanted to *control* the primordial, not just release it. Moreover, Quatach-Ichl was never very far from the cult leaders these days, making direct moves against them impossible.

Reluctantly, they decided to let the matter drop. Hopefully the lich and the cultists would be too busy fighting the city to try and sabotage their operation. They had done their best to covertly prepare the city and its defenders for the upcoming invasion so the attackers should have their hands full in that regard. They simply made the last round of preparations and then settled down to wait.

Everything was ready.

Zorian turned to Zach.

"If this fails, I'm dead," he told him.

Zach shifted uncomfortably.

"The Guardian may have been lying for some reason," he said. "Perhaps you will wake up at the start of the next restart and..."

"Maybe," said Zorian, cutting him off. He really doubted it, though. "However, it's best to plan for things not being so convenient. Anyway, if everything fails and we all die, it's all up to you. You're our last and only hope."

"I... I guess," Zach sighed, looking really pained at the idea of him getting out of this thing alone. "Look, I know this probably sounds hollow... but if anything happens to you, I promise I will take care of your original self, alright?"

"That actually does make me feel somewhat better," Zorian said. "Come on. It's starting."

The ritual was taking place inside the Hole, on a floating platform. There was a raised dais in the center, on which the Sovereign Gate stood. It struck Zorian that this was a very similar setup to the one the cult had used for their ritual. They really had ended up supplanting their role in a way, hadn't they?

Of course, the real setup their group was using was much more extensive than what the cultists had used in the past. Though the main ritual grounds consisted of this one floating platform, the supporting mechanisms actually extended throughout the entire local underworld. Additionally, the entire space around them was enclosed in several layers of dimensional membranes that isolated the place from the outside world as much as possible. There would be no plucky trio of mages simply flying up to them in a sphere of white force to disrupt the whole thing from within, like Zach and Zorian had done to the cultists in one of the previous restarts.

The entire group arranged itself into a series of three concentric circles. Zach, Zorian, Daimen and Xvim were at the very center, surrounding the Sovereign Gate. They were the people most skilled in dimensionalism, and thus the most crucial for the effort. Around them were dozens of people who had enough skills to contribute, but not enough to take on the heavy burden that the main four were responsible for. Finally, there was the rest of the group who couldn't really help the procedure work, and could only stay back and pray for everyone's success. They were here only because once the area had been enclosed in dimensional membranes, no one could get in without disrupting everything and causing the ritual to fail. Thus, if they wanted to get them outside, they had to be present inside while the ritual took place.

After some shouting and pushing, everyone was in their assigned position and (hopefully) knew what to do. They started casting.

For the first five minutes, nothing much happened. The air above the platform warped and twisted like hot summer air, but nothing more than that occurred. The group had to be exceptionally careful about their spell work and timing, and that meant work was bound to be slow. Still, everything was proceeding well so far.

The walls of the Hole shook, sending dust and pebbles everywhere and causing the inscribed spell formula in the walls to flare and flicker with an ominous blue light. A deep rumbling sound emanated from somewhere in the distance, like a growl of a titanic beast.

Crap. What the hell was going on outside? What were Quatach-Ichl and the cultists doing?

"Stay focused!" Xvim warned. "We are at a critical—"

Another tremor, this one even stronger, shook the entire place and everything suddenly went to hell. The shimmering, controlled breach they were working towards quickly spun out of control, and a pitch black, irregular crack suddenly manifested itself in the air around them.

"Shit!" Zach swore. "Suppress it! Suppress it!"

But it was too late. A swarm of dark brown tentacles, ropelike and covered in thorns, rushed out of the crack and sent everyone scattering out of their positions.

The crack widened, revealing a giant, three-lobed, inhuman eye lurking behind the dimensional barrier, and more tentacles rushed out to confront them. These were thicker, and had rather human-like hands attached at the end.

Though things had gone badly, all was not lost. They had made the ritual with certain tolerances, and this was still a manageable outcome. Quickly, many of the people standing around in the third circle of the ritual rushed forwards and started fighting the tentacles. People like Kyron and Taiven had no skills with which to help the ritual itself, but they had plenty of combat power and no other duties to distract them. They fearlessly charged into the invading primordial mass, recklessly burning through their mana to keep it away from Zorian and the others.

As for Zach and Zorian, they were busy suppressing the breach and could offer very little help. Should their attention lapse for even a second, Panaxeth would overwhelm them before they could blink. They frantically dodged the flailing tentacles, shaping and stabilizing the breach into something manageable.

Dimly, Zorian was aware that one of the 'hands' that got severed in half by Taiven suddenly grew legs and claws and flung itself at her. Taiven ended up tackled at the ground, unable to cast much of anything. Kyron managed to blast the thing off of her, but she had to be dragged off to the side, effectively out of the fight.

She was also bleeding heavily, leaving a thick trail of blood as she was dragged to the edge of the platform. Zorian had no idea if she was going to live, and couldn't really afford to check at the moment.

Not far from there, one of the aranea tried to block one of the thin, thorny tentacles with a force shield but found her defenses to be lacking. The tentacle punched through her shield and swiftly wrapped itself around her torso several times. That's when they found out that the thorns weren't just very sharp, but were also thin and bladed like a razor. The high-pitched scream of the aranea cut off quickly as the thorns effortlessly sliced through her exoskeleton and turned her into a mutilated corpse.

The tentacle then picked up the corpse and started waving it around like a bloody flail, sending blood and viscera everywhere. Some of the mages panicked or flinched when the aranean blood splattered all over them, even if no actual damage was done, and their efforts to keep the breach in check started to fail.

"Damn it," swore Zorian, reaching into his jacket pocket and removing a handful of steel spheres densely covered in spell formula. He had been hoping to save these for later. He *needed* them later. But if he didn't use this now, they were done for.

He flung the spheres at the rift above and they spontaneously aligned themselves around it into a quickly rotating ring before starting to glow. The primordial's tentacles reacted quickly, switching directions and trying to tear the sphere formation apart, but thankfully the rest of the group immediately realized they could not let that happen. A swarm of multi-colored rays, bullets, and more exotic projectiles intercepted the tentacles, halting their charge for a moment.

A moment was enough. The spheres erupted into blinding white light, blinding everyone for a moment, and then the rift abruptly shrunk. Some of the tentacles, cut off from the source of their mass by the shrinkage, fell from the sky, crashing onto the platform with a loud thud.

Their relief was short-lived, however, since the tentacles soon started twitching and bubbling like boiling water, before starting to merge into an ovoid, chrysalis-like mass.

Alanic was the first to act, sending streams of white-hot flames at the forming cocoon, and then everyone joined in. However, the structure seemed to have developed some kind of resistance to the spells they had used on the tentacles thus far, because it was stubbornly resisting attempts to eradicate it.

Deep within it, some horrible shape rapidly began to form.

And the Sovereign Gate spontaneously started glowing white, a silhouette of the familiar form of the Guardian of the Threshold forming right above it.

“Shit...” Zorian couldn't help but mumble.

“Use the orb,” Xvim said.

“But—” Daimen protested.

“We have no choice,” Xvim interrupted. “We have no time. It has to be now.”

After a moment of indecision, Daimen reached to his side and threw the imperial orb at the crack. Zach, Daimen, Zorian and Xvim quickly started casting layers upon layers of spells on it, trying to integrate it into Panaxeth's prison like they had intended.

It wasn't going well enough, so Zorian reached for more of the items he prepared for this – a collection of metal tablets, several staves made out of alchemically-treated wood, and a box of several hundred marbles, each of which contained a three-dimensional spell formula made out of metal wire. He sacrificed it all in succession and even burned some of his life force to make his spells hit harder. He was fairly sure he noticed Zach, Xvim and Daimen doing the same, burning their life to make sure the fusion worked.

They succeeded. The imperial orb pulsed three times with translucent waves of rainbow light before pulling the pitch black rift into itself. The crack in the sky disappeared, but the orb seemed to pull in the space around it still. The air warped and rippled, forming a pitch black sphere above the orb, its surface rippling like water. Around it, a smoky grey torus burst into existence, crackling with multicolored energies. Then another, and then another, until three grey tori revolved around the pitch black sphere that had suddenly grown perfectly still and featureless.

The exit. It was ready!

Unfortunately, that's when the glowing form of the Guardian of the Threshold finished materializing. It did not speak a word, simply raising its hand at the group and releasing a thick, blinding beam of white energy at them.

The beam did not even cross half of the distance towards them before it suddenly split into more than a hundred thinner, but equally bright beams.

Zach and Zorian's simulacrum, previously held in reserve, sprang into action. So did the combat golems Zorian made for the occasion. But the beams were fast and each one swerved and pivoted in the air like a living thing, tracking its chosen target. Hastily erected defenses did nothing to stop them, and Zorian was pained to see Ilsa, Nora, and two of the aranea killed on the spot when the beams hit them.

The exit was right there, open and ready, yet four people had died so close to their salvation.

Some people fired a counter-attack at the spectral form of the Guardian, but the entity did not attempt to dodge or shield itself from the attacks in any way. Every attack that reached it simply sank into its glowing form and disappeared. There was no indication that the Guardian had suffered any damage from the attacks, or even that it had noticed them.

Damn it, they needed to start the evacuation now! Zorian started directing his simulacrum to start the preparations, but that's when the primordial chrysalis from before suddenly exploded, a large, vaguely humanoid beast bursting out of it. It had four arms. A three-eyed, skeletal head stood attached to its shoulders through a long, flexible neck. Its tail was extremely long and thin, and ended with a hand-like appendage. Glossy, chitinous carapace covered it, studded with thin, razor-like spikes.

It roared horribly, its sound incredibly loud and grating... and then it dropped on all six of its main limbs and charged straight at the center of the platform, where Zorian and the others were located. Anyone who tried to get in its way was flung aside like a rag doll and every spell that hit it was resisted with little to show for it.

The glowing form of the Guardian raised its hand again, another beam sparkling on its fingers.

And then, to add a final insult to it all, the entire area rocked and shook as a series of loud booms erupted from somewhere above.

Zorian's heart sank. There was no mistaking it. Someone was attacking their ritual grounds from the outside.

Probably Quatach-Ichl and the cultists.

Damn it! How did they—

No. No, that was a silly thing to ask. He had to focus on the now. He had to—

The Guardian fired another white beam of death. It once again flowered into hundreds of smaller beams, and this time they were not capable of minimizing the effects. Zorian joined his simulacrum in blocking as many as he could, but it was not enough. He watched, horrified, as Kael tried to shield his little daughter from one of the beams with his body. The beam drilled straight through them, killing them both on the spot.

Kyron managed to block the beam, but that made him too distracted to deal with the primordial beast running up to him from behind. Its massive, clawed hand swiped across him, shattering through his hastily erected shield and cleaving him in half before continuing its relentless advance.

Another series of explosions sounded from just outside the ritual grounds and the spell formula that stabilized the exit to the time loop flickered dangerously.

A small, almost imperceptible crack appeared on the imperial orb floating just beneath the exit. It could no longer handle the strain of maintaining the bridge to the real world.

Somewhere on the edge of the platform, Zorian could feel Taiven's soul suddenly wink out. She probably bled to death while everyone was too busy fighting for their life to tend to her wounds.

Suddenly, it dawned to Zorian that they were all going to die here. They were so close, they had practically won, and yet—

“Truthfully, I think I’d always known it would end this way,” Daimen suddenly said with a small sigh.

He took a knife out of his pocket and ruthlessly slashed at his wrists.

“Daimen! What are you doing!” Zorian screeched at him.

“You have to live,” Daimen told him, his hands trembling as he went through a complicated series of gestures with them, his wrists heavily dripping blood. “It’s fine if I die, but you have to live. Don’t let it all be in vain. It *can’t*!”

Suddenly, he thrust his bloody hands towards the collapsing exit in the air, pouring every shred of his life force into the stabilization wards. The cracks on the imperial orb stopped spreading, the black surface of the exit calmed down into its smooth, peaceful state, and the spell formula lining the walls stopped fluctuating for the moment.

Xvim watched the scene for a moment before focusing on Zorian.

“Go,” he said. “Zach and I will keep the exit stable while you pass through.”

“Zach doesn’t need this, but you—” Zorian protested.

“Go!” Xvim shouted at him. “Zach cannot keep this stable by himself. Go now!”

He... could do that, yes. He could go through by himself, abandoning everyone to their fate. But that...

He glanced at the others, desperately fighting to keep the primordial beast away from them and keeping the Guardian of the Threshold busy with other targets. They knew the exit was there. They could have just dropped everything and made a mad dash at the exit in hopes that some of them would make it. Wouldn’t that be the smartest choice, individually?

Yet none of them had made that choice.

Steeling his heart, Zorian stopped focusing on the maintenance of the exit, handing over his part of the burden to Xvim and Zach, who visibly struggled under the increased strain. He then crouched and jumped, casting a quick flight spell and rushing straight at the exit.

The primordial beast screeched in anger, increasing its pace. The Guardian suddenly teleported in front of Zorian, blocking his path and forcing him to evade and block another series of white beams that chased after him, pivoting in the air and curving their trajectories to keep him in their sights. Some of the other loopers helped him out, ignoring their own safety to block some of the beams with their own spells. The ceiling shook again, this time more severely than before, but Daimen’s final sacrifice had allowed things to keep working for now.

He was only inches from the exit when the primordial beast suddenly opened its massive bestial mouth and fired some kind of serrated bony spike straight at his chest.

He was practically a spent force by this point, and could do nothing to stop the spike from slamming straight into his back and passing straight through his chest.

An explosion of blood and viscera erupted out of him, his whole chest a ruined mess. Perhaps it was just him losing all sensation as death took him, but it felt to him that everything suddenly went quiet for a moment as his flight spell failed and his body began to fall to the ground, trailing blood behind it.

His wound was too serious. He was dead for sure.

Closing his eyes, he initiated the final contingency, separating his soul from his body. A complicated soul spell he had always kept running in the background suddenly activated, allowing him to maintain consciousness in soul form. Without hesitation, he abandoned his dying form and rushed straight into the exit in front of him.

Before either the primordial beast or the Guardian of the Threshold could stop him, he was already through, following invisible paths that would lead him to the real world.

As a soul, his ability to perceive the real world was highly limited. He followed invisible lines of space and time, racing through a tunnel he could dimly perceive in front of him. Most of his ability to navigate in this place came from the fact he had absorbed the dimensional perception of the tunneler toad and gained a considerable amount of proficiency with it in the five months he had spent in the imperial orb.

Yet, that same ability was also threatening to undo everything he had accomplished. He had bound that ability to his mana reserves and his body, but his body was no more. One of the very pillars that were supposed to anchor the ability to him was gone, and his mana reserves shuddered and churned, threatening to destabilize. Should that happen, he would lose all ability to cast spells or even direct his mana. Everything would still fail in the end. He had to hold on for a little while longer. He focused tightly on keeping control over his mana reserves, even as he tried to navigate to the exit in the real world.

Dimly, he felt the tunnel start to collapse behind him. Apparently Xvim and Zach had finally lost their struggle to keep the passage open. Nobody except Zorian had gone through, as far as he could tell.

He drove himself to travel faster.

Finally he was out! He could feel the space open up around him, the tunnel ending. For a while he was disoriented, confused about what he had to do. His mind was fuzzy – he had never spent this much time in soul form, especially not with destabilizing mana reserves. However, he eventually remembered what he had to do. He had to track down his old body.

Fortunately, that was not so difficult. He had no idea where the exit had deposited him, exactly, but he and his original body shared a certain bond with each other.

It was hard to cast much as a pure soul, but Zorian could do enough to craft himself a set of ghostly hands. From that point, everything became easy. A couple of divinations to lock down on the location of his old self, a couple of quick teleports to enter his room and he was there.

His old self was sleeping, blissfully unaware of the invasion. Soul Zorian did not hesitate. His soul form plunged straight into his old self's chest, causing the boy to gasp before all his body locked up as the two souls started to fight for the ownership of the body.

Maybe it was quick. Maybe it was slow. Zorian had never fought a soul battle or possessed someone's body before. What he did know was that his old self never had a chance. From the moment he attacked, the ultimate outcome was never in question.

He opened his eyes and looked at the ceiling of his room

His room. Yes. Definitely his room.

He rose into a sitting position and looked around. It was night. He thought he would maybe wake up when Kirielle came to jump on top of him, but then he remembered that the time loop technically began much earlier than that.

He placed his right palm in front of him. A ghostly orb of white light bobbed up and down just above it.

The soul of his old self.

He stared at it for a full five minutes, trying to decide what to do with it. He had considered the issue before, of course, but now that he was actually here...

After a while, he closed his palm around the soul, causing it to fade away and move on to the afterlife.

To do anything else, seemed... cruel.

Then he jumped out of bed, took a look around his dark, silent room and cracked his knuckles.

It was time to get to work.

92. The Scramble

Chapter 092 The Scramble

In the months leading up to their disastrous exit from the time loop, Zorian and the other members of the group had entertained many different outcomes and how each of them would reflect on what they would have to do immediately after crossing over into the real world. This included the possibility of having to cross over in soul form, much like Zorian had ended up doing in the end. Theoretically, this meant that Zorian already knew what to do and how to arrange his priorities.

In practice, things weren't so simple. While he had succeeded in leaving the time loop and possessing his old body, the process had a critical flaw.

Their theorizing had assumed that, if Zorian executed everything correctly, he would be at his top form upon seizing his body. After all, he would possess a body that was flawlessly matched to his soul, so there shouldn't be any rejection issues that usually plagued possession attempts. Having crossed over as a soul meant losing all the physical resources and information storage they had planned to bring, but at least his magic would be fully intact.

In reality, he didn't even have *that*.

The problem was the dimensional ability of the tunneler toad he had anchored to himself in the time loop. His body may have been perfectly matched to his soul, but it wasn't the body to which he had anchored the ability to. Without the life force portion of the anchor, the part located in his mana reserves couldn't persist for long, either. He was fortunate he had managed to prevent its collapse before successfully possessing his old body, or else he'd be dead right now and all the sacrifices the others had made would have been for nothing. However, once he established full control of his body, the ability anchor in his mana reserves finally gave out and unraveled completely.

Unraveling a permanent enhancement like that was not a small matter. It caused him no pain, and he would not be permanently crippled by any means, but his mana reserves would be in utter turmoil for the next four to five days.

An eternity, considering time was of the essence.

Standing completely still in the darkness of his room, Zorian closed his eyes and sensed his mana again with a more critical eye. It was bad... but not unmanageable. A regular mage would have been completely crippled by the chaotic, unruly nature of his current mana reserves, but Zorian had honed his shaping skills to virtual perfection. Plus, he had experienced something similar before, when Quatch-Ichl had inflicted grievous soul damage, so he had experience in how to handle these sorts of things.

Slowly and carefully, he waved his hands in the air in front of him, softly muttering a spell chant. After some time, a single flawless simulacrum materialized in front of him.

The simulacrum did not speak or wait for Zorian to give him a command. He knew what was asked from it. He simply walked back to the bed, lied down, closed his eyes, and focused completely on calming down the raging mana reserves they both shared.

Zorian breathed a sigh of relief as he felt his mana reserves immediately stabilize into a more manageable form. Good. So long as one of his simulacra focused all their attention on stabilizing them, his mana reserves would remain usable. It wasn't the same as him being in top form, but it would do for now.

His spellcasting restored to a usable condition, he immediately threw himself into the next task before him: confirming that Zach had left the time loop and waking him up before Red Robe had a chance to assassinate him in his sleep. A critical task that would normally require him to drop everything else and rush to Cyoria, but which might be achievable through faster and cheaper methods.

Quickly rummaging through his old school supplies for alchemical reagents and deconstructing a bunch of old items scattered around his room for necessary materials, Zorian constructed a simple ritual circle on the floor of his room. He then spent almost a minute performing a special long-range ritual spell... one that tapped into his marker. The same marker that he had shared with Zach.

There was no guarantee that Zach still had the marker on his soul, of course, even if he had successfully left the time loop. Unlike Zorian, Zach was supposed to leave the time loop the normal way for a Controller. That is to say, the Guardian of the Threshold would perform the transfer. For all Zorian knew, this process may have involved erasing the marker, since it was no longer necessary.

However, Zorian had a suspicion that the marker was definitely going to stay embedded in Zach's soul. A suspicion that turned out to be correct when the ritual finished, and the information from it rushed into Zorian's mind. He could feel the existence of the second marker in the direction of Cyoria, shining like a star in the darkness.

He breathed a sigh of relief. He had made it out. There was no reason why he wouldn't have, but so many things had gone wrong that Zorian did not dare take anything for granted.

He then reached out to Zach over the faint connection provided by the ritual and their identical markers. His mana reserves dropped like a stone. Bridging the vast distances between Cirin and Cyoria was hard and costly, even for such a small thing. Without the two identical markers connecting them, it would have been entirely impossible.

Just before he was about to run out of mana, he succeeded in touching Zach's soul. It was just a light brush, but it was enough. A sharp spiritual jolt shook his soul, shocking him awake.

After observing things for a second to make sure he had really succeeded, Zorian broke the connection and stood up. He couldn't actually talk to Zach through a spell like that, so there was no point in burning through his mana to keep the link going. They would talk more once they actually met.

He waited for a while till his mana reserves recovered and then cast the simulacrum spell three more times. Like the first simulacrum, these ones did not bother speaking either. There was no point. Zorian's connection with his simulacrum was very strong, intertwining them on both mental and spiritual levels. Though they still had their own individual minds, they were constantly exchanging thoughts with Zorian and each other, much of it on a purely unconscious level with no need to expend effort or concentration to make it happen.

Four simulacrum. This was the most he could manage at the moment while still remaining effective. He would be casting a lot of magic in the near future, so he had to keep his mana regeneration rate at acceptable levels.

He considered what to do next for a moment, mentally bouncing ideas back and forth between his simulacrum. While they talked, they silently wandered around the house and rummaged through his belongings, gathering materials. They didn't have too much time to spend on making equipment, but some basic spell aids and disguises were a must.

The chance that Red Robe and Silverlake would target his family immediately after exiting the time loop was low, in his opinion. Those two had more pressing issues to tackle for now, and Cirin was far from Cyoria. Red Robe might not even know about Zorian and where he lived, or else he would have knocked Zorian out of the loop before leaving it. Silverlake obviously did know, but she and Red Robe presumably did not know each other before now and would struggle to establish trust.

Nonetheless, Zorian knew he couldn't just leave his family undefended. He had to either move them to a secure place or leave a simulacrum behind to protect them.

Gathering them up and moving them to some distant area was the safest option. The most responsible option. However, that would be a lengthy and mana expensive task, and many critical tasks would have to be postponed until it was done. He couldn't make that choice. Xvim... Alanic... all the temporary loopers that had died to keep the exit open instead of trying to save their own lives... they had made that choice because they trusted him to look after everyone's interests once outside. He couldn't just blow everything off in order to make sure his family was perfectly protected.

Plus, he was ultimately a bit selfish. Evacuating the house would require him to inform his parents about what was happening or use mental compulsions on them. He didn't want to do either. He wanted some semblance of normalcy to remain between them for now. If possible, he wanted to just wait for them to leave for Koth as they normally did. In just a few days, his parents would be on a ship at sea and all but unreachable. The problem of their safety was ultimately self-solving.

It was unreasonable, perhaps, but he still held on to a tiny sliver of hope that all this could be solved without informing the whole world.

He shook his head, forcibly banishing his idle thoughts and fears for the future. It wasn't the time. Just as it wasn't the time to be shaken by the death of people that had been working with him on this project for more than a year. He'd worry about that later.

A little while later, all the preparations were finished and he was back in his room. He glanced at the simulacrum to his left and his copy silently nodded at him before wandering off to secure the house. Cirin was not a magically potent area, and the materials he had at his disposal left a lot to be desired, but it should be enough. He would have to appropriate a fair portion of the family silverware, though...

For a second, Zorian stared at the two remaining simulacrum in front of him. Four simulacrum, but he could really only use two of them. So inefficient. Still, one had to work with what they had, not what they wished they had. He silently told the two to get ready, and then all three of them started to cast a powerful teleportation spell. Moments afterward, they were enveloped by a ripple in space and disappeared.

Lying on the bed, the first simulacrum did not even twitch at their departure. He was wholly consumed in his task, knowing that if his attention lapsed even slightly over the next couple of hours, it could spell disaster for everything they were trying to accomplish. Having their mana reserves suddenly turn chaotic in the middle of a critical moment could kill the original or dispel one of his fellow simulacrum before they could accomplish their goals. Fortunately, Zorian's research into mental enhancements had taught him how to assume some very useful states of mind, or else he likely wouldn't have been able to maintain focus over such long periods of time.

The final iteration of the month had not started auspiciously, but Zorian and his simulacrum were determined to make it work anyway.

- break -

Cyoria was fairly easy to teleport to, since there was a teleport beacon placed in the middle of the city. Though the real purpose of the construction was to redirect all incoming teleportation into one specific area, so that they could be more easily monitored and policed, it also acted as a sort of lighthouse for teleportation magic. This meant that while Red Robe and Silverlake would find it very inconvenient and mana expensive to travel to a small rural town like Cirin, it was relatively easy and cheap for Zorian to teleport himself towards Cyoria.

The moment he and his two simulacrum had arrived into the city, they each split off to pursue their own tasks. For simulacrum number three, that meant checking up on Veyers. After all, there was a good chance that Red Robe was actually Veyers, in which case he would probably try to get

his old self out of the line of fire as soon as possible. Probably. Whatever the case, visiting Jornak's place to see what was happening there was of very high importance in Zorian's mind.

The simulacrum moved rapidly through the streets of Cyoria, using his own two feet to move around instead of wasting mana on teleportation. He wore a featureless white mask over his face and his other features were hidden with heavy clothing and layers of privacy wards. The original and the other simulacraums similarly hid their identity. It was likely they would come face-to-face with Red Robe at some point, and there was no point in making things easy for him by openly identifying themselves as Zorian Kazinski. Silverlake knew who Zorian was, of course, but she was also an untrusting bitch, and it might take a while for her and Red Robe to set aside their differences and start working together. If Zorian could keep his identity secret for a few extra hours with his disguise, he would not consider this a wasted effort.

As he approached Jornak's house, the simulacrum grew more cautious. He slowed his pace, circling the house wearily. He knew how to bypass the house wards, of course. He'd done it dozens of times, by now. However, if Red Robe was really here, he had likely modified or upgraded those just in case. It's what Zorian himself would have done and there was no reason to assume Red Robe had been any less cautious.

His paranoia soon proved itself well-warranted. As he studied the house wards, he noticed they had been subtly changed. He was lucky, or maybe unlucky, because this was pretty damning proof of Red Robe's activity.

Five minutes later, the simulacrum managed to get past the defenses and entered the house. What greeted him was eerie silence. The house was dark and abandoned, and it only took a few moments for the simulacrum to realize that both Veyers and Jornak were gone. Walking around the place, the simulacrum could see numerous signs of frantic activity scattered around the place: closets and cabinets flung open, drawers ripped out of their sockets, piles of clothes and small items scattered all over the floor...

It wasn't just that Veyers and Jornak were gone – they had gathered up anything of real worth from the house before leaving. This was an evacuation, not a kidnapping.

The simulacrum cast a number of divination spells, trying to see if he could get some clues about where the two had gone, but failed to find anything. That was to be expected, though – it would have been shockingly incompetent of Red Robe to leave a trail behind him as he evacuated the place.

The simulacrum stood in the living room of the abandoned house, fiddling with a small white statuette of a dragon that he found on the floor, lost in thought for a while. Did this prove that Veyers was Red Robe? Well, not exactly... but it did prove that he was connected to him somehow. Jornak was also gone, which could mean a lot of things. Maybe the lawyer was the real Red Robe. Admittedly, the Red Robe that Zorian met in the past was roughly his own height and thus a poor match for Jornak, who was a fully grown man, but that could be accomplished easily through shapeshifting. Or maybe the time-looping Veyers just appreciated what the older man had done for his old self and so had taken him to safety as well. Whatever the case, they were all gone now, and there was little point in staying here when there were so many other things to be done.

He thought about torching the whole place out of spite, but it was better not to escalate things for now. Red Robe clearly cared a lot for these two, so burning down Jornak's place might genuinely anger him. Sure, they were already irreconcilable enemies, but doing this would make things personal. He might go after Zorian's friends and family sooner than he otherwise would have.

Before he moved on, the simulacrum quickly contacted the original and the other copy to find out what was happening on their end. They were both currently fighting and couldn't talk much. Should he go help them? No... the whole point of creating so many simulacraums was to pursue many different goals simultaneously. He would just have to trust the other two would be able to complete their task on their own.

Instead he went north, towards Knyazov Dveri.

It was time to see what Silverlake was up to.

- break -

While simulacrum number three was checking out Jornak's house, number four had rushed into the tunnels beneath Cyoria to contact the aranea living beneath the city.

Once, the Cyorian web had been his closest allies. They had taught him how to control his telepathic abilities, helped him make sense of the invasion, and provided a semblance of companionship in a world where most things were painfully short-lived. Spear of Resolve, the aranean matriarch, had intended to betray him in the end... but he was still devastated when they were all erased out of the time loop.

Part of his desire to see them as soon as possible was definitely emotional. Everything he knew about the time loop suggested they would be alive and well out here in the real world, but he had to see that with his own eyes. In his mind, he couldn't help but draw parallels between the aranea and the temporary loopers that had sacrificed themselves so that he could cross over into the real world. He needed some good news right now.

However, there was also a practical side to his visit. Zach and Zorian were quite capable of dismantling the entire invasion in a matter of days, halting it in its tracks... but that was without Red Robe's interference. Plus, who could forget Silverlake was also working against them? Thus, the idea of just quickly shutting down the invasion was untenable. However, this did not mean they would just sit back and do nothing about them. If they wanted to do serious damage to the invaders, the best time to do so was right now, at the very beginning of the month, before Red Robe and Silverlake had a chance to warn all their allies about the danger.

They had to move quickly, and that meant recruiting helpers... and the Cyorian aranea were one of the few powerful groups that Zorian felt they

could win over to their side very quickly.

Apparently Red Robe agreed with his assessment, because when simulacrum number four arrived on the outskirts of the aranean settlement he found them locked in a desperate battle against Red Robe.

The battle had clearly been raging for quite some time. Mutilated aranean bodies and arachnoid viscera lay scattered everywhere, and several of the caves and tunnels had been collapsed by both sides in an attempt to get rid of the other. A choking cloud of dust lingered in the air, reducing visibility.

Red Robe was just as Zorian remembered him. A bright red robe covered him completely, hiding most of his features, and a patch of magical darkness obscured his face. His movements were unhurried and methodical, though instead of painlessly and instantly 'killing' the aranea in front of him he mostly relied on various force spells to crush them and cut them apart. The sight of him fearlessly advancing forward like an invincible juggernaut and killing aranea in very brutal and bloody ways was probably very intimidating to the spiders. Zorian suspected Red Robe was trying to crush their will to fight and scatter them before he ran out of mana.

Simulacrum number four quickly realized that Red Robe in front of him was a simulacrum, just like him. It made sense, really. Much like Zorian had created a bunch of copies to perform several tasks simultaneously, Red Robe had likely done the same.

He immediately rushed into the battle, firing a powerful incineration ray at Red Robe's back. The other simulacrum did not show any signs of surprise, as if he had fully expected the interruption. He simply turned to the side in a smooth, practiced motion, blocking both Zorian's spell and one from a nearby aranea.

Simulacrum number four did not speak, and neither did his opponent. They simply circled each other and kept launching probing spells at one another, testing each other's skills and spell selection. The simulacrum was a bit disappointed at Red Robe's silence. Based on his previous experiences with the third time looper, he had expected Red Robe to try and strike up a conversation or start monologuing. That could have given Zorian an opportunity to figure something out about his opponent and his goals.

Probably why he was staying silent. Oh well.

The aranea did not interfere in their fight much. Some of the angrier ones, who had lost friends and family members to the assault, kept trying to launch surprise attacks at Red Robe whenever they spotted an opening. Many of those ended up dying, since their attacks exposed them to Red Robe's retaliation. Zorian tried to keep Red Robe too occupied to focus on the aranea much, but there was only so much he could do. Thankfully, most of the aranea had had the common sense to pull back deeper into their settlement to regroup and recover their strength.

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After a while of this sort of spell exchange, Red Robe suddenly stopped. He appeared indecisive for a moment, as if he wanted to say something, but he eventually just shook his head minutely and reached for a short spell rod on his belt. Zorian tensed and prepared for the fight to escalate, but it turned out he had misjudged the situation. The rod was a simple recall spell. The moment Red Robe touched it, his body blurred for a second and then he was gone.

Zorian's simulacrum did not try to pursue. He was here to save the aranea and recruit them as allies, not to take out a disposable pawn that Red Robe could recreate in a couple of minutes. This was already a victory.

He relaxed and waited for the aranea to approach him, reasoning that trying to be proactive wouldn't be a good idea at the moment. He may have saved them, but the aranea were still obviously tense and might lash out if they felt pressured.

Thankfully, he did not have to wait long. It took less than two minutes for the aranea to assemble a welcoming party that cautiously approached him. They were visibly surprised when he responded to their greetings with telepathy and fumbled in indecision when he asked to talk to Spear of Resolve. The matriarch was true to her name, however. She quickly interrupted the talks and announced she would be arriving to talk to him personally, brushing aside the outraged protests of her subordinates.

Soon he was standing in front of her again, the two guards she brought along standing behind her and giving him their best menacing looks. To most people, she would doubtlessly look like any other aranea – a giant black jumping spider, same as any other. For the simulacrum, though, the sight brought back a flood of memories rushing to his mind.

He wanted to punch her right in that big-eyed, manipulative face... but also hug her and tell her he was glad to see her. This was probably similar to how Zach had felt upon seeing him on Cyoria's train station, so long ago.

Except that he had much better impulse control than Zach and wasn't going to punch her.

Or hug her, for that matter.

[Greetings, friend.] Spear of Resolve said politely. [I am grateful for the help you provided us in our hour of need. We are not ungrateful people and will surely find something to reward you with, but I sense there is more to this visit than just this.]

[True,] the simulacrum sent back. [We have many things to talk about.]

The matriarch tapped her front legs against the ground curiously.

[Curious. There was a curious note of nostalgia bleeding over into your messages,] she pointed out.

[Ah. Sorry about that,] he said, wincing slightly. [I can't help it. You don't remember this, but we knew each other.]

[Oh? I find that very hard to believe,] the matriarch said.

[It's true,] the copy insisted. [We worked quite closely in the past.]

The matriarch sent him a note of patronized amusement.

[I have a very good memory when it comes to people, and you seem like a very noteworthy person. I would surely remember if I'd had the fortune to meet a mage of your caliber,] she said. [In particular, the level of control you have over your Gift would immediately make you stand out in the sea of people I have met over the years.]

An entirely reasonable argument. Sadly, the simulacrum didn't have time to take things slowly and delicately guide the matriarch to the correct conclusion. He decided to take a risk and be totally blunt.

[I come from the future,] he told her.

The matriarch was silent for a moment. Several other aranea in the vicinity shifted in place from either amusement or incredulosity. They were clearly listening in on their conversations through their link with the matriarch. Nothing out of Zorian's expectations, really.

[That's... quite a claim you're making, friend,] the matriarch said. She seemed more intrigued than dismissive, which surprised Zorian a little. He supposed that, even if she did not take his claim seriously, she wanted to hear his clarification.

[Zorian Kazinski,] said the simulacrum, taking off his mask as a show of trust. If this worked, he would be working closely with these people anyway. [You can just call me Zorian.]

[Zorian, then,] the matriarch agreed. [Zorian, you surely realize that great claims like that require great proof to be taken seriously?]

Zorian no longer had the matriarch's memory packets, which meant that the method he used to employ to get her cooperation in the past was no longer possible. However, that was okay. He had other means of catching her attention.

[Of course I do,] the simulacrum said. [I can even show you my memories of the timeline I came from.]

[Come now, Zorian,] the matriarch scolded. [Any memory you show me could be fabricated entirely. That proves nothing.]

[Not quite,] the copy responded, a small grin on his face. [If I showed you some random scene with little relation to you, then yes, it could easily be a forgery. But what if I showed you a detailed map of your inner settlement, including the insides of your secret research room and your treasury? What if I demonstrated detailed knowledge about your secret research and your trading networks – the sort of things only your most respected elders have access to? What if I told you the names of every aranea that makes up your web, described what the insides of your private rooms look like, and demonstrated I could mimic the speech patterns and personality traits of a great many of your subordinates? Such things do not necessarily prove I come from the future, but certainly prove *something*, no? How could I possibly know that?]

The matriarch's legs began to twitch uncontrollably.

A small commotion broke out among the aranea surrounding them. The simulacrum could tell there was a heated discussion going on in the background.

"Enough," Spear of Resolve suddenly said, speaking up verbally for the first time since the meeting began. Obviously she wanted the simulacrum to hear this too.

"But honored matriarch!" one of the guards protested.

"I've decided!" she said firmly, spinning around in place to stare down the guard, who shrank back at her admonishment. She then turned back towards the simulacrum.

[I'll open my mind to you,] the matriarch said telepathically. [Show me these 'memories' of yours.]

Zorian's copy did just that. He tapped into the stored memories inside his head, reproducing them as best as he was able. For several hours the aranea watched in uncomfortable silence as the simulacrum laid their closely guarded secrets bare to them. He showed them his conversations with Spear of Resolve, Novelty and the various guards and ambassadors he had interacted with in the past.

By the time he was finally done, the matriarch was clearly disturbed at the amount of information he possessed. It was as the simulacrum had said – it wasn't ironclad proof that he was from the future, but it did mean he had access to just about everything about them at some point. That was disturbing enough on its own.

[This... how could you possibly know all of this?] the matriarch asked hesitantly. She usually tried to project an air of certainty and confidence

when interacting with him, even when she was secretly bothered behind the façade. There was none of that now, however. [Even if you're from the future, even if we worked together in this future, I would *never*—]

[You died,] Zorian's copy told her bluntly, cutting her off. [You all died. That cloaked man that just attacked you earlier? In the future I know... I was not strong enough.]

[Oh,] the matriarch said, deflating.

[You were supposedly allied with us, but you searched our city for anything of value the moment we died,] one of the aranea elder interjected, accusation clear in her voice.

[You would have done the same in my place,] he said, wholly unrepentant.

The aranea said nothing to that.

[I am curious,] the matriarch eventually said, picking her words carefully. [If I were to just tell you to go away and refuse to have anything to do with you... what would you do, oh mighty time traveler?]

[I would respect your decision,] the simulacrum shrugged.

[Truly?] the matriarch asked, sounding very skeptical.

[Why not? I would just go to one of the other aranean webs in the area,] Zorian's copy said. [It's not like you're the only aranean web that I worked with.]

Every aranea in the room suddenly became very quiet and still.

And simulacrum number four could not help but smile smugly, for he knew he had them

- break -

While the two simulacra pursued their own tasks elsewhere in the city, the original had what was arguably the most important task of all – he had to check up on Zach and help him if he was in danger. He wouldn't put it past Red Robe and Silverlake to focus on killing him as their very first priority.

It's what Zorian would have done in their place, after all.

His fears turned out to have been only half-right. When he arrived at the Noveda estate, he found the place on fire and wracked with explosions. Destructive beams punched straight through the thick, warded walls of the building, triggering various alarms and countermeasures. Clearly an attack on Zach was already in progress. It was good that he had woken up his fellow time traveler with that ritual, or else Zach would have probably met a quick and ignoble end at the hand of his attackers.

Well... attacker, singular. When he reached the sight of the battle itself, he only found Red Robe fighting Zach. Silverlake was nowhere to be seen.

Very curious. Even if she was wary of Red Robe, she should have at least cooperated with him on this.

In any case, this Red Robe was the same as the one that had attacked the aranea in the tunnels below. It was just a simulacrum.

Once Zorian joined the fight, this second simulacrum seemed to realize the attack had failed and that persisting would just waste mana, so it just... dismissed itself.

What an underwhelming outcome. What was Red Robe doing, if he was so wary of really committing himself anywhere? He didn't like this. He *really* didn't like this...

He turned towards Zach and winced. He hadn't noticed it while he had been fighting Red Robe's simulacrum, but the other boy had a large bleeding gash across the chest.

"H-Hey..." Zach panted. "Thanks for the wakeup call back there. If you had been just a moment late, I would have probably never woken up. I, a-ah..."

His knees gave out suddenly, causing him to tip over. Zorian quickly rushed forward and caught him just before he was going to slam head-first into the floor.

"Shit..." Zorian swore, inspecting the wound. His medical magic was a joke, but he could at least assess the severity of an open wound like this one. "You lost so much blood there. How were you even standing for so long?"

"It's not the f-first time..." Zach gasped, pressing his trembling fingers over the wound. The bleeding immediately lessened somewhat. "I'll live."

Zorian sighed. He would live, sure... but he would be pretty much incapacitated for the next day or two, even with the best medical care in the country. This was terrible news.

“I’m glad you made it out,” Zach said with a trembling voice.

[Don’t speak,] Zorian told him telepathically, picking him up like a baby. Well, he tried to, at least. Picking up another person was a little bit too much for him, so he first had to cast some spells to lighten the load, but he managed it in the end. He then immediately set off in the direction of the nearest hospital. [You’re going to aggravate your wound. Also, damn you’re heavy.]

[I’m doing you a favor,] Zach responded back. [Didn’t you say you wanted to work out more when we get out?]

[Not like this, you asshole,] Zorian grumbled.

[Wait...] Zach suddenly frowned. [You... you’re wounded too!]

Zorian gave him an incredulous look. What... oh.

[Ah, no,] Zorian said. [My mana is in chaos because the tunneler toad’s dimensional perception ability unraveled when I abandoned my body back in the time loop.]

It was scary how perceptive Zach was sometimes. Zorian didn’t even think he was showing any signs of mana instability on the outside, but clearly he was wrong.

[Oh yeah,] Zach said, immediately calming down. [Still, doesn’t that mean—]

[I’ll be held back in what I can do for at least a couple of days, yes,] Zorian confirmed.

[Damn it! Nothing ever goes right about this!] Zach raged.

[I wouldn’t say that,] Zorian said. He tracked down the nearest potion store and teleported them both towards it. It was closed at this time of day, but breaking in was a simple matter. He idly wondered whether a medical emergency like this counted as a valid reason to perform a burglary, but then decided he didn’t care. He would anonymously pay the shopkeeper back for the damages he caused. [I’m sure Red Robe is feeling pretty aggrieved right now. He almost had you, but he failed in the end. Plus, my simulacrum just stopped him from getting rid of the aranea beneath the city.]

He quickly picked up the most powerful wound closing and blood replenishing potions in the store and fed them to Zach, who immediately showed a positive reaction. His skin got back some of its color and the wound seemingly closed, though Zorian knew it was still very much present beneath the surface.

Zach immediately tried to get up on his own two feet, the idiot. He collapsed back immediately, having aggravated his wound.

“Let’s... just get you to the nearest hospital, alright?” Zorian said, face-palming at the sight.

“Zorian, listen,” Zach said. “When you left through the exit and the time loop reset itself, I lingered behind for a bit. Just to see what would happen to you and Silverlake over the next few restarts, you know?”

Zorian raised his eyebrow at him. “And?”

“You were back,” Zach said. “Both of you. You didn’t remember anything about the time loop but you were walking and talking as normal. You were just like any other person stuck in the time loop, unaware of the passage of time past the summer festival. Man, talking to your old self was freaky, I tell you. I all but forgot how unfriendly and sensitive you were back then. Did I tell you I’m really glad you made it out in the end?”

“You did,” Zorian confirmed.

“Oh yeah... what did you do with the—” Zach started to ask, before being cut off by Zorian.

“I killed him,” Zorian said curtly. “Sent his soul to the afterlife.”

“I... umm... shit,” Zach fumbled. “That’s kind of... brutal?”

“What was I supposed to do?” Zorian asked, uncomfortable with this line of questioning. “I don’t know how to make a new body for him. Maybe I never will. I’d have to either keep him in stasis for years and years before finally releasing him into an alien world where a stranger has usurped his life... or having him accompany me as a powerless ghost looking over my shoulder, constantly getting his face rubbed in at the fact I’m so much better than him at everything. Isn’t that a cruel and horrifying fate to inflict on someone?”

“I... don’t know,” Zach admitted after a while.

“I know I’m not the same person as him by this point,” Zorian said quietly, “but I would hate that with every fiber of my being. I... don’t think I’d ever get over it. Maybe I’m just a selfish monster trying to justify my crimes, but I think I’m doing him a favor. Alanic says the afterlife is still a thing, even after the gods stopped talking to people. For all his faults, I don’t think the old Zorian had done anything truly heinous in his life... there should be a good outcome waiting for him there. Something he’d never get back here with us.”

There was an awkward silence for a few seconds, and then Zorian cracked his knuckles before picking Zach up again. Thank the gods for

lightening spells.

"I don't want to talk about this," Zorian admitted. "Let just get you to a hospital and call it a day. We'll just have to leave the rest to our simulacrum. Now that I think about it, maybe Red Robe is onto something by only sending simulacrum to tackle problems and never appearing in person. Sure, it makes him more likely to fail and get beaten back, but it also makes every failure more inconsequential..."

He babbled about all sorts of things as he walked through the city. He was mostly out of mana by this point, since pretty much all his simulacrum had been tapping into them for their own purposes, so he couldn't simply teleport to the hospital. However, it was fine – Zach had stopped bleeding by this point, so he wasn't going to die any time soon. He should make use of this breather to make some golem simulacrum and replace the current ectoplasmic ones with them. Of course, the golem simulacrum were expensive so he would have to raid some of the Ibasan caches for money and materials. Plus, he needed a proper workshop and–

He suddenly stopped and sighed internally. So many things to do. So little time and mana to play with. The only thing that made him feel better was that Red Robe and Silverlake were probably faced with choices just as difficult as theirs.

Hopefully they had chosen their priorities better than their opponents.

- break -

When simulacrum number three arrived at the spot of Silverlake's hideout, he found no signs of fighting or forced entry in the vicinity. However, that did not actually tell him much. For all he knew, Silverlake had some kind of secret entrance into her pocket dimension, and could simply walk in any time she pleased, wards be damned. Hell, perhaps the old Silverlake had simply *let* her in. It was hardly a given that the two would fight to the death once they met.

It all depended on whether the time looper Silverlake wanted to kill her old self to take her life and belongings back, or if she wanted to recruit her into her plans.

Or maybe she intended to simply ignore her old self entirely. After all, simply coming here was highly dangerous, since Zach and Zorian knew about this place, and it was an obvious place to set up an ambush for her.

Anyway, the first task simulacrum three currently faced was checking if the old Silverlake was still alive and inside. If she was, then he needed to know if the time looper Silverlake had already visited her and tried to recruit her.

To find that out, he could rely on slowly using exotic divination on her hideout while carefully avoiding being found out... but that would take a lot of time and mana and he didn't want to bother. Instead he simply made an unearthly racket just out of her pocket dimension, screaming obscenities at the treacherous old witch until she decided to come out to confront him.

Which she did. She stomped out of the pocket dimension, visibly fuming and glaring at him.

The simulacrum immediately decided she probably hadn't been visited by her time looper self. She had approached him too carelessly, like she had no idea what he was capable of. She would have been far more cautious if the other Silverlake had warned her about him.

Still, he had to make sure.

"Boy, what the hell are you shouting for!?" Silverlake shouted, stopping some distance away from him. "Coming here in the dead of the night, at three in the morning, shouting all these obscenities at a poor old woman like me... what is the world coming to these days!? Haven't your parents taught you to respect your elders!? Bow down and apologize or I'm going to poison your whole family, you hear me!?"

"I just wanted to get your attention," the simulacrum told her honestly.

That only made her angrier.

"Listen, I'm kind of in a hurry... did you perhaps get visited lately by an ugly old crone that looks *just* like you?"

Silverlake raised her hand and fired a weak lightning bolt. Well, relatively speaking, since that spell could have inflicted serious damage to a normal person.

Zorian's simulacrum, though? He simply copied his mentor Xvim and backhanded the lightning bolt to the side. Rather than char his hand, the bolt was deflected harmlessly into the nearby ground, creating a small crater in the forest soil.

Silverlake's posture instantly changed, becoming warier and more alert.

"No, seriously... did someone who looks just like you visit you recently and try to kill you or recruit you? Someone who knows all your secrets and abilities?" he again asked.

"Who are you?" Silverlake said, her eyes narrowing suspiciously and her hands twitching with half-formed spells.

The simulacrum clacked his tongue. She was totally ignorant of everything, he was sure of it. Time looper Silverlake had not visited this place.

But why? Did she really not care about her old self, or was she just being paranoid? He hadn't arrived here particularly quickly – if Silverlake

wanted to travel here from Cyoria, she would have arrived way before he did. In all likelihood, she would have finished up before he had a chance to get here and intercept her.

"Hey! Are you deaf or something?" Silverlake shouted, kicking a nearby stone in his direction. It was surprisingly accurate, flying straight at his forehead. She had a pretty good kick. Of course, Zorian just dodged the stone with practiced ease, so it ultimately amounted to nothing.

He could kill her, he realized. Even if time looper Silverlake wanted her dead, there was no guarantee that old Silverlake would be grateful to them once they saved her. She was an incredibly cynical person, and would simply see two young fools she could exploit to her advantage. She might work with them out of a sense of self-preservation, but she would be constantly looking for an angle to exploit and probably wouldn't want to do anything that placed her into significant danger.

What was the point of such an ally?

"Here. Catch," he said, throwing a small stone disc at her. She did not bother catching it, simply stepping back and letting it hit the ground. She then used a nearby fallen branch to suspiciously poke at it.

The simulacrum rolled his eyes at her.

"What the hell is this thing?" she asked.

"It's an illusion stone," the simulacrum said. "I recorded a rather interesting scene in it. You can study it later in the privacy of your own abode. Oh, and by the way? You should probably change your warding scheme as soon as possible. You should also collapse any secret entrances into your place, even if you think you're the only one who knows about them."

He turned to leave.

"Now wait just a moment here, you little brat! You're just going to leave without explaining any of the crap you just unloaded into my lap?" Silverlake demanded.

"Yes," Zorian's copy nodded. "I decided not to kill you. Don't make me regret it, alright?"

Before she could respond, he teleported away.

He didn't want to linger around Silverlake's place. While setting up an ambush around her hideout might have seemed like a good way to get the time looping version of her, Zorian felt something wasn't right there.

He had to make sure Alanic, Kael and Lukav were fine. Silverlake could wait.

- break -

While Zorian and the other simulacrum were teleporting around and wracking their heads to figure out what the enemy was planning, simulacrum number two was bored. His job was to secure the house and watch out for Red Robe or Silverlake staging an attack on his family. However, he had already done all he could to secure the house and no attack was happening.

The hours passed, and eventually he found himself in front of Kirielle's room. Hmm... the morning was already here, wasn't it? Didn't that mean it was about time for Kirielle to wake up?

He rubbed his hands sinistly, an evil grin on his face. It had been so long since he had a chance to wake up Kirielle. He liked to sleep in, and the time loop never really changed that, so it was usually her that woke him up.

He entered her room and crouched next to her bed. She was covered up to her neck in a blanket, with only her face visible. She was blissfully unaware of Zorian crouching next to her, a look of peace and contentment on her face.

The simulacrum considered how he should go about doing this. Jumping on her, like she liked to do to him, had an air of poetic justice on it. However, it didn't feel right. He was too big and heavy, and it would be a bit too much for a prank.

Dropping a bucket of water on her like she had when she had thought he was a shapeshifter?

No, that would get the bed wet and mother would freak out on him.

Hmm...

Oh well, he'd just go with the classic.

"Good morning, sister!" he suddenly shouted in her ear. "Morning, morning, *MORNING!*"

She woke up screaming and flailing, and eventually fell out of the bed.

He laughed at her. Ah, he needed that...

"Zorian, you jerk!" she shouted at him, flailing her little arms at him like a windmill. She was like a little angry kitten, though, so it just made him laugh harder.

She eventually kicked him out of the room so she could switch out of her pajamas. Once she was out, she gave him a curious look.

"How come you're awake?" she asked.

"I couldn't sleep," the simulacrum said.

"Oh," she said. She looked at him hopefully. "Hey, can you show me some magic? Please?"

He spent the next half an hour entertaining Kirielle, casting various spells for her amusement, until the original contacted him and told him to stop wasting mana on frivolities like that. What a jerk. The mana drain on those illusions was totally negligible!

He watched Kirielle deflate when he told her he had to go pack and couldn't play with her anymore. She looked like she wanted to ask him something but eventually just chickened out, staring at the floor like a kicked puppy instead.

He sighed internally. He knew what she wanted to ask, of course. She wanted him to take her to Cyoria with him. But doing that would be... irresponsible.

Short-sighted.

Stupid.

He watched Kirielle for a few more seconds, remembering all the promises he made to his little sister over the many restarts he shared with her. He promised he wouldn't forget her. He promised he would teach her magic.

He promised he would bring her with him to Cyoria.

Just as she was about to run off, Zorian placed his hand on her shoulder, causing her to halt in her tracks and look at him in surprise. Her lip quivered slightly.

"Hey, Kirielle..." he told her with a mischievous smile. "Do you want to come with me to Cyoria?"

Simulacrum number two could practically imagine Zorian screaming at him in the near future, explaining in great detail what an idiot he was being.

He didn't care, though.

The smile on her face when he asked her that question made it all worth it.

93. Shelter in the Storm

Chapter 093 Shelter in the Storm

Sometimes he could be so stupid, Zorian lamented. He had *known* that his simulacrum tended to be more impulsive and whimsical than himself. It seemed to be an intrinsic trait of every one of his copies, no matter how carefully he made them or how closely they were connected to him. They may be very much like him, but they *weren't* him. The moment they realized they were just a simulacrum that would not live past a few hours or days, their perspective on long-term consequences would get subtly skewed compared to his own. After all, more likely than not it wouldn't be them who would have to deal with those when the time finally came.

He also knew that giving his simulacrum unpleasant or boring tasks had a good chance of coming back to bite him in the ass. His simulacrum did not mind dying for him, but they were not at all afraid of inconveniencing him. In fact, they often seemed to relish the idea.

Zorian wondered what it said about him that his simulacrum behaved that way, but that was a thought for another time. The point was that, despite knowing all of that, he had still left his simulacrum in charge of dashing Kirielle's hopes of going to Cyoria. He should have known that was going to be a problem, but he thought it would be a simple matter of the simulacrum refusing Mother's offer while Kirielle remained quiet on the sidelines. This was, after all, what usually happened when *Zorian* didn't want to bring Kirielle with him. All the simulacrum had to do was just retreat his steps and be on his merry way! Instead his copy got bored and actively sought Kirielle out to hang out with, wasting their precious mana on frivolous entertainment, and then got all emotional when it was time to say goodbye...

Ugh. Just like the offending simulacrum predicted, Zorian had been furious. It was a stupid, short-sighted decision! Yes, sending her off to Koth with their parents would be a massive disappointment for her, but at least she'd be out of danger! That was more important than making her momentarily happy!

The simulacrum was completely unapologetic about it, too.

"What's done is done," his copy told him over their telepathic link. "I already gave her my word I'm taking her with me. If you have a problem with that, you can come over here and personally inform her that you've changed your mind and won't be taking her with you after all..."

"You bastard!" Zorian fumed at him. "I should dismiss you for that!"

"That would leave Kirielle and the rest of the family completely defenseless until you sent a replacement," the simulacrum pointed out. "Besides, do you really think I care about that? From my very first moment, I knew my time was fleeting."

Sadly, true. Since his simulacrum were willing to die and sacrifice themselves for his sake, the thought of dying did not bother them much. Thus, threatening to unmake them was largely ineffective.

"I just don't understand why you did that," Zorian complained. "We could have just taken Kirielle to Cyoria in a month or two, once the whole situation has hopefully been resolved and she's back from Koth. There is no need to take her there *now*, when the situation there is at its most dangerous!"

"When, if not now?" the simulacrum disagreed. "Even if we can resolve everything and save the city, the consequences are bound to be immense. Even a failed invasion will make our parents perceive Cyoria as a place of unspeakable danger. You think they will let her live in the city after that? Even for a few days? Come on. This is probably the last time we can plausibly take Kirielle to Cyoria without literally kidnapping her."

Zorian frowned. He hadn't really thought of that. It was true that no matter how the situation with the invasion was resolved, it was bound to complicate things. Plus, now that he thought about it a little, Kirielle would have to go back to school at some point soon. It wasn't like she could visit a different city for several weeks at a time, then. Come to think of it, that was probably the reason why she was so excited to make this trip with him now. She knew this was one of her last chances to experience something like this in the near future...

He sighed internally. For all of its blessings, he sometimes worried that the time loop had damaged his thinking. For more than a decade, anything that did not resolve itself within the span of a month was largely irrelevant. He did consider the future a lot, but that was all highly theoretical and often directed at the far future rather than something only a few months later.

Still. Even with all of that in mind, bringing Kirielle to the epicenter of their clash with Red Robe and Silverlake was simply a terrible idea.

"Besides," his copy continued, "by bringing Kirielle along we actually have a legitimate excuse to rent a room at Imaya's place. Kael is much more willing to trust us if we come along with Kirielle. And it's not like we don't have a plan to evacuate..."

"Those are just excuses you thought up afterwards to justify your decision," Zorian told him.

"Well... yes," the simulacrum admitted after a short pause. "Yes, I admit that. It's still true, though, and I'm not going to go back on my word. *Our* word. You promised you're not going to just forget her once we're out there in the real world. Now you want to just stick her on a ship to Koth and put her out of your mind while you do your stuff?"

"That 'stuff' is a matter of life and death and getting her out of danger doesn't mean I'm going to simply forget about her afterwards!" Zorian snapped. "I just want her to be safe. She's a prime target and I'm just a *little* bit busy at the moment. It's not the time for this!"

“Forget it,” his copy sighed. “I just... I won’t do it, okay? I already said it. What’s done is done. I’m not going to turn around and tell her it was all a mistake and that I changed my mind. It would kill her. If you think this is such a huge mistake, come over and do it yourself. Go tell her that her dream trip is canceled, I dare you.”

The simulacrum then terminated their connection, signaling it considered the conversation over.

After taking several deep breaths and calming down somewhat, Zorian decided that the simulacrum was right about one thing: he should definitely be dealing with this problem personally. As he noted in his earlier lament, it was stupid of him to assign a task like this to a simulacrum to begin with, and only he could truly fix it. Or at least stop the problem from getting worse.

Besides, there was no need for him to stay in Cyoria at the moment. Previously, he had been worried that his simulacrum would get dispelled in the fighting and that he would need to constantly replace them... but that was far less of a concern, now. The first golem simulacrum had been placed into service by now, replacing two of his ectoplasmic simulacrum with a more mana efficient and resilient group. Golem simulacrum were very difficult to neutralize – even punching a hole through the chest or blowing off a limb would not be enough to put them down for good. That extreme resilience, all by itself, should allow his copies to clash with the invaders and Red Robe’s simulacrum without fear.

Additionally, he couldn’t really afford to start anything big while Zach was still incapacitated and vulnerable. Taking some time off to figure out what to do about his family and friends was... doable.

Thus, not long after his argument with his simulacrum, Zorian found himself back in Cirin. He told the simulacrum to make himself scarce for a while and then seamlessly took over his place.

Well, *mostly* seamlessly.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” Kirielle asked him suspiciously, narrowing her eyes at him. “You... you aren’t thinking on going back on your word, are you?”

She didn’t seem panicked, more outraged at the idea. She placed her hands on her hips and pouted at him in a way that was probably supposed to look angry but looked more like she had an upset stomach or something.

“No take-backs!” she declared, pointing her finger at him. “Mom says that’s not allowed! You said you’re taking me with you, and I’m going!”

Zorian clacked his tongue in distaste. All he did was stare at her a little, and she immediately started jumping at this one specific conclusion... how judgmental. Never mind that she was essentially correct here, was his old self so bad that this was a legitimate first conclusion she came up to?

...okay, yeah, he could kind of see her reasoning here.

“I didn’t say anything about not taking you,” Zorian said slowly.

“Then what?” she asked curiously.

“I’m missing some of my school books,” Zorian told her. “I’d appreciate it if whoever took them returned them to me before we leave the house.”

“Err, yeah, I will– I mean, I’m sure they’ll turn up in your room by the time I finish packing.” Kirielle fumbled, punctuating her statement with a nervous laugh.

She then gave him one final suspicious look before running off upstairs to finish her packing.

The simulacrum he had displaced had been watching the whole exchange through his senses. His copy did not comment on his actions in any way, but Zorian could *feel* the simulacrum’s amusement at how things turned out.

“Shut up, idiot,” Zorian whispered under his breath. “This is all your fault, anyway.”

He did not need to speak up verbally, of course, but it made him feel slightly better to do so. Why hadn’t he dismissed his stupid copy, again?

Oh, right. He didn’t want to waste mana and he had a task for him later.

In any case, nothing of real note happened until Ilsa knocked on their door, just like she always did at the start of the month, and Zorian volunteered to check up on that.

Sure enough, he found Ilsa waiting for him behind the door. After an appraising glance, she adjusted her glasses and guessed his identity.

“Zorian Kazinski?” she asked.

“That’s me,” Zorian confirmed. “Come in, Miss Zileti.”

“Oh, you know me?” she asked in mild surprise, stepping into the house.

“Err, kind of,” Zorian said. “Someone pointed you out to me. You’re a teacher from the academy, right?”

"That's right," Ilsa said. "I didn't know I'm that famous. Hopefully you heard only nice things about me, yes?"

She gave him a small smile, and Zorian awkwardly returned it.

She didn't remember anything. That is, *of course* she didn't remember anything. He and Zach had already done a check of the various temporary loopers to see if any of them made it out in soul form like Zorian. The results were as expected as they were disappointing. They were all alone in this. Nobody else had made it out.

It was strange and more than a little painful for Zorian to see Ilsa like this. He had worked with her for nearly a year, and she had been one of the people he had been relatively close to. Now that Ilsa was dead, the new one had no idea who he was.

The same was true for Alanic, Taiven, Kael, Xvim, and so many others. They were alive again, but they were not people he had spent all those months working with. He could rebuild these relationships, but without the common goal of escaping the time loop and the limited ability to interact with people outside the group, the nature of those relationships would completely differ. In the meantime, he had to interact with all these people while constantly walking on eggshells because he subconsciously viewed them as friends and allies, and had a year's worth of habits and instincts to reinforce that... while they just viewed him as some stupid teenage kid acting a little weird around them.

He'd manage. He totally would.

But damn was this making him depressed...

"Mister Kazinski? Are you alright?" Ilsa asked him, breaking him out of his self-pity.

"I'm fine," he assured her. "Just... thinking about some things. It's nothing important."

He turned the scroll in his hands a few times before casually directing his mana to flow along the sides of the seal, causing it to pop off without resistance. He then glanced at the certificate inside for the sake of appearances and set it aside.

"That's pretty impressive," Ilsa noted. "Although you held onto the scroll for a while, I could tell you spent most of that time distracted with other thoughts. Once you actually focused on the task of removing the seal, you did it quickly and easily. I see someone is continuing in Daimen's footsteps."

Once, the comparison to Daimen would see him bristling inside at the slight. Now it was just a mildly exasperating statement. He would likely never be totally okay with being compared to his oldest brother like that, but these comparisons no longer had the same sting they once did.

"Only in very general terms," Zorian told her. "My brother and I are very different people."

"Of course," Ilsa smoothly agreed. "Everyone is their own person. I simply meant that you also show signs of great talent."

Their discussion proceeded in very predictable fashion. Once she heard he was taking Kirielle with him to Cyoria, she brought up the possibility of renting a room at Imaya's place, which Zorian accepted. She also informed him that he wouldn't get to choose his mentor like he was supposed to, and that he was simply assigned to Xvim Chao instead. Zorian pretended he knew nothing about the man and Ilsa pretended he was simply a normal, if slightly demanding teacher. He also chose his electives. They were the exact same ones he had chosen the first time he had done all this, except this time the entire process took less than a minute, since he simply told Ilsa his choices the moment she brought the topic up.

It was all so routine and familiar that he found himself quickly slipping into a sort of practiced 'role' he had learned to play over the many restarts during which he had done this. It felt comforting and frightening at the same time. Comforting, because this was probably the first time since he had gotten out of the time loop that he felt certain he was making the right choices. Frightening, because he suddenly felt like he was in the time loop all over again. Like everything around him was unreal and illusionary. Unbidden, the notion that he was still trapped in that ever-repeating month popped into his mind and refused to go away.

He imagined himself living through this month, winning against his foes, befriending people he knew from the time loop, changing things for the better and getting emotionally invested in it all... only for the whole thing to turn to smoke in the end when the time loop inevitably reset itself and he woke up in his room in Cirin, just like he always did. It was horrifying.

It was also stupid. He was definitely out of the time loop. The aranea and the mercenaries that had been knocked out of the time loop by Red Robe were back, and Red Robe himself was again active in the world. The spirit world was also once again accessible – he and Zach had checked that already. All evidence pointed at them being out for real.

But the fear remained. Ilsa had finished her explanations and left, but Zorian's mind remained trapped in this ominous scenario for quite a while afterwards.

Sometimes he could be so stupid, Zorian lamented.

- break -

The long train ride from Cirin to Cyoria was even more boring than it usually was. This was mostly because Zorian was not doing anything of critical importance, and thus had to refrain from tapping into his mana reserves too much. That mana was best reserved for his simulacrum, who were out there acquiring funds, making magic items, teleporting around, and fighting their enemies. Frivolous uses of magic like entertaining Kirielle

on the train with illusions were simply inexcusable. He had scolded his simulacrum over these sorts of things many times in the past, so now that he was in their position it was important that he set an example for them and show them how things should be done.

Additionally, this was no longer the time loop, and he would have to deal with consequences that went beyond just this one month. It was best for him to at least pretend to be a normal student mage in front of a little tattletale like Kirielle. That meant no spellcasting at all for the moment, since students could not bypass the wards on the train.

After an hour or so, he kind of began to understand why his simulacrum were so prone to breaking the ‘no frivolous magics’ rule.

Still, in the end he found ways to amuse himself and Kirielle without magic. He told her stories of some of his time looping adventures, using true stories with altered names and a few tweaks here and there. Kirielle complained the stories were too fantastical and ridiculous after a while, so they started a drawing competition instead. Zorian had actually learned how to draw reasonably well over the long course of the time loop, but he was nowhere near good enough to match Kirielle, so she always won.

His sister did not mind, though. Even though it was an unfair competition right from the start, she always wanted to keep going for another round. The little imp never got tired of winning.

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“Now stopping in Korsa,” a disembodied voice echoed. A crackling sound again. “I repeat, now stopping in Korsa. Thank you.”

A few things happened in quick succession then. First, Ibery wandered in and peeked into the compartment to see if it was free. Zorian, being kind of bored with Kirielle’s antics, invited her in. Ibery seemed a little taken aback by his friendliness, but seeing Kirielle put her at ease, and she did claim a seat beside them after a moment of hesitation. Then Byrn, a guy he had met way back at the beginning of his time looping experience, also wandered in and asked if a seat was free in their compartment. Zorian happily invited him in, too.

Suddenly, the compartment had become a lot livelier than it used to be. Ibery was shy and quiet, and had immediately chosen to bury her nose in a book when she came in, but Byrn was friendly and talkative and immediately tried to strike up a conversation with them. Kirielle immediately started peppering him with questions about magic and the academy.

“I’m Kirielle Kazinski,” Kirielle said, “and that’s my brother Zorian. Are you a student like Zorian? Can you do magic? What year are you? Is it true that you have to fight a giant spider in order to get admitted as a student? Zorian says that’s a requirement, but I think he’s lying...”

“Ha ha, umm... I don’t think I would have gotten in, if that were the case,” Byrn laughed. “I don’t think I could win a fight against the other students, never mind a giant spider.”

“Lots of types of giant spiders,” Zorian noted. “There’s a whole bunch of them that you could easily club to death with a mundane weapon, so long as you keep your cool and don’t panic.”

“Oh? You sound pretty knowledgeable about that. Did you ever fight one for real?” Byrn asked curiously.

“Yes, though not as an admission test, of course,” Zorian said. “I told that to Kirielle just to mess with her a little.”

“I knew it,” Kirielle pouted, folding her hands over her chest and giving him a grumpy look.

“Ah, so, I hate to shift the subject, but that last name...” Byrn tried.

“Yes, Daimen Kazinski is our brother,” Zorian said with a shrug. “We have very little contact with him, though. He mostly does his own thing and rarely visits.”

The conversation continued for a while after that, meandering from topic to topic. Even Ibery joined in after figuring out from Byrn’s question that they were Fortov’s siblings. She did not actually bring up Fortov, however, which was probably for the best. Zorian would have been diplomatic, of course, but Kirielle disliked their middle brother as much as he did and would likely not have anything nice to say about that topic. In any case, the conversation eventually turned towards a particularly shocking event that occurred in Cyoria recently. Namely, the fact that Zach’s place had gotten utterly trashed during his fight with Red Robe, and that he himself had gone missing for several hours while people frantically searched for him all over the city.

“What? Someone actually attacked the Noveda Mansion like that? I didn’t know that,” Ibery said, surprised.

“Yes, it happened really recently. The attack happened very early in the morning, just a few hours ago,” Byrn said, nodding self-indulgently. He was clearly pleased to have acquired this news so soon after it occurred. Man, news sure does spread fast these days. “I hear the fighting was really fierce. Some of the support columns were damaged, and several walls got breached. I heard repairs will take weeks! It must have been a really powerful force that launched the attack – the newspapers were saying only a fully equipped mage regiment could have done so much damage so quickly.”

“But that place is right there in one of the better parts of the city... and aren’t Noveda an old, influential Noble House?” Ibery asked. “How could a force of that size come and go just like that? Where were the guards during all this?”

"Well, someone was clearly fighting the attackers and fought them off in the end, so presumably the guards were not useless," Bryn shrugged. "Besides, I hear the Noveda are not the same force they once were. My father says they're a mere shadow of their former selves. It's still crazy that something like this can happen."

"You know, Zach Noveda is one of my classmates," Zorian said suddenly.

"Really?" Bryn said, perking up. "I don't suppose you heard more about this, then?"

"I just know Zach is fine," Zorian said, shaking his head. "He wasn't present in the mansion when the attack occurred. He was out drinking and dancing throughout the entire night."

Or at least that was the excuse Zach had picked for himself as an explanation as to what had happened. They modified the memory of the healer that had patched him up (after leaving him a sizeable 'anonymous tip' for his services), so no one should be able to contradict his story. Zorian did suggest to Zach that he should pick some other excuse, since saying he had spent the entire night getting drunk and gods know what else was somewhat embarrassing, but Zach insisted this was fine.

Sure enough, Ibery responded to Zorian's explanation by wrinkling her nose in distaste, while Bryn simply laughed awkwardly.

"I did hear rumors about the Noveda heir," Ibery said. "They say he's not exactly a model student, if you know what I mean."

"There is nothing wrong with his magic skills," Zorian quickly said, feeling compelled to defend his friend. "He's just a little... reckless."

"Are you friends with this Zach?" Kirielle asked curiously. "How come I don't know anything about this?"

"Why would I say something like this to a little tattletale like you?" Zorian asked rhetorically. "You'd run off to tell Mother the moment my back was turned."

"I would not!" she huffed, swinging her legs in an attempt to hit his knees. He shifted his legs out of the way a few times and she eventually gave up on the idea.

By the time the train arrived in Cyoria, the whole group was so absorbed in their conversation that they kept together and continued conversing even when it was time to disembark. When the train began to approach Cyoria, the whole group left the compartment and went to stand by the exit... along with so many others. Usually Zorian led Kirielle with him to the exit early enough to seize a place right next to the exit, but he had lost track of time this time, and they ended up in the middle of a literal throng. Somewhat tired from socializing and put off by the throng of people pushing and shoving all around him, Zorian leaned on the nearby window and simply observed the people around them.

It had been a while since he had been stuck in a crowd like this. With his great magical skills and ability to simply teleport from place to place, he usually had no need to use normal transportation methods to get to places. A confusing, erratic mess of emotions and mental signals washed against his mind sense, but he was far too good at controlling his psychic powers these days to be bothered by that. His mind was like a rock in the sea, battered by the winds and violent waves, but solid and unmoving.

"Hey, you! You're one of the upperclassmen, aren't you?"

Zorian looked at the girl talking to him, curious as to what she wanted from him. She was part of the group of first years next to him, and had completely ignored him up until now. Her whole group was kind of amusing, talking excitedly amongst themselves about how they were going to start learning magic, and become famous mages, and similar stuff. He kind of wished he could see their faces when they realized the first year was all about theory and repetitive mana exercises.

"I am," he confirmed. "So?"

"Can you show us any magic?" she asked eagerly.

Wait... this sounded kind of familiar...

"He can't!" Kirielle, who had apparently been listening in on their conversation, piped in. "The train has a magic field that stops people from doing magic."

"It's because some of the students would set fire to the seats or etch their names and crude drawings into the walls of the train," Zorian confirmed.

"Oh," the girl said, clearly disappointed.

"I know," Kirielle agreed with, sadly. "It sucks. Some jerk always has to ruin it for the rest of us."

Yeah, this whole situation was really familiar to him for some reason.

Oh well, it probably wasn't anything important.

- break -

Zorian became a little concerned about things after the group disembarked at Cyoria's main train station. This was because Bryn had a habit of

following after them, and Zorian had plans that would be rather inconvenienced by that. He was just debating whether it was justified to use mind magic to nudge his thoughts in the 'right' direction, when Bryn regretfully informed them that he had to stay behind at the station for a while. Apparently his parents were disturbed enough by the recent attack on the Noveda Mansion that they had asked a friend of theirs that lived in the city to pick Bryn up from the station and escort him to his dorm. Thus, Bryn would have to stay behind and wait for the man to show up.

Zorian found it curious that Red Robe's attack on Zach had such far-reaching consequences. Bryn wasn't even from Cyoria, yet the attack changed the way he went through the month so quickly and radically. Zach and Zorian knew that Tesen and the city authorities would have a strong reaction to the Noveda Mansion being suddenly attacked like that, but he didn't expect the ordinary people to care so much.

In any case, Zorian simply said goodbye to Bryn and Ibery and was on his merry way with Kirielle in tow. He did exchange contact methods with Bryn and Ibery in case they wanted to get in touch later, but he wasn't sure if anything would come out of that. Neither of them had been particularly inclined to seek him out when they had done similar things in the time loop. With the world lasting longer than a month, though, perhaps that would change. Only time would tell.

Zorian didn't take Kirielle immediately towards Imaya's place, though. Instead, he took her to a familiar bridge in one of the city parks. There, a small black-haired girl was crying her eyes out over a bicycle that had fallen into the creek below.

Kirielle watched quietly from the sidelines as Zorian slowly calmed Nochka down and got her to explain why she was crying. This done, he placed his hand over the bridge and telekinetically lifted the bike out of the water. He also casually cleaned it up a little, ignoring the chorus of complaints from his simulacrum that he was being 'frivolous' in his mana use. The jerks had been on the lookout for something like this for a while now, most likely.

"It isn't frivolous," he told them telepathically. "What did you expect me to do, exactly?"

"You could have waded in through the muddy water on foot," a simulacrum helpfully explained.

"It's just getting a little wet, there's no harm in that," another one added.

"All it would take is a bit more time. Gods, why are you so impatient?" a third one scolded.

"All of you, shut up and mind your own business!" Zorian told them grumpily.

He had the worst simulacrum.

"There," Zorian told Nochka. "Your bike is clean, intact, and out of the creek. You can stop crying now, okay?"

"Okay," she sniffed, rubbing her eyes. "Um. Thank you."

"Well, if that's that, I guess we should get going now," Zorian said. "Though... I think it's going to rain soon. Do you have an umbrella?"

"N-No..." She said, shaking her head. "But, um, I'm going to be fine..."

"We should help her get home," Kirielle suddenly said. She quickly got into Nochka's personal space and introduced herself. "Hi, I'm Kirielle! Kirielle Kazinski, and that's my brother Zorian. What's your name?"

After some back and forth, Nochka agreed to have them accompany her home. The walk was a short one, but Zorian paid close attention to everything around him along the way. He found no evidence of cephalic rats or other invader agents along the way. Even the cephalic rat swarm he usually encountered while traveling through this part of the city was not here this time – he had chosen the path that led to Nochka on purpose, not because he was trying to avoid the rats. The aranea were fighting a pretty intense war with the cephalic rats at the moment, so this turn of events wasn't particularly surprising. They were too busy to spy on people much, and could no longer move freely through most of the city.

Still, while Rea and her family seemed free of invader schemes at the moment, he knew that wouldn't last forever. Assuming Red Robe did not find some kind of alternative method of unlocking Panaxeth's prison, shifter children like Nochka remained a critical component of primordial's release plans. Thus, evacuating them out of the city through means fair or foul was probably the most certain way of sabotaging the ritual at Zach and Zorian's disposal. Shifters were not that numerous and there were only so many shifters available in the area.

Though, if he were going to be honest with himself, wanting to befriend Rea and her family wasn't purely because of pragmatism. Rea had no special influence over her fellow shifters and would be of limited help if he wanted to talk them into going along with the evacuation. He just had a soft spot for the little girl that had befriended his little sister and the sight of her stripped naked and waiting to be drained of all blood for some messed up blood ritual was vividly burned into his mind. He had promised to himself that he would make sure Nochka survived the month out there in the real world, and he still meant that. He meant to save all the shifter children, of course, but making sure Nochka was safe had a personal dimension for him.

Since he had already thrown away his good sense and taken Kirielle to the death trap that was Cyoria, he may as well introduce her to her former and future friend. At least if they started hanging around each other, he could more easily protect the both of them without spreading himself thin.

The actual conversation with Rea was pretty mundane. Nochka's mother was pretty friendly, and Zorian did not confront her with any heavy topics. They simply talked about who he and Kirielle were, how they had met Nochka, and where they were staying. Kirielle almost ratted out Nochka on dropping her bike in the stream, which caused the little cat shifter to panic and hurriedly shut her up... by manifesting her claws and

clamping down on Kirielle's arm. This caused Rea to freak out because Nnochka 'almost' ruined their secret and hurt a guest, but the situation was thankfully resolved in the end, and Zorian pretended not to have noticed anything strange about the incident.

Interestingly, Rea also brought up the news of Zach's place being attacked, just like Bryn did. She didn't have any new information for Zorian, but it did emphasize how notable the attack was for people. Zorian wondered if Red Robe even realized how eye-catching the whole thing would end up being.

"You are classmates with the Noveda heir?" Rea asked. "My, I seem to have met an important person today."

"Not... really?" Zorian said dubiously.

"Come now, Mister Kazinski. You have a famous brother, you attend a prestigious magical academy, and one of your classmates is a scion of a Noble House," Rea pointed out.

"Two, actually," said Zorian. There was also Tinami. "I don't think any of that makes *me* important."

Rea hummed loudly at him, clearly not agreeing.

"Have it your way," she shrugged. She rose from her seat and took a look at the weather outside. Things didn't look good of course. The rain was pouring in thick sheets while the wind was blowing madly in all directions, and Zorian knew from the time loop that the storm wouldn't be ending any time soon.

This was the main reason Zorian was less impatient about leaving Rea's place this time around. He couldn't just teleport to Imaya's place or create a rain shield around himself and Kirielle. No, he would have to use an umbrella like a normal person, and they would end up wet and miserable by the time they actually reached their destination. He was in no hurry to experience that.

"What horrid weather," Rea said, frowning. "I think you're going to have to remain here over the night."

"We can't impose on you like that," Zorian said hurriedly, shaking his head. "We'll just slowly make our way through the storm. A little rain won't kill us."

"You can't be serious," Rea said, giving him an annoyed look. "I know teenage boys can be a little reckless, and I would not have said anything if it was just you being stupid... but you're taking your little sister along and you have to take this into account. Are you seriously thinking of taking her out there into *that* with just an umbrella?"

Zorian stared at Rea for a few seconds before looking at Kirielle, who was sitting on the floor with Nnochka. They were both whispering something to each other and pretending they weren't listening in on their conversation.

"Kirielle," Zorian asked her slowly. "What do you think about going?"

"Umm..." she fumbled, rubbing her hands awkwardly. "It's raining pretty hard."

Zorian sighed, taking off his glasses and massaging the bridge of his nose. After a few seconds he gave Rea an embarrassed look. He was just about to speak up but she put a hand on his shoulder to stop him and simply nodded her head knowingly.

"I'll go get some blankets," she said, before wandering off to do just that.

In the corner of his eye, he could see Nnochka and Kirielle excitedly whisper to each other. They, at least, seemed pleased with this outcome.

After a few seconds, Zorian clacked his tongue and decided to just roll with the situation. It was embarrassing, but there was no real harm in it.

He looked through the window, silently observing the storm for a while. After a while, Rea wandered in and placed a steaming cup of tea on the window sill beside him. Zorian gave her a curious look.

"A cup of tea is necessary for proper rain watching," Rea explained to him.

"Ah. Thank you," Zorian said quietly. "Sorry for the imposition. I could tell it was going to rain, but..."

"Do I look that mean and selfish to you?" Rea asked, raising her eyebrow at him. "Hospitality had always been important to my people."

"Your people?" Zorian asked her curiously, feigning ignorance.

"Your acting skills are decent, but I know you saw the claws on Nnochka's fingers. You probably know what we are," Rea said, sipping slowly from her own cup of tea while standing beside him.

"Yeah," Zorian admitted with a shrug. "It doesn't bother me."

"Good," Rea said simply. She then dropped the subject and no longer pursued the matter. "I don't know if this is really the issue, or if there is something deeper going on, but it's pointless to get angry or frustrated at a storm. It's a force of nature; there is no fighting that. You just take shelter and wait until it ends."

"Right," said Zorian quietly, taking a sip of the tea Rea had made for him.

Sadly, some storms couldn't be dodged that easily.

- break -

While Zorian had been escorting Kirielle, his simulacrum had been very busy. They, along with Zach's simulacrum, constantly attacked known cult leaders and invader bases, raiding them for funds and trying to decapitate their organizations. Sadly, this hadn't been nearly as effective as they had hoped. Red Robe had clearly been very busy and most of their targets had been forewarned they were coming. Warding schemes were changed, the guards were on alert, and some people were just outright evacuated to safety. They had managed to acquire a lot of money and resources, since many of the secret caches had been protected mainly by their secrecy, and it wasn't easy to strip a base of everything that was worth money in a hurry, but Zorian doubted they had managed to deal any kind of decisive strike to their enemies.

Below the city, the fighting was also intense. It was mostly the aranea fighting the cephalic rats, but Zorian's simulacrum sometimes helped the aranean side... and since Zorian's uncontested presence would have meant a decisive victory for the aranea, Red Robe's simulacrum was always there to stop the cephalic rats from getting wiped out. Neither Zorian nor Red Robe were fighting seriously, wary of showing the enemy too much and wasting their mana reserves, but the fact Zorian's simulacrum had a much more resilient golem body meant that he was slowly getting an upper hand in these skirmishes. It remained to be seen what Red Robe would do in response to that. Zorian doubted he would let the cephalic rats just die, since they were a critical asset for the invasion forces.

The simulacrum were also negotiating with various aranean webs in the region, trying to bring in additional support for the fight. Of particular importance were the negotiations with the Silent Doorway Adepts, since they needed their help to open a connection to Koth. Zorian did not doubt for a second the negotiations were going to succeed; they had lots of things they could tempt the Silent Doorway Adepts with. The Bakora gate addresses in particular were bound to have irresistible allure for the web. However, the issue was that these negotiations would still end up taking time, and they had to keep the web protected from enemy machinations while they were in progress. Silverlake knew exactly how important this was to them, so an attack at the Silent Doorway Adepts was worryingly plausible.

Some things were also moved forward a little. Kael and his daughter had been contacted by Zach's simulacrum disguised as a school official, who teleported them directly to Imaya's place. This was mostly because Zach and Zorian were worried that Silverlake, whose movements were still a mystery to them, was going to target them. Kael and his daughter were too easy of a target to be left alone for long. Thankfully, Kael did not suspect a thing and even praised the academy for their thoughtfulness. Zorian intended to evacuate Kael to Koth once he opened the gate link there, but for now he was safest at Imaya's house, since that way he would be living under the same roof as Zorian and Kirielle.

Meanwhile, the simulacrum that got Zorian in the whole trouble with Kirielle got a task to get his parents away from the house as soon as possible. Thus, less than an hour after Zorian and Kirielle had boarded the train to Cyoria, the simulacrum rounded up Mother and Father and teleported them to the port city of Luja. Their memory was modified to make them believe this was perfectly normal. It would create some discrepancies in dates; that could be a problem later. For now, though, Zorian was just glad they would soon be out in the open ocean and out of danger. He'd deal with potential consequences of his decision later.

The simulacrum in his room that was focusing on stabilizing his mana reserves was also evacuated out of the house, leaving it completely empty. Even if Red Robe decided to visit the place now, the most he could do was burn it down in frustration.

Which would still be devastating for Mother and Father, but Zorian was quite sure they wouldn't want to die to protect it.

Overall, things had been going... decently. There was still no sign of Silverlake, and Red Robe was passively responding to their moves while focusing most of his energies into something they couldn't see.

It made no sense to Zorian. The way he saw it, he and Zach had an absolute advantage in this conflict. Even if everything else failed, they could always inform the Eldemarian government about the invasion and it would be instant loss for Red Robe and Silverlake. Any chance of successfully invading the city or freeing Panaxeth would be gone. No matter how personally powerful they were or what clever plans they had, they could never take on the central government head-on and win. Thus, Red Robe and Silverlake should have taken a far more aggressive stance against them by now.

But there was nothing Zorian could do about that. All he and Zach could do was wait. Hopefully, by the time they recovered their full strength, they would uncover what their enemies were planning.

94. Ghosts

Chapter 094 Ghosts

The next morning, Zorian and Kirielle bid Rea and her family goodbye and went to Imaya's place. Once there, they found out that Imaya had only been slightly worried for them – she had guessed from the severity of the last night's storm that they had taken shelter somewhere overnight.

He also officially met Kael and his daughter. The morlock boy was a bit more leery about him than Zorian remembered, but he supposed that was to be expected. He usually greeted Kael at Cyoria's train station and charmed him with practiced gestures and conversation right from the start... none of which had happened this time. Since the circumstances of their meeting differed, so did Kael's reaction to him.

It was a minor matter, really. Zorian was confident that the morlock boy would warm up to him eventually. If anything, the fact Kael was currently so distant may very well be a good thing. Much like Zorian's interaction with Ilsa earlier in the resta-

He froze suddenly, fiercely knocking his head with his fist a couple of times. No. Not 'restart'! There was no time loop anymore. It was the real thing. He had to get this into his head as soon as possible...

His strange actions prompted strange looks from Imaya, who asked him if he was alright.

Once Kirielle had settled in and he cleared up some things with Imaya, Zorian left a simulacrum to guard the place and left to find Zach. He eventually found him sitting on the edge of the academy fountain, idly running his hand through the water while lost in thought.

"It's weird," Zach told him when he approached. "The fountain hadn't worked for years, and it was only recently that it got fixed and repainted... but to me, it looks perfectly normal as it is right now. In fact, I don't think I actually remember what the fountain looked like before this month."

"Makes sense," Zorian shrugged. "It's been decades since you've last seen it."

Even Zorian struggled to remember details like that, and his stay in the time loop had been far shorter than Zach's. He had the ability to flawlessly preserve important memories inside his memory packets, of course, but that only worked for select things he consciously deemed important. Most of his memories went through the exact same process as any other person's.

Zach didn't say anything to that. Instead he simply got up from his sitting spot and then motioned for Zorian to follow him.

"I'm a bit hungry," Zach said. "Let's go to the cafeteria and see what they have to offer. It's been so long since I've been there I've already forgotten what the food there tastes like."

"So did I," Zorian admitted. "Still, we stopped going there for a reason. The cafeteria food is nothing special, I assure you of *that*. What's this all about, really?"

"I don't know. It's just something that has been on my mind lately," Zach said with a shrug. "Say, did you ever figure out what you would do after this month?"

Zorian hesitated for a few seconds.

"There are so many uncertainties surrounding this month that it almost seems foolish to have any long-term plans until it's over," he said cautiously. "Even if we both survive and Cyoria isn't a ruined wreck by the end of it, the invasion may very well leave us on the run or trigger another round of Splinter Wars. Ignoring that, though, I think I'll just gather some funds..."

Zach gave him a knowing look.

"Well, okay, a *lot* of funds," Zorian admitted. "And then I'll open a research facility to study the nature of mana. Maybe I'll be able to figure out how to duplicate that mana-increasing stabilization frame that you and Quatach-Ichl have attached to your soul. Or maybe I'll discover how to store mana in outside containers, assimilate mana more quickly and efficiently, or some other revolutionary improvement. That had kind of been my dream when I was younger – to invent something that would completely revolutionize the way magic is done. I eventually discarded that as a childish fantasy that I had no power to realize... but maybe it's not so impossible anymore."

"Still very difficult," Zach noted. "If a talented mage with plenty of money was enough to revolutionize magic, it would happen way more often than it does."

"It doesn't matter," Zorian said. "It's fine if I fail. I have no interest in hoarding money or in political maneuvering, so what else would I do with my time and money?"

"Never say never," said Zach with a grin. "Once you get married, you may find your wife is not nearly as divorced from material concerns as you are."

"You're not even married yourself, so how would you know anything about that?" Zorian huffed. "Don't talk like an old man."

“But I *am* an old man,” Zach protested. “At least from a certain perspective. Anyway, I hope you realize that this sort of thing you’re describing is something the time loop would have been absolutely perfect for, right?”

“Yes, but I didn’t have time to focus on such peripheral, highly theoretical projects back in the time loop. Kind of funny, but true. Life is amusing like that sometimes,” Zorian shrugged. He paused for a moment, thinking about something. “Of course, before I can throw myself into big projects like that, I first need to pay back all the people that helped me inside the time loop. Doing that without drawing any attention and revealing my identity is bound to be a... tricky undertaking.”

“Can you even do that at this point?” Zach asked. “We lost most of the notebooks and research notes when the physical exit strategy failed.”

“I saved the most crucial work in my head, and the rest can be reconstructed with some effort,” Zorian said. “It may take years but I’m sure I can do it.”

He was deliberately being a little more optimistic about things than he really felt. So many things had been lost at the end of the time loop... it pained Zorian to even think of it. Zorian had used memory packets to preserve their most important information, designs, and notebooks before the group had made their exit attempt... just in case... but this was still just a small part of the whole. It couldn’t substitute for the vast body of knowledge and invention that the group had managed to gather in the end.

Rebuilding that massive library and then handing down portions of it to various people without causing a massive stir that led straight back to him would be a difficult problem.

“Does that mean you’ve already given Kael his notes?” Zach asked curiously.

“No, not yet,” said Zorian, shaking his head. He actually had fairly complete version of Kael’s notes. He prioritized preserving his research, mostly due to them being old friends, so he didn’t have to reconstruct much in that regard. “The situation is very weird right now. I don’t want to involve him in this mess until I have to, and I can’t just hand him those research notes and leave him to his own devices.”

“Do you even want to tell him about the time loop?” Zach asked.

“Ideally, I’d like to keep everyone except Xvim, Alanic, and the Cyorian web in the dark about the time loop,” Zorian said. “I’m not sure how possible that is, though. We are already planning to evacuate everyone we know to Koth at some point. We’re going to need an explanation of some sort for that. At the very least, informing Daimen about things may be necessary to get his cooperation.”

“Daimen would also be useful for his magical prowess and possibly his connections,” Zach pointed out. “Speaking of Koth, how are the negotiations with the Silent Doorway Adepts going?”

“Reasonably well,” Zorian said. “We haven’t reached an agreement, but that’s normal. I don’t think we need to tell them anything about time travel. Gate keys for another continent are tempting enough on their own. We should have a way to Koth in a few days.”

“Good. I’ll feel a lot better with Princess by my side,” Zach said. “With her support, not even Quatach-Ichl can force us to withdraw. I’d put my hand in the fire that Red Robe is trying to broker some kind of alliance with Quatach-Ichl as quickly as he can.”

“Probably,” Zorian agreed.

“I really don’t like this,” Zach said. “You at least are in constant contact with your simulacrum, but I don’t have that luxury. I have no idea what’s happening out there until my simulacrum deigns to send me a report, so all I can do is wait. I feel useless and stupid.”

“The simulacrum are doing fine,” Zorian assured him. “I’m concerned that we can’t find any solid clues as to what Red Robe is really doing, but us being active along with our simulacrum would not have helped with that anyway.”

“You may be right, but I’m sick of waiting.” Zach told him. “It just isn’t my style, you know? Once we get our hands on the imperial orb and have Princess on our side we’ll be able to *really* go on the offensive. It doesn’t matter what Red Robe is planning then – we’ll just come straight at him and crush him in battle. If we demolish the Ibasan base beneath Cyoria and shut down the gate they use to transport their troops, the invasion is over. We’ll see if he’ll still hide behind simulacrum when that happens.”

“Hey! Zorian! Hey! Over here!”

They had barely stepped foot inside the cafeteria when a familiar voice started calling for him. It was Benisek – the chubby, cheerful, girl-obsessed boy that Zorian used to regularly interact with. Sadly, the time loop had not been kind to their friendship. Benisek could be really annoying and shallow, and the time loop had only made that worse. Eventually, Zorian stopped interacting with him at all.

He kind of felt bad about that. Benisek had his faults, but so did his old self. He couldn’t really ignore the boy’s invitation without looking like a colossal jerk, so he reluctantly walked over. Zach followed after him, inviting himself along.

“Hello, Ben,” Zorian said, as he fetched a nearby chair and sat down next to him. Zach gave Ben a friendly wave and a smile before copying his action. “You sound happy. Eager to start a new school year?”

“You bet!” Benisek said, grinning wildly. “We’re upperclassmen now! Our dating prospects have entered a whole new level!”

“Hell yeah!” Zach agreed, fist pumping in the air. “For girls!”

“For girls!” Benisek agreed, returning the fist pump with one of his own.

“For gods’ sake, you two… we’re in a public setting.” Zorian complained, trying to ignore the way people around them were staring at them.

“So. You two are hanging out together, now?” Benisek asked curiously. “When did that happen?”

“In the last couple of days,” Zorian told him. “Don’t ask. It’s a long story involving a series of misunderstandings, me getting punched in the face at the train station, and Zach getting attacked by my little sister in retaliation.”

“That sounds super interesting, though,” he protested. “You can’t tell me something like that and then just leave me hanging, man.”

He suddenly frowned a little, giving Zorian a weird look.

“Wait… are you saying you brought your annoying little sister along to Cyoria?” he asked.

“Yup,” Zorian confirmed with a decisive nod.

“Ouch,” Benisek said with an exaggerated wince. “My condolences. See, I told you that being so serious and responsible would eventually bite you in the ass… my family would never even *think* of letting me take care of my younger sisters! You should be more like me, Zorian!”

“The mere idea is horrifying,” Zorian told him bluntly.

“Bah, you don’t know what’s good for you,” Benisek said. He gave Zach a speculative look. “Though, if you keep hanging out with our dear friend Zach, that may change after a while. I hear your recent life has been somewhat… exciting.”

“Oh yeah, downright explosive,” agreed Zach.

“So that attack I was hearing about…?” Benisek asked.

“It’s all true, but I was out drinking and dancing that night so it ended up missing me,” Zach said with a careless shrug.

“Ha ha, now *that*’s the proper way to evade death!” Benisek said, leaning forward to punch Zach in the shoulder. Zach blocked it, which Benisek took in stride. He leaned back in his chair, his expression becoming more solemn all of a sudden. “But man, I got to say, this is one messed up week. First the attack on Noveda Mansion, and now that thing with the villages in Holakor… what is the world coming to? I really, really hope this isn’t a prelude to war, you know? It’s kind of selfish, but I want my academy days to be peaceful and fun.”

Zach and Zorian shared a confused look with each other.

“What do you mean ‘villages in Holakor’?” Zorian asked him. “We don’t know anything about that.”

“Ah? No?” Benisek said, surprised. “You two need to pay more attention to recent events, then. I know Eldemarian newspapers haven’t reported much on it, but you two should keep an eye on continental news. One of you is the heir of a Noble House and the other… well, I know Zorian doesn’t like hearing about his brother, but—”

“Just tell us already,” Zorian told his friend with a heavy sigh.

“Fine, but you have to tell me that long story you teased me with earlier,” Benisek blackmailed.

“Deal,” Zorian immediately agreed. He would make something up later.

“Alright,” Benisek grinned. “I’ll hold you to that. Anyway, word is going around that a number of villages in Holakor – that’s the big neighboring country to the west of Eldemar, you know – have been hit by some sort of attack recently. A weirdly brutal attack. Rumors are saying it was a total bloodbath, with *hundreds* of people killed.”

Zorian’s mood immediately plummeted.

He supposed they finally got a clue as to what Red Robe had been doing all this time.

- break -

If you come across this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen from Royal Road. Please report it.

Later that day, Zorian returned to Imaya’s place, his thoughts still on what Benisek had told them. He and Zach had immediately dispatched a pair of simulacrum to Holakor to check up on this situation, but it would take a while for them to reach the villages in question and investigate things. In the meantime, they could only speculate what Red Robe had been doing there and for what purpose.

He didn’t have a lot of time to dedicate to his musings, though, because he was soon interrupted by Taiven, who sought him out for recruitment.

Zorian didn't want to tell her about the time loop. Like Kael and a lot of other people that once made up their group of temporary loopers, she couldn't actually help them in any way and telling her about the invasion would just expose her to danger. Well, more danger than she was already in.

Sometimes he wondered if it wouldn't be easier to just tell everyone about the time loop and point the central government at Red Robe and the invaders right from the very start. However, when they had discussed that scenario back in the time loop, even the temporary loopers agreed this was a very unhappy solution to the problem. The central government was notoriously corrupt and power-hungry, and the current king favored a highly aggressive stance towards any internal threats. Once Eldemar's forces were done dealing with Red Robe and the Ibasans, they were almost certainly going to turn on them.

And anyone who knew about the time loop and the invasion would likely suffer along with them.

Calling in the military was pretty much a guaranteed win... for Cyoria and its citizens. However, they, and people close to them, might end up paying the price for this good deed. This was not a choice they wanted to make. They were not selfless angels, after all. Thus, it was decided to only make the report once they were reasonably sure it couldn't be tracked down to them. That would take a while to set up, but it wouldn't take the entire month to do so. That was the main reason why Zorian was fine with Red Robe's stalling for time. Unless Red Robe blindsided them with something, Zach and Zorian were guaranteed to win.

Of course, if Red Robe's schemes *did* blindside them, they would rather unmask themselves than allow the city to be destroyed and watch as an ancient godlike monster is released into the world. That was why it was important to keep most of the former temporary loopers in the dark for now. If the army suddenly stormed into the city and started asking questions, the less they knew about what was going on, the better.

Still, he couldn't just refuse Taiven's offer and send her off into the tunnels beneath the city to die. Thus, he let her in on some of his secrets.

“What?” Taiven complained. “Why are you staring at me like that? Is there something on my face?”

She ran her hand over her face to check things and even glanced behind her to check if there was someone standing over her shoulder. Zorian didn't know whether she was faking it in order to make fun of him or if she honestly believed these were legitimate possibilities... but he supposed he *had* been staring at her for a little too long.

“Taiven, this job of yours is a total setup,” he eventually told her. “You should stay away from this one.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” she asked, narrowing her eyes at him. “It's just a simple find and retrieve in the tunnels below the city. Fight some giant spiders, find the lost thingy, get out.”

“The giant spiders are aranea,” Zorian told her. “They're giant, intelligent, *telepathic* spiders. Unless you know what you're doing and come prepared, they can blast you into unconsciousness before you can blink.”

Taiven took a step back at the description, her eyes widening at the description.

“Shit,” she swore. “Roach, how do you—”

“And that man isn't some innocent wanderer that lost his expensive trinket down there,” Zorian continued. “He had been spying on the aranea and got caught in the act. That ward breaker device is currently safely stored in the aranea treasury, not carelessly dropped in some dusty tunnel and free for the taking.”

“Roach, how do you know this!?” Taiven asked, a little more forcefully this time.

“Huh. I'm surprised you didn't just accuse me of lying,” he told her slowly.

“This is too serious,” she said, frowning. “I don't think you'd joke around with something like that. And you're not really the joking type, either. Now tell.”

“Well, I know about this because I'm friendly with the aranea,” Zorian told her. “They're teaching me how to control my telepathic powers, after all.”

“Your... telepathic powers?” she repeated slowly. “As in... mind reading?”

[Among other things, yes,] he sent her telepathically.

She flinched back and gave him a frightened look afterward. For a moment Zorian thought she would bolt out of his room right then and there but instead she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and forcibly calmed herself down.

“Damn, Roach,” she said, massaging her forehead. “You really know how to drop a secret on someone.”

“I had to make sure you take this seriously,” Zorian said.

“Well, you succeeded,” she responded unhappily. She gave him a suspicious look. “You didn't read my mind without permission, did you? How long has this been going on, anyway?”

“I didn’t,” Zorian assured her. “I only found out about my innate mental powers recently.”

“Well, good,” Taiven said. “Though I’m not too happy you’re keeping secrets like that. Especially something that sounds so... shady. I never knew there was a colony of sapient spiders living beneath the city. They’re not here legally, are they? And you’re just hanging around them and learning mind magic from them like it’s nothing? What else are you hiding from me?”

“You’re just mad I didn’t invite you along for this ‘shady’ adventure,” Zorian said, deflecting her worries.

“Yes, dammit!” she said, swinging her fist at his shoulder.

He flawlessly deflected her half-hearted punch to the side, causing her to stop and blink at him in surprise. His move wasn’t really all that amazing, but he suddenly realized he never used to do that sort of thing before the time loop. Oops.

“You know I’m right, though,” she said, ignoring the incident in favor of crossing her arms in front of her chest and staring down at him. “It’s crazy dangerous what you’re doing, and you should have at least taken a bodyguard when going down there.”

“You?” Zorian ‘guessed’.

“Who else do you know that is an amazing battlemage?” she asked rhetorically, straightening her pose pridefully.

“Well, I’ve been hanging out with Zach Noveda lately, and he’s pretty good at combat magic,” Zorian told her.

“The Noveda heir? Isn’t he one of your classmates?” Taiven asked dubiously.

“Yes,” Zorian confirmed.

“A third year student being able to compare with me? Please,” Taiven scoffed. “You’re looking down way too much on me, Zorian. Looks like I’ll have to challenge you to a proper fight soon, just to broaden your horizons and let you get some perspective on things.”

Zorian couldn’t help it. He stopped himself from laughing out loud at her, but there was a wide smile stuck on his face that just wouldn’t go away.

“What?” she demanded. “What the hell is so amusing about what I said? You want to fight right now!?”

He couldn’t help it and simply burst into laughter at her.

Later on, Zorian reflected that Imaya was probably starting to think of him as some major weirdo. First it was that incident of him punching himself in the head earlier, and now there was a girl chasing him around the house and demanding that he ‘takes it like a man’ and whatnot.

Zorian wasn’t sure how his friendship with Taiven was going to fare in the future, considering that he could not possibly hide the full extent of his skills forever... but at least her current visit had brightened his day somewhat.

- break -

Red Robe had chosen his targets well. Although situated on the border of Eldemar and relatively close to Cyoria, Holakor was pretty difficult to access. It had rather unfriendly relations with Eldemar – not an unusual situation in regards to states bordering their country – and it was a mountainous country with poor transport infrastructure and plenty of isolated mountain villages. Reaching their destination was quite mana expensive, requiring lots of teleportation and other magic, and orienting themselves was a chore. The whole region was swarming with Holakorian soldiers searching for the culprits and trying to control the flow of news and people in and out of the place. Additionally, Holakor’s cartographers had apparently not done a very good job, because some of the villages hit by the attacks weren’t even marked in publically available maps and records.

Still, Zach and Zorian were resourceful people, and their simulacrum inherited their skills. Thus, it took them less than two days to reach the villages Benisek had told them about and investigate the situation.

The results of the investigation were grim. Benisek had said the worst of the rumors mentioned hundreds of casualties... but it only took one glance at the first village they visited to realize this estimate was, if anything, severely understated. The village was the scene of a total bloodbath – of the 300 or so inhabitants, most of them had been killed. Only a young couple that sneaked away from the village during the night and an old hunter that decided to sleep over in the wilderness had survived the slaughter. The attackers hadn’t even bothered to loot the place – the objective appeared to have been simple, indiscriminate killing.

The other villages they visited were pretty much the same. A sudden, overwhelming attack that aimed to kill as many as possible. Accounts of the attackers were hard to come by, since most people who got caught up in it died, but it was clear the attacker was a sizeable armed group. A group that contained war trolls, various monsters, and scores of undead. A group that seemed capable of teleporting themselves all over the place, because they had hit over ten villages in the span of a single night, before seemingly disappearing into thin air.

Adding everything together, Zach and Zorian estimated the death toll reached easily into thousands. Holakorian authorities had walled off the area from the rest of the country, fearing mass panic and unrest if the true scope of the slaughter became known, which was why the reaction to the attack was rather muted at the moment. Still, those kinds of measures were just stalling for time. Zorian would be surprised if they could keep it a secret for more than a week.

At first, neither Zach nor Zorian could understand this move. What was Red Robe trying to accomplish by killing Holakorian villagers like that? Was this some sort of large-scale sacrifice? Zorian wouldn't call himself an expert on blood magic, but he didn't think so. The killing was too quick and disorganized, and the villages hit by the attacks weren't arranged into discernible pattern.

In the end they went to Alanic for help. Alanic was one of the people they had decided to inform about the existence of the time loop and the invasion no matter what, since he was highly competent and already in huge danger from the invaders no matter what. Thus far he still wasn't convinced they were telling the truth about the whole time travel business, but the information they had brought him was pretty convincing on its own. After all, the little notebook that Zorian duplicated from his memory packets was written by Alanic himself, and listed all sorts of criminal groups and hideouts they had found over the restarts. Even if Alanic thought they were lying or delusional about being time travelers, he was still holding a book written in his own handwriting, mentioning things only he should know about and listing a variety of things whose truthfulness was easy to check.

Alanic took one look at the information they had compiled about the attack on Holakorian villages and dismissed the idea it was some kind of massive demon summoning or some other piece of blood magic.

"Blood magic fueled summonings are disturbingly easy, but not this easy," Alanic said, shaking his head. "The victims would have to be herded into a central location. Their life force would have to be carefully mixed and funneled into a massive spell formula circle. The preparations would not be small and would be easily noticed and stopped. Holakor's authorities would not miss such a thing, and you would have seen evidence of it even if they had."

"Then what is this about?" asked Zach, sounding frustrated. "Why are they killing all these people? It's not simply bloodthirstiness, I'm sure of that. This was clearly done with the full cooperation of Quatach-Ichl and his forces. There is no way he would have agreed to this unless there was some kind of clear benefit to this."

Alanic looked at the papers in silence, shuffling them around while frowning deeply. This went on for a full minute, with Zach and Zorian quietly waiting to hear what he had to say.

"I almost want to say this is a soul-gathering operation," Alanic eventually told them. "Except... gathering souls is not such a simple business, either. In order to gather the souls of thousands of people, the attackers would need thousands of soul containers. Even if they could afford to build that many, the sheer logistics of shuffling those soul containers around to the right place and the right time and casting the necessary spells to capture the soul before it moved on to the afterlife..."

Zach and Zorian's faces became uglier the longer Alanic continued to speak.

"Shit," Zach swore.

"What?" Alanic said, frowning. He was frowning a lot at the moment, clearly upset by the information the two of them just brought him.

"They don't have to go through all that trouble because they have Sudomir's Well of Souls," Zorian explained to him.

"Well of Souls?" Alanic slowly repeated. He glanced at the little book on the side of the table. "Is that inside the notebook you gave me?"

"It is," Zorian confirmed. "You must not have reached that part."

Alanic quickly flipped through it until he reached the relevant part. Zach and Zorian waited for him to finish, discussing things quietly amongst themselves.

"Well," Alanic eventually said, snapping the book in his hands shut. "Not only am I now certain this was *indeed* a soul gathering operation... I think I even know what they need all those souls for."

"Yes. And so do we," Zach told him grimly. "It's pretty obvious at this point."

"Sudomir is making his wraith bombs in advance," Zorian finished for them.

- break -

Despite recent developments, Zach and Zorian decided to attend the first day of classes at the academy. There were three reasons for that. The first one was that Zach and Zorian wanted to scout out Iasku Mansion to see what they were dealing with before they committed themselves to anything substantial. The second one was that they should get access to Koth soon, which will greatly expand their capabilities and was well worth waiting for.

And the third one was that showing up to class today was probably their last chance to do such a thing for the rest of the month. After today, it was unlikely they would have time to mess around with schoolwork and attending classes. They might as well take this opportunity to reunite with their classmates for a moment, finish recovering, and mentally prepare themselves for the trials ahead.

"You're late."

Zorian looked at Akoja, dutifully standing in front of the door with a clipboard in her hands and taking note of incoming students. She stared at him coolly, tapping her foot impatiently against the ground.

He simply smiled at her in response, causing her to suddenly lose her cool and look away uncomfortably.

“Sorry,” Zorian told her. “Things are a little hectic these days, at least for me.”

“Well... just don’t let it happen in the future, okay?” she told him seriously, quickly recovering her confidence.

“Sadly, I don’t think that’s possible,” Zorian shook his head. “I’m probably going to be absent from classes a lot in the near future.”

“It’s not a good idea to miss the start of the school year like that,” she told him with a small frown.

“I disagree. The start of the school year is the *best* time to miss,” Zorian told her. “It’s all just repetition of things we’ve already learned in previous years and very easy study material. I’ll make up for it in a flash, you’ll see.”

“Just get inside already,” she told him with a long suffering sigh.

Zorian gave her a thumbs up and did as he was told, humming happily as he entered the classroom and picked a seat for himself. Zach was already inside, Akoja not having paid too much attention to him. Zorian greeted a few of the classmates he remembered being slightly more friendly with before the time loop, turning some heads due to how uncharacteristically happy he seemed, before going towards the front of the classroom.

He picked a familiar spot next to Briam and his fire drake, with Zach right behind him.

Just like he expected, the small fire drake in Briam’s lap immediately started hissing at him when he approached. Briam quickly enclosed the orange-red lizard with both hands and started whispering soothingly at his familiar. The drake calmed down a little but still kept both of his eyes on Zorian, alert and nervous.

Zorian ignored the spectacle, simply plopping down on his seat and calmly watching the scene. He still didn’t understand what exactly the fire drake found so upsetting about him in particular. He had once even peered into the fire drake’s mind to find the answer, but that didn’t help. The fire drake was not actually a sapient being. He was a creature of instinct, and something deep inside of him told him that Zorian was uniquely dangerous out of all people gathered in the classroom. The fire drake did not understand why, but it trusted its instincts.

Did the drake sense Zorian’s mental powers, despite not being psychic himself? Did Zorian have some ability he had no idea about? It was a mystery. From what Briam had told him, he wasn’t unique in this regard. Fire drakes could be very strange, temperamental creatures, and he wasn’t the first person that his familiar had picked out for some reason. Eventually, the influence of the mage they were bonded with tended to temper these kinds of aggressive urges, and mature fire drake familiars were apparently far more placid and reliable in dealing with strangers.

“Sorry about that,” Briam said. “He’s still a little uneasy around strangers.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Zorian said, waving the apology away. “Congratulations on getting your own familiar, I guess. Must be a milestone for you.”

“Yeah,” Briam said happily, patting the drake like some kind of scaly cat. The drake reacted to that sort of like a cat, too. “It’s great.”

He spent some time talking to Briam and waiting for the class to start. Though it was premature to worry about that now, he couldn’t help but wonder how to deal with school life in the future. His classmates were nice and all... some of them he’d be happy to befriend if possible... but he was so much more capable than them magic-wise that it wasn’t even funny. Plus, the classes themselves are bound to be mind-numbingly boring. Could he really pretend to be just a normal student for two years straight? Was it actually possible for someone like him – a guy with archmage-level skills and a decade of additional memories and experience under his belt – to befriend one of these people?

Perhaps time loop Taiven was right and his attempt to connect to his former friends and classmates was ultimately kind of hollow and patronizing...

Thankfully, his somewhat depressing thoughts were soon interrupted by Ilsa’s arrival to class. She did her practiced speech at the beginning of the class and then started the lesson. Zorian was already preparing himself for a boring but relaxing class the likes of which he had heard dozens of times inside the time loop when the classroom door suddenly burst open, and a teenage boy his own age swaggered inside.

He was tall, with messy blond hair and rumpled clothes that looked like they had seen better days. The door had been opened so forcefully that Zorian suspected the boy had kicked it open with his foot instead of using the handle. It rebounded against the wall with a loud bang and promptly closed itself behind him.

As he marched forward towards the front of the class, the boy swept the whole class with his gaze. For a moment, Zorian met his eyes and found himself staring at vividly orange eyes, their slitted pupils burning with barely contained anger and aggression.

Veyers Boranova had arrived to class.

95. Betrayer

Chapter 095 Betrayer

Veyers was a frustrating part of the time loop mystery for Zorian. The fact that he had been deliberately erased from Zach's mind and that he started each restart dead made him a strong suspect for the real identity of Red Robe. However, that raised the question of how Veyers had managed to become a permanent looper. It couldn't have been through the method Zorian had used – everything he and Zach knew indicated that had been pure luck, and that deliberately replicating it would be both hard and dangerous. Zorian's conversation with Panaxeth had fully convinced Zorian that Zach was the original Controller of the loop, so Red Robe must have come later. That meant he had probably become a looper through the temporary marker given by the imperial crown... which meant that he had only had six months to figure out a way to permanently join the time loop.

Did Veyers really possess the skills necessary to pull that off? He was just an inexperienced teenager. He had a crippling condition that made his magic and personality unstable. He was not considered a social genius or a magic prodigy, even before his botched ignition ritual. There was no way he could have developed his magic sufficiently to pull it off in mere six months, and organizing a group that could have done so in his stead would have taken considerable amount of social shrewdness.

Not to mention that Veyers would have had to do all this while keeping Zach in the dark about everything. Zach wasn't very paranoid, and was probably even less so in the past, but that couldn't have been easy regardless.

Still, Zorian could see how it could have worked. Perhaps Zach had really come to like Veyers for some reason and had done most of the work himself. Perhaps he had brought the other boy into the time loop again and again, figured out a way to stabilize his magic, and helped him advance his skills in the fastest and most convenient manner possible. Perhaps there had even been a time when Zach had gone through the trouble of recruiting Quatach-Ichl and other soul magic experts in order to figure out a way to crack the secrets of the temporary marker... so that he could bring his best pal Veyers permanently into the time loop.

In order to be Red Robe, Veyers didn't have to be a resourceful mastermind that achieved what he and Zach could not in just six months... he could have simply been an opportunistic, heartless traitor who stabbed Zach in the back after his fellow time looper had given him everything he could.

It was all pure speculation, of course. Concrete answers about Veyers were basically impossible to find inside the time loop. Veyers himself obviously couldn't be questioned, people he was related to knew nothing useful, Zach did not remember anything about the boy, and Red Robe had left the time loop. If there were answers regarding Veyers, they would have to wait until Zorian had left the time loop.

Once he had done so, however, things remained stubbornly unclear. He found out that Red Robe had gone through the trouble of evacuating Veyers and his lawyer friend immediately after crossing over to the real world. That greatly increased the chance that Veyers really was Red Robe in his mind. However, he was then informed by Zach that, in the restarts following his departure, both Zorian and Silverlake were very much alive. Devoid of any memories of the time loop, but alive. This was very much unlike Veyers, who was dead and soulless at the beginning of every restart. Didn't that basically confirm that Veyers was knocked out of the time loop by the imperial dagger and couldn't possibly be Red Robe?

Now, all of those questions had a chance of being answered, because Veyers was finally in front of them. They didn't even have to search for him – he had just shown up in class, alone and defenseless.

Zorian had to admit, he had been caught completely off-guard by the boy's arrival. If this was Red Robe, why would he do this? If this was the original Veyers, why would Red Robe allow this? Why, for the love of all that was holy, had Veyers suddenly come here?

Based on the reactions of everyone around him, Zorian could see that no one, not even Ilsa, knew the answer to that question.

After briefly staring down everyone, Veyers picked an empty spot not far from Zorian and Briam and sat down. He ignored everyone staring at him and started to unpack his books and writing supplies out of his bag, slamming them loudly on the table in front of them in a clear attempt to provoke some kind of reaction.

"Mister Boranova, what do you think you are doing here?" Ilsa finally asked him.

"What?" he challenged. "I'm attending the class I paid for. Is there a problem?"

"You are no longer a student of this institution," Ilsa told him, taking a deep breath and clearly suppressing a sigh. Her voice was tinged with annoyance and she gripped the teaching rod in her hand a little more tightly in her grip. "You know this."

"I know no such thing," Veyers said immediately, shaking his head and making exaggerated faces at her. "My tuition has been paid in full, I passed my first circle certification with flying colors, and I received no notification about any changes in my attendance status. How can I no longer be a student?"

"You attacked people on your disciplinary hearing, mister Boranova," Ilsa told him. "As a result, you were expelled from the academy. You know this, I'm sure of this. Why are you doing this to yourself?"

"That's a lie. I didn't attack anyone," Veyers said stubbornly. "I lost control over my magic and burned down some furniture. It happens, sometimes. You know this, I'm sure of this. Your institution had no problem taking my money back in the past, even though they were warned this would be the case. I was assured that so long no one was hurt and I paid for any damages, I would be allowed to attend. You have no right to expel me over that incident!"

"It wasn't me who made the decision, so I don't understand why you're telling me this," Ilsa told him. She didn't look particularly sympathetic towards him, and probably didn't really believe him much either. "Make a complaint to the academy's legal department if you feel you were wronged."

"Well, I will!" Veyers exclaimed. "And in the meantime, I will continue to attend the classes I paid for!"

Zorian looked in disbelief as Veyers continued to argue with Ilsa over his expulsion and right to attend classes. He found the entire situation surreal. It was obvious this Veyers wasn't Red Robe. He paid no special attention to Zach and Zorian, his mind and soul were largely unprotected, and his awful, confrontational attitude was exactly as Zorian remembered it. This was the original Veyers, untouched by the time loop... for better or for worse.

Why would Red Robe allow this? He had specifically evacuated the original Veyers from his friend's house at the start of the restart. Zorian had fully expected Veyers to have been taken to some secure place, far away from danger. Why would Red Robe go through all that trouble and then just let the original Veyers come to class and make a scene. It didn't make sense!

Zorian could try to search for answers by digging around in Veyers's mind... but the boy did have some basic protection from mental tampering. He was wearing a pendant with a big green marble embedded in it – it was projecting a mental shield around Veyers's mind and would start screeching and glowing if that barrier was broken or tampered with.

Zorian had seen such pendants before. The shield they created was easy to break, but the alarm on them was sufficiently trigger-happy that he couldn't bypass it quietly. He would cause a scene almost as big as Veyers's if he mentally assaulted him in the middle of class while he was wearing that.

Not that this would stop Zorian for long, of course. He just needed to pick the right moment and everything would be over in seconds. The only thing that worried him was that he suspected Veyers to be some kind of trap by Red Robe. Did the boy have some kind of trap placed inside his mind, waiting to be triggered by a careless mind reader? Was there someone spying on Veyers, ready to report them to the authorities when they were caught attacking him?

He started covertly scouting their surroundings while watching Veyers get increasingly agitated as he argued with Ilsa. The rest of the classmates were also starting to get restless, muttering to each other in increasingly loud voices. Few of them saw Veyers's actions in positive light, which no doubt made him even angrier.

"...must give me back the money I paid for this!" Veyers shouted, banging his hand against the desk for emphasis. "It's disgusting and shameless in the extreme that you're trying to claim my tuition after expelling me! How brazen and corrupt can you be!?"

"I could say the same thing about you, mister Boranova – how shameless do you have to be to make this kind of display here and disrupt my class like this?" Ilsa said in a tone that was calmer and more dignified than Veyers's, but still noticeably heated. "If you have complaints about money, go speak to the headmaster or the accounting office. I am not in charge of handling student money and I'm not familiar with the particulars of your case. All I know is that you have been expelled and that you are wasting everyone's time here with your antics. Please leave."

"Make me," Veyers challenged. His orange eyes light up with a fiery glow and a notebook he placed on the table ignited and burst into flames.

Evidently Red Robe didn't bother to fix his botched ignition ritual.

"Make me," he repeated angrily. "I'll burn this whole place down, I swear!"

"Veyers..." Ilsa said, pushing her glasses upwards to massage her eyes in frustration. This was the first time she was calling him by his first name. "Why must you do this? Don't you realize you're just shooting yourself in the foot? If you really plan to take the academy to court over this, behaving like this will only give them more ammunition."

"Trogmar, no!" Briam suddenly yelled.

It was useless. Trogmar, his fire drake familiar, had been completely infuriated by Veyers for some time already. Now that Veyers had lost control over his powers and started burning things, the fire drake decided it was done passively waiting for this threat to come to him and his master.

With a fearsome battle screech, the fire drake ripped itself away from Briam's desperate attempts to hold him back and leapt over the tables. It crashed into Veyers's table, scattering books in all directions, and hissed menacingly at the orange-eyed boy.

Swearing loudly, Veyers hurriedly pushed himself from his desk, fell on his ass in his hurry to evade the fire drake, and then erupted into a short-ranged fireball centered on himself.

Undaunted, the fire drake took the flames head-on and added his own fire breath to the blaze.

The entire class started screaming and scrambled to get out of the classroom and away from the burning battlefield.

Well, Zach and Zorian remained calm and collected. They each picked one end of the classroom and subtly protected their classmates from harm by channeling the flames away from them through invisible force fields and chilling spells. Aside from them, only Briam and Ilsa did not try to escape the place. Briam was desperately trying to rein his familiar in and drag him off from the fight, while Ilsa did her best to keep the fire contained and tried to restrain Veyers and the fire drake in order to stop the fight.

Ilsa would have normally realized that Zach and Zorian had something to do with the surprising tendency of the flames to swerve away from the students or lose power before they reached them, but Zorian was using some light mind magic to draw her attention away from that. It wasn't particularly difficult, since there was a big, eye-catching battle in progress, and that attracted most of her attention anyway.

Of course, the fact Veyers and Briam's fire drake were throwing fire everywhere and that everyone was making a huge racket in their attempt to vacate the classroom meant this was a perfect opportunity for Zorian to covertly disable Veyers's pendant and invade his mind.

He shared a silent look with Zach, who simply nodded at him. In the next moment, they both struck. Zach wrapped the pendant in an illusion that made it appear inert no matter what was happening while Zorian pierced the mental barrier it created and started reading Veyers's mind and subverting his will.

Eventually, Ilsa managed to separate the two combatants, aided in no small part by Zorian mentally forcing them both to back down. Briam immediately dragged off his familiar away from Veyers, calming the fire drake down and inspecting him to see if he got hurt in the fight. As for Veyers, he simply collapsed unconscious all of a sudden. Zorian found it easier to memory search people when they were not mentally struggling against him all the time, and he had already gotten everything he could have out of his surface thoughts alone.

He was just about to convince Ilsa to let him and Zach carry Veyers off to a hospital or something when she suddenly spoke up.

"You two... have you been here all this time?" she asked, glancing towards Zach and Zorian.

"Yes," Zach confirmed. "We know some basic spells, so we stayed to see if we could help somehow."

"A bit reckless, but commendable," Ilsa said. "Unfortunately, no good deed goes unpunished in this world. I need some uninvolved witnesses when I speak to the headmaster about this, and since you were here from start to finish, you fit the bill perfectly. You'll be coming with me after I clean up the classroom."

Zach and Zorian shared a look before lightly shrugging at each other. This was perfect, really – they got to stay close to Veyers for quite a while, giving Zorian plenty of time to rummage through his memories, and they didn't even have to make up some contrived excuse to do so.

"Okay," Zorian agreed easily.

Ilsa nodded at them, pleased they had no intention of trying to weasel out of it. She conjured a disc of force and levitated Veyers on top of it, before turning towards Briam.

Zach took the chance when her back was turned and telekinetically crushed Veyers's mind shield pendant into scrap. It gave off one final ear-piercing screech and a flash of light, invisible and inaudible through the illusion Zach placed on it earlier, and then went completely inert.

"Briam, you and your familiar are coming along as well," she told him.

"This... Teacher, I don't know what came into him! I—" stammered Briam, clutching the fire drake in his arms tighter to his chest. Trogmar had largely calmed down at this point, increasingly aware that his master was not happy with what he had done.

"I understand," Ilsa sighed. "I don't think you will receive a serious punishment... especially since Veyers is the other involved party. You really need to keep a better grip on your fire drake, however. Veyers started things, but this isn't a good look for you, either."

"Yes," he nodded quickly.

"Let's go, then," Ilsa said, gesturing towards the door.

She strode off towards the Headmaster's office, followed by Zach and Zorian, Briam and his fire drake, and an unconscious Veyers on a floating ectoplasmic disc. She found Akoja and a number of other students waiting outside the classroom door, curious to see the resolution of the incident, and promptly recruited some of them as additional witnesses before telling the rest the class was canceled for the day and that they were free to go.

Zorian handed off his body to the mind of a distant simulacrum before focusing all of his attention on the memories locked inside Veyers's head...

- break -

"So... were you the one who pushed Briam's drake into doing that?" Zach asked him later.

"No, that was completely spontaneous," Zorian said, shaking his head. "I had nothing to do with it."

The questioning had lasted for hours, and Veyers had managed to wake up by the end of it. Without any memories of mental tampering, of course. He then yelled out all sorts of threats to everyone in the room and stormed off angrily, thus marking the end of that particular meeting.

This story is posted elsewhere by the author. Help them out by reading the authentic version.

Zach and Zorian decided to retreat to Noveda Mansion to discuss what happened.

“What did you get out of Veyers, then?” Zach asked. “You don’t look very excited, so I’m guessing very little.”

“Sort of,” Zorian admitted. “As you might expect, he doesn’t know who Red Robe is. He doesn’t even remember what happened when he and his lawyer friend were evacuated at the beginning of the restart – that part of his memories was thoroughly erased, and I can’t find out anything about it.”

“Of course,” Zach scoffed. “If he knew Red Robe’s plans or identity, no way would Red Robe send him to class like this. What was even the point of that, I wonder? This was way too petty to be a legitimate part of Red Robe’s master plan.”

“I don’t think this is something Red Robe thought up,” Zorian said. “From what I could glean in Veyers’s mind, our *former* classmate has had this on his mind for quite a while. Long before this month began.”

“Wait, so this is *his* idea?” Zach said incredulously.

“If you could remember Veyers, you’d know this is exactly the sort of thing he would do,” Zorian said. “He thought his expulsion was unfair and decided to do something about it. I doubt he saw the situation developing as it did, but he definitely came to class with the goal of making a stand against the academy and drawing attention to his case.”

“So this had nothing to do with Red Robe?” Zach asked, frowning.

“No, this was just Veyers being Veyers,” Zorian answered. “In fact, I suspect this was the reason Red Robe wiped out your memories of Veyers when he took a sledgehammer to your mind.”

“What?” asked Zach, giving him a shocked look. “What do you mean? I don’t understand.”

“Veyers probably did this in every single restart while he was still alive,” Zorian said.

“Come to our first class and start a fight with Briam’s fire drake, you mean?” Zach asked.

“Yeah,” Zorian nodded. “We always wondered why Red Robe bothered to erase your memories of Veyers, considering you wouldn’t normally even interact with him...”

“...but if he normally showed up for class to make a scene, it would be very strange for him to suddenly stop coming.” Zach said, eyes lighting up in realization. “If Red Robe is Veyers, he probably didn’t want to go through this at the beginning of every restart just to keep up a charade. It’s a waste of time, and he probably cringed inside at the thought of what an idiot he used to be. However, him being absent from class would immediately tip me off that something is wrong with him... unless I no longer remember him.”

“That still begs the question, though... why would Red Robe allow Veyers to expose himself like this after going to the trouble of saving him at the start of the month?” Zorian asked.

“We didn’t kill him,” Zach pointed out.

“Yes, but how would Red Robe know for sure what we would or would not do to Veyers?” Zorian countered. “He was playing with Veyers’s life by letting him come here. Plus, even if he scrubbed his memories clean of any sensitive information, he can’t know for sure that he didn’t leave anything of importance behind. It’s just a pointless risk. If I was in Red Robe’s place, I’d never let this happen. I’d trap Veyers in a dungeon and sedate him if I had to. Does Red Robe even care about the welfare of the original Veyers?”

“I don’t know if that logic really holds,” Zach told him dubiously. “You also brought your little sister here, even though you knew this placed her in greater danger. You cared more about fulfilling her wishes than making her perfectly safe.”

Zorian made a sour face at that. He hated when Zach was right like that...

“Anyway, even if Red Robe doesn’t know what you would do, he does know *me*... well, presumably. I would never just kill Veyers for no reason, even if he does have some tenuous connection to our opponent. None of this is his fault, really. Does he even have any connection to the Cult or the Ibasans?”

“No, that’s all Jormak,” said Zorian, shaking his head. “And Veyers doesn’t know about that, either.”

“Right. So there is no reason for us to go after original Veyers,” Zach said. “He’s just a dumb kid with no way to threaten us. Killing him would be really petty. We didn’t even kill the original Silverlake, even though she could be a real headache if time looper Silverlake manages to recruit her to her side.”

“I guess,” Zorian said, not really convinced yet. “I still think it’s very weird. I thought him showing up was maybe some kind of trap, but it doesn’t appear this is correct...”

“I put a tracker on him before he left,” Zach said. “If he goes back to Red Robe...”

“He won’t,” Zorian said, shaking his head. “This is Red Robe cutting him off and letting him sink or swim on his own. He’ll go either back to his family or maybe to his lawyer friend. Assuming Jornak goes back to his home, that is.”

They talked about the issue for some time before Zorian decided it was time to leave. Sadly, another thing cropped up before he had a chance to set off.

Placed on the doorstep of Noveda Mansion was a simple white envelope addressed to ‘Zach Noveda and Zorian Kazinski’. After thoroughly analyzing it for traps, the two of them opened it and found a letter waiting for them inside.

It was just a sheet of normal, non-magical paper with a few words scrawled on it in fancy, formal handwriting.

*Thank you for showing mercy.
Perhaps we can come to an agreement after all.
Let’s talk.
You can pick a time and place for the meeting.
You know how to contact me.*

There was no return address, signature, or name of the sender on the letter... but it was obvious who sent it.

Just as it was obvious that they couldn’t refuse the invitation.

- break -

It was already late in the evening and Zorian was slowly making his way to Imaya’s place. He wasn’t in a hurry. His thoughts were still stuck on the letter they received back at the Noveda estate. A meeting with Red Robe... what could the third time traveler want to talk to them about? As far as Zorian could see, they were completely and unavoidably opposed to each other. There was very little they could agree upon, and they couldn’t really trust each other to stick to any such agreement anyway.

Especially since Zorian strongly suspected Red Robe got into the time loop by backstabbing Zach. A person like that couldn’t be trusted at all...

As he was passing through one of the many Cyoria city parks, he suddenly stopped and turned towards the small fountain in the center. He had detected a familiar mental and soul signature in that direction.

There was a young woman sitting there, on the edge of the fountain. She was roughly 20 years of age, tall and beautiful, with long black hair and a feminine figure – the sort of beauty that made men turn around as they walked and remained stuck in their head for a while. Also, she was completely unfamiliar to Zorian. He had never seen this woman before in his entire life, he was sure. And yet...

She grinned at him cheekily, patting at the spot next to her, as if inviting him to join her. Some of the men around him cast him dark, jealous glances in response.

Zorian ignored the invitation for a second, directing his attention to the roof of a nearby building, where a large raven was inconspicuously sitting and observing the scene below.

Zorian cautiously approached the smiling woman, his expression darkening. When he was closer to her, he stopped. He could feel a ward field spring into existence around them, but he did nothing to stop it. He could immediately recognize it as a basic privacy ward, meant to stop people from listening in on them.

“Hello, Silverlake,” he said. “You look much better than you did the last time we talked.”

“Ha ha, you flatterer!” she told him. “I *feel* better! My mind is clearer, my bones do not ache, and I no longer get tired as easily. Being young again is everything I hoped for, and more!”

“Is this really what you looked like when you were younger, though?” Zorian asked her curiously.

“I have no idea,” she said with a shrug. “I don’t have any paintings of myself when I was younger, but I do remember being quite a looker in my younger days. Anyone who could legitimately call me out on this little bit of vanity is long dead, so who cares?”

“Little bit of vanity...” Zorian repeated quietly.

“Yes, just a little bit,” Silverlake said, pretending to adjust her hair while smiling at him brightly. “You know, you should try not to frown so much. It will give you wrinkles.”

“You were surprisingly quiet so far,” Zorian pointed out. “What’s up with that?”

“Ah, you know... there’s always something,” she said dismissively. “An emergency here, an emergency there, and you suddenly lost two days with nothing to show for it. It’s frustrating, but that’s life.”

“Indeed,” said Zorian, glancing to the nearby roof where the raven was intently watching them. “I see you got yourself a new familiar. What

happened to your old raven?"

Silverlake stopped smiling at him.

"I guess Panaxeth couldn't get him out of the time loop along with you," Zorian continued. "That must have hurt. I heard it's not healthy to lose a soul-bonded familiar like that. Especially for witches like yourself. Witches are known for having well-developed familiar-related magic, which probably translates into an even deeper link to their partner animals. Your soul must have suffered considerable damage when you were incarnated into that pretty new body of yours..."

"You know, you have been unusually passive yourself," Silverlake remarked. "I would have expected you to move faster and bolder than this. I'm guessing your arrival here has not been very smooth either."

"I guess you could say that," Zorian said. "I'm mostly recovered by now, though."

"What a coincidence. So am I," said Silverlake with a happy laugh. She suddenly gave him a serious look. "Besides, we both know it isn't my spellwork that really worries you and your 'friend'. It's the knowledge I possess about your skills, resources, contacts, and tactics."

Zorian frowned at her weird emphasis on the word 'friend', but in the end decided not to pursue that for the moment.

"Why are you here, Silverlake?" Zorian asked her seriously. "Aren't you afraid I'll kill you on the spot?"

"Ha ha! What, you'll attack me in the middle of a crowded park?" she said, sweeping her hand to point at the various people milling around them. Some of them were even curiously observing them, unable to hear what they're saying but clearly speculating what two mages like them could be discussing like this.

"It might be worth it to take down a traitor like you," Zorian told her.

"Ha. You know, I never told Red Robe most of the information about you that I possess," she said.

Zorian frowned at the statement.

"If I die here, however, the dead man's switch I made will activate and everything I know will fall into his lap," she said with a triumphant grin. She crossed her legs one over another and threw her head back in a self-satisfied pose. "Killing me here would be a very serious mistake. You're a smart, sensible kid, so I know you'll make the right choice."

After a few seconds, Zorian decided she was probably telling the truth. The way Red Robe had been behaving these past few days, it was obvious he lacked the sort of deep knowledge about Zach and Zorian that he should have had if Silverlake had simply spilled everything immediately.

"Alright. I guess you have a point there," Zorian admitted. "That still leaves the question of why you came here. You were clearly waiting for me. What do you want?"

"What? Not going to thank me for keeping your secrets?" Silverlake complained.

"Whatever your reason for doing that, I'm sure it's purely selfish and aimed squarely on maximizing your gains in this. I'm guessing you were trying to pressure Red Robe into making some sort of concession by not handing all the information over to him immediately, but it ultimately doesn't matter. All that matters is that any benefit we get out of this is purely incidental. What is there to thank you for?" Zorian challenged.

"So judgmental," Silverlake sighed dramatically. "It's because I'm a witch, isn't it? It's always like this... we're only good for making potions and doing people's dirty work, and then it's back to the woods with you..."

"I don't have time for this," Zorian told her, turning to leave. "I think I'm going to practice my aim on that raven over there and then go home."

"There's still time for you to join me, you know?" Silverlake called out, not a trace of panic or annoyance in her voice.

Zorian's back remained turned away from her, but he did turn his head towards her to give her an incredulous look.

"I know I sound stupid to say that..." she began.

"Yeah, you do," Zorian confirmed.

"...but I really think you should hear me out," she continued. "Remember when we were talking about your 'friend' and how weird I made the word sound?"

"Yes?" Zorian confirmed, finally turning around to properly face her.

"That was your cue to ask me what I mean by that, silly boy. Must I draw a picture for you or something? Zach is no friend of people like us."

"People like us?" Zorian asked. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, I'm sure you know by now that I have entered into a bit of a contract with the primordial trapped in Cyoria," Silverlake said.

“A death pact to release it by the end of the month or die trying,” Zorian said.

“Yes, more or less,” Silverlake agreed. “But I’m not the only one who made a death pact. Your ‘friend’ has also made a death pact.”

What?

“That’s bullshit,” Zorian said. “Zach could leave the time loop at any time. Why would he need to make a deal with Panaxeth?”

“Not with the primordial, you numbskull,” Silverlake rolled her eyes at him. “With the angels! He made a death pact with the angels to stop the release of the primordial... while making sure no one could find out about the existence of the time loop. Even if he prevents Panaxeth’s release, so long as there is even a single person who knows about the time loop by the end of the month, he is going to die. Never mind people who literally originate from the time loop like me and you... even people you tell about the time loop must either die or have their memory erased, or he will not survive this month.”

Zorian froze momentarily, his brain stuttering for a second. He fully expected Zach to have some sort of compulsion embedded inside his mind, but this...

“How do you know this?” Zorian asked her quietly. “Did Panaxeth tell you this?”

“The primordial cannot directly discuss this,” Silverlake said. “He hinted at it, and Red Robe explained the details of it to me later. I don’t know how he knows so much about it, but presumably Zach told him that personally while he still remembered.”

“He could be lying,” Zorian pointed out.

“Yes, but I don’t think he is,” Silverlake said. She gave him a knowing look. “And you probably don’t think so either.”

Zorian said nothing.

“Don’t think for a second that Zach doesn’t know about this, either,” Silverlake said. “As someone who is laboring under this sort of contract, I can tell you right now that deals with primordials are not that easy to get out of. I already tried to erase my memories to void the contract, and it didn’t work. The pact is branded directly into my soul, and I am constantly aware of its terms. I can forget the details of how I got it, but not the core contents of it. Zach is the same. Remember how he ‘mysteriously’ knew he had to find a way to beat the invasion? And how he – seemingly foolishly – insisted on trying to take it on all on his lonesome?”

Zorian still said nothing, though his posture slumped a little in response.

In retrospect, there were a number of things about Zach that fit this idea. His strong insistence that he would never use the temporary looper markers, for instance, which always seemed a little strange to his eyes... until he suddenly changed his mind about that.

Or the fact that Zach was clearly a very proactive and social person before he started working with Zorian, but became increasingly passive and even slightly fatalistic once they started working together.

“I understand what you’re getting at, but I think you’ve badly misjudged the situation,” Zorian told Silverlake. “I don’t think Zach is out to kill me. And I don’t think he would have been out to kill you if you had kept your trust in us and helped us make an exit for ourselves. With your help, we could have physically left the loop, laden with knowledge and resources of the time loop. Was it really worth it to give that up just for a chance of a younger body that you would have gotten eventually, anyway?”

“In the end, aren’t you and Zach the only ones who successfully left that place?” Silverlake challenged, a defiant look on her face. “How do you know my presence would have made a difference? You don’t. If I stayed, I would have faced extremely low chances of success while working for a person that needs to kill me once we got outside. You can hate me all you want, but I think I made the right choice.”

“Hmph,” Zorian scoffed, turning back to leave again.

“Do you seriously think you can trust Zach, knowing all you do now?” Silverlake called out.

“More than I can trust you,” Zorian responded without turning back.

The raven on the nearby roof suddenly took flight and disappeared into the horizon.

Behind him, Silverlake shapeshifted into a raven before flying off herself, this time in the opposite direction her familiar went.

Well, Zorian actually strongly suspected that the Silverlake he spoke to was her raven familiar, whereas the raven on the roof had been the real Silverlake. As much as she tried to pretend she didn’t fear him attacking her, he felt she wouldn’t risk herself so easily.

He sped up his pace, putting some distance between himself and the people that were commenting on the spectacle of an attractive woman suddenly shapeshifting into a bird and flying off, before deliberately entering a dark, isolated alley devoid of people.

He kept walking for a while before suddenly stopping and turning around.

“Are you really going to keep following me all the way to Imaya’s place like this?” he asked.

Only silence greeted him. The alley was dark and still, and there was no trace of anyone here beside him. He was stubborn, however, and kept staring at one particular patch of darkness without making any moves.

After a full minute of this, he was just about to start throwing magic missiles at the spot when the familiar figure of Zach stepped out of the shadows.

"Took you long enough," Zorian said, relaxing a little. But only a little. "You've been following me ever since I left the Noveda estate, didn't you?"

"Err, yes," Zach admitted. "Sorry. I just... I don't know. I had a bad feeling and decided to shadow you in secret. I figured that if I was right, I get to save the day, and if I was just being paranoid, you'd never even know. I guess I overestimated my stealth skills a little."

"Honestly, if Silverlake didn't put me on guard, it's entirely possible I could have missed you," Zorian admitted. He paused for a second. "You heard my conversation with her, didn't you?"

Zach's shoulders slumped a little.

"So it's true," Zorian said, getting a little angry. "Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't know the details," Zach said defensively. "I didn't know I'd made a deal with angels, or even that it *was* a deal. All I knew was that I have these... instincts... that tell me things. I can't really talk about them..."

"Can't or won't?" Zorian asked.

"Can't," Zach said. "I get tongue-tied whenever I try."

"And if I read your mind to find out?" Zorian asked.

"I will have to kill you," Zach told him seriously.

"Oh," Zorian said, swallowing heavily. He didn't think he had any chance against Zach, even now. He did have that one trump card that nobody except him knew about, but he needed proper timing to use that, and Zach would probably kill him before he could set it up... "Err, good thing I never tried to forcibly read your mind while you were sleeping or something..."

"Yes, very good thing," Zach agreed.

A short, uncomfortable silence descended on the scene.

"You already decided to die at the end of the month, didn't you?" Zorian asked him. "That's why you had gotten so weird and philosophical lately..."

"I don't intend to murder you once this is all done, if that's what you're asking," Zach told him. "Silverlake is just a black-hearted witch with no understanding of things like basic human decency and personal integrity. If I wanted to survive at all costs, I would have gotten rid of you while we were still in the time loop."

"I can't believe this..." Zorian muttered. "If I had known about this earlier, maybe we could have..."

"It's divine magic," Zach said. "We wouldn't have been able to do shit. Just like Silverlake can't get rid of her death pact no matter how hard she tries. She's a witch. They're known for being skilled with geas. You just know she used every trick in the book to try and get out of the contract, but she still failed."

"So you're okay with just dying at the end of the month?" Zorian asked.

"Of course I'm not fine with it!" Zach said. "It's just... if I have to murder my friends to survive, then what's the point of all this power and knowledge? It's not... it's not how I want to live my life, okay? Damn it... what the hell was my old self thinking to agree to this?"

Zach slumped against the nearby alley and lightly thumped his head against the wall.

What a horrible, convoluted mess, Zorian thought.

As if outmaneuvering Red Robe and Silverlake was not enough, he now had to figure out how to keep Zach alive when the end of the month came calling.

Sometimes, he thought the gods were still out there, watching him and laughing at his misfortune.

96. Contract

Chapter 096 Contract

Before the time loop, Zorian had never frequented the taverns, restaurants and other establishments that were so common in Cyoria. They were a waste of time and money in his opinion, and it wasn't like he had any real friends to go drinking with. It didn't help that he had seen more than one of his classmates succumb to the lure of big city life in his two years of education. Rural teenagers like him were especially vulnerable, since they had little to no parental supervision and were unaccustomed to the luxuries and opportunities that existed in Cyoria. Zorian did not want to follow their example, especially after it became obvious that his brother Fortov had fallen into the exact same trap as they had.

Amusingly, the time loop had pretty much made him worse in this regard, and he was now familiar with virtually every alcohol-serving establishment in Cyoria. This was mostly Zach's fault – his fellow time traveler loved drinking and despised the static nature of the time loop, which meant he dragged Zorian off to a different place every time they had to meet or talk.

The situation was similar at the moment. Once they'd both had a chance to gather their thoughts, Zorian tried to pursue the topic of Zach's angelic contract and the restrictions he was laboring under, only for his fellow time traveler to insist he needed a drink. Zorian himself had never understood the appeal of alcohol, but he also knew it was pointless to argue about things like that with Zach. He just let his friend lead him to a small but lively tavern, where they claimed a table and erected simple privacy wards to ensure some privacy. Still not the safest location for this kind of thing, but it would do.

"Ahh..." said Zach in satisfaction, slamming a beer glass on the table before wiping his mouth on his sleeve. Zorian's mouth twitched at the sight, but he said nothing. He was already used to that kind of behavior from Zach, really. "I really needed that."

"So. Can I spoil the mood now and dig a little more into this whole angelic contract thing?" Zorian asked him, folding his fingers together in a thoughtful gesture.

"I guess," Zach shrugged. "Though I really don't think I'll be able to tell you much."

"I just need some things confirmed," Zorian said. "You said you can't talk about the contract thing... that it physically stops you from saying the words... but would it stop me from picking it up from your thoughts through telepathy?"

Zach looked uncomfortable for a moment, his eyebrows twisted into a thoughtful frown.

"It shouldn't," he eventually decided. "I mean, we communicated through telepathy quite a few times in the past. You read my surface thoughts more than once, and I never felt any urge to attack you. Let's try it."

Zorian felt Zach lowering his mental barriers and immediately started looking through his surface thoughts. Which... appeared to be completely empty.

Blank, even.

"Are you thinking about the angel contract at the moment?" Zorian asked, frowning.

"I'm thinking of the 'mysterious rules' that I'm laboring under," Zach told him. "If that's really a death pact with the angels like Silverlake was saying, then yes, I'm thinking about it. Why?"

"I can't read anything from you," Zorian admitted. "It's like you have no thoughts at all."

It didn't work. No matter what trick or method they used, Zorian could not get anything about a contract from Zach's surface thoughts. It wasn't that he could not read the boy at all – he could interpret Zach's thoughts just fine when he was thinking about mundane things, like how his hand itched or how cute the passing waitress was, but every thought that involved the 'mysterious rules', as Zach called them, was invisible to Zorian.

The effect was both subtle and sophisticated. There was no indication that Zach's thoughts were being magically blanked out, and it looked mostly like Zach was deliberately blanking his thoughts or just plain not thinking of anything. If Zach tried to embed a few relevant thoughts in a larger stream of consciousness, the restriction would not only unerringly pick out the offending parts, it would do its best to quietly erase them without leaving any suspicious pauses or other evidence of tampering. Unless someone spent a lot of time scrutinizing Zach's thoughts or already knew what to look for, it would be very easy to overlook the fact that some of the thoughts had been tampered with.

How was the contract even doing that? Zorian had no idea how something like that could get accomplished without the contract itself being sapient in some fashion. But that couldn't really be true, right?

"What if I tried to read your memories?" Zorian asked.

"No!" Zach immediately and reflexively protested. He stared at him for a second before shaking his head, seemingly reasserting control over himself in that one moment. "No. Bad idea."

Zorian nodded slowly, making a placating gesture.

“Alright,” he said carefully. “But you know, someone has already read your mind once. As well as erased a bunch of things in it...”

“Red Robe,” Zach nodded.

“Yes,” Zorian confirmed. “Doesn’t that... make you murderous, I guess?”

“Well, it kind of did,” Zach said, scratching his hand. “Remember when we first met and I told you I had a confrontation with Red Robe for the first couple of restarts after he disabled me and read my mind? I made it seem like he was the aggressor all the time and I was just an innocent victim, but... I may have been simplifying things just a *little* bit. I basically made it my life’s goal to destroy him for a while there. I hounded him relentlessly for at least two restarts. It may have been one of the reasons why he decided to leave the time loop entirely after a while.”

“Oh,” said Zorian. That... made a lot of sense, actually. “But you were both time travelers. What would you even do to him if you managed to catch him?”

“You don’t need to be a master mind mage to erase the victim’s entire mind,” Zach told him. “Or scramble it beyond all repair. There are spells for that, and I got ahold of all kinds of illegal spells while looping.”

“You got me there,” Zorian admitted. The sort of effect Zach was describing did not take much skill and sophistication; just power. “I notice you aren’t frothing at the mouth right now at the thought of Red Robe being present again, though. Does the effect run out or something?”

“Yeah, I calmed down after a while, since I could no longer find him,” Zach said with a shrug. “Even after I left the time loop and saw Red Robe again, it didn’t start up again. I guess the angels didn’t want me to become useless if someone read my mind and then fled beyond my reach.”

“So I should have just forcibly read your mind and then spent a few restarts running away from you?” Zorian mused.

Zach scowled at him.

“What? You have to admit that’s a reasonable interpretation of what is happening,” Zorian said.

Except that he was not at all sure he could have successfully evaded Zach for several restarts. His fellow time traveler had vastly more endurance than Zorian did, and knew most of the places and escape routes Zorian could come up with. Zorian might have still been able to avoid any permanent consequences of being caught if he forced a restart every time he was forced into a corner, but doing so would rapidly burn through their remaining restarts.

“Anyway, what about the *first* time Red Robe messed with your mind?” Zorian asked. “You know, the one where he erased Veyers out of your mind and gods know what else?”

“I don’t know,” Zach said, frowning. “I don’t recall going on that kind of hunt for someone before we met. I guess since I had no idea who mind raped me, and perhaps didn’t even know there was a specific person behind my amnesia, the effect never kicked in.”

“Hmm,” Zorian mused. “So if you never find out that you had your memory read or never see your attacker—”

“It won’t work. I’m no longer the same person I was back then. I *will* know I had my mind tampered with, and I’ll know it was you,” Zach warned him. “And not just because you just stupidly clued me in that you’re considering it, either. I mean, who else but you could pull it off? Even if I had absolutely no proof, my first instinct would be to blame you.”

“And then you’d try to kill me,” Zorian guessed.

“That, or erase your relevant memories,” Zach said. “But we both know how impractical that option is on a mind mage like yourself. In practice... yes, I’d have to kill you.”

So. The contract could mask Zach’s surface thoughts to eliminate any mention of itself, but it couldn’t do the same for his long-term memories for some reason. Thus, anyone who looked deep into Zach’s memories had to be... silenced.

In whatever manner was practical.

“Who determines who has to be memory wiped and who has to die?” Zorian asked.

“What do you mean?” Zach asked.

“What if Ilsa read your memories?” Zorian clarified with an example. “Would you memory wipe her or kill her?”

“Memory wipe her,” Zach said immediately.

“Really? But she has some pretty advanced knowledge of mind magic under her belt,” Zorian pointed out. “She’s possibly even better than Xvim in that regard.”

“Really?” Zach said, surprised. “Huh. I would have never guessed. Damn... I guess I would have to kill her in that case.”

Zorian stared at Zach for a second.

He lied. Ilsa had no advanced knowledge of mind magic. She knew how to cast telepathy spells, and that was it.

Guess that answered his question – Zach was the one that made the decision. The contract may force him to act in certain ways, but it was Zach's *perception* that determined things...

"What?" Zach asked.

"Nothing," Zorian said, shaking his head. "Let's forget that, then. There is something else I've been wondering. Silverlake said you have to make sure the time loop stays a secret or you die, right?"

"Right," Zach sighed. "She did say that, didn't she? Of course, I can't really confirm or deny anything..."

"But it's pretty much true," Zorian surmised. "However, back in the time loop, I recall that you tried to convince pretty much everyone who would listen that the time loop was real. Or at least you told me you did so. Plus, you never had any issue with helping me convince people that the time loop was real."

"Well yeah, I'm not *compelled* to keep it a secret," Zach shrugged. "I can't talk to people about the 'mysterious rules' that bind me, but everything else is fair game. I can tell people about the time loop just fine, I just have to keep in mind the potential consequences. And... while the time loop was still going on, those consequences were a non-issue, you know?"

"Right. You only die if the knowledge of the time loop isn't contained in the real world, when it actually matters. It doesn't matter how many people you tell inside the time loop, because they'll never get out of there anyway," Zorian guessed. "Or at least that was the idea, probably."

"Keep in mind, I had no idea how the time loop worked back then," Zach said. "I didn't know there was a real world and the time loop world, or any other details that we figured out later. I wasn't lying to you when I said I don't remember how I got in the time loop and how it functions."

Right. That was pretty terrible design by the angels. If they could make sure that the contract they made with Zach was impossible to forget by any means, why didn't they include some basic information there as well?

Alanic apparently wasn't kidding when he said angels worked in mysterious ways.

"If you didn't know how the time loop works, how did you know when telling people about the time loop matters and when it doesn't?" Zorian asked.

Zach couldn't answer him, of course. That would mean he would reveal some of the information about his contract thing, and that was forbidden.

"Well, we have no real choice here," Zorian said. "If you can't discuss these mysterious rules you are laboring under, and you don't even have a solid idea what they mean, we'll have to summon the angels for a talk."

Zach gave him a surprised look.

"But you..." he began.

"I'm not supposed to be here, outside the time loop, yes," Zorian said, nodding.

This was the primary reason they had been hesitating about contacting the angelic hierarchy, even though they had already suspected the angels were involved in the time loop. It was entirely possible that summoning an angel would just draw their attention to Zorian's existence and give them a chance to finish what the Guardian of the Threshold had already tried and failed to do.

"We'd be risking a lot," Zach said, frowning.

"No, *I'm* risking a lot," countered Zorian. "And I'm willing to take the risk. We need to see if this contract of yours can be re-negotiated, or at least find out what it actually entails."

Zach gave it a brief thought, tapping his fingers against the beer glass in his hand.

"Well... it's not like I was looking forward to dying," Zach finally said. "Though if the angels immediately smite you dead upon sight, don't come crying to me that I didn't warn you."

"I won't be doing anything at that point, being dead and all," Zorian blandly pointed out. "Anyway, Silverlake said you made a contract to stop Panaxeth from being released at the end of the month. If true, that suggests the angels care a lot about keeping Panaxeth in his prison. Killing me would interfere with that. Plus, silencing all the extra witnesses is impossible so long as Red Robe lives. Hopefully that will give them pause."

Well, that all made perfect sense to Zorian, but it was obvious that the logic of angels was not the same as the logic of men. It wouldn't be too surprising if the summoned angel just ignored everything Zorian said and tried to kill him anyway.

Would it be considered disrespectful if he sent a simulacrum instead of participating in the summoning personally?

"You really think there is a chance to renegotiate... this?" Zach asked, waving vaguely over his chest.

It was unlikely. But hey, it was worth a try, right?

“The contract is probably divine magic, right?” Zorian asked, ignoring the question for now.

“I... don’t actually know,” Zach said uncertainly. “It has to be. I mean, otherwise I would have managed to find it by now, right? The only piece of mortal magic I ever found embedded in my soul is the marker...”

Zorian shook his head. He was pretty sure the marker did not include any divine energies or ‘mysterious rules’ in it... because if it did, Zorian himself would have probably inherited them from Zach when he acquired his marker.

“It’s probably a part of the soul stabilization frame that boosts your mana reserves,” Zorian pointed out. “The divine blessing and divine contract probably came together as a package deal.”

Zach winced slightly.

“Yes, I kind of guessed that too,” he admitted. “But that whole frame is incredibly complicated... it’s hard to figure out where the blessing ends and the contract starts.”

Yes, that was pretty much how Zorian expected it to be. The blessing and contract were probably intertwined in a way that made it impossible to remove one and not the other. That way, even if Zach found a way to remove the contract, he would have to give up the mana boost that came along with it.

An extra layer of security that would make just about anyone hesitate to tamper with the whole thing. After all, who would be willing to lose something as amazing as a divine blessing that doubles your mana reserves?

“Even if the angels agree to renegotiate, you’d probably have to give up your divine blessing.” Zorian eventually said.

Zach looked horrified at the thought, but also a little bit resigned. He seemed to have expected something like that to be true.

“Aw, man...” he whined, finishing his entire beer glass in one desperate gulp before ordering another from a nearby waitress.

“It’s better than being dead,” Zorian consoled him.

“I don’t know, man... how would you react if you had to give up half of your mana reserves tomorrow?” Zach asked him sullenly.

Zorian blinked rapidly in surprise. That’s right... Zach didn’t even know his mana reserves were a result of a divine blessing until relatively recently. The current situation had persisted as far as he could remember. His mana reserves felt *normal* as they were right now, and reducing them probably felt no different than a crippling injury...

“I’d be absolutely devastated, but it’s still better than dying,” he finally said, a little quieter this time.

Zach gave him a cranky grunt and said nothing else in response.

“How are we going to summon an angel, anyway?” Zach eventually asked, calming down a little when he got his second glass of beer delivered to their table. “Alanic?”

“Alanic can’t summon an angel,” Zorian said, shaking his head. “Only a few priests are capable of that, and he is not one of them. However, I happen to know someone in this very city who *is* capable of summoning angels, so it shouldn’t be a problem. Though we might want to invite Alanic with us, anyway.”

“Oh? Who is it?” Zach asked curiously. “I don’t remember anyone like that.”

“You wouldn’t know her. I haven’t really interacted with her ever since we teamed up,” Zorian noted. “It’s Kylae Kuosi, a priestess in one of the semi-abandoned temples here in Cyoria. She is a bit of an obscure figure, but she’s a capable mage and she knows quite a bit of interesting magic. For instance, she is one of the ‘experts’ when it comes to forecasting the future through divinations... and she also knows how to establish contact with the angels. It didn’t matter much in the time loop, since contact with the spiritual planes had been blocked there, but now...”

“Alright,” Zach said after a second of thought. “Let’s see what the heavenly bastards have to say.”

- break -

It took them three days to arrange for the summoning to occur. It wasn’t particularly difficult, but Kylae was understandably very suspicious about a couple of teenagers showing up on her doorstep and asking for her to summon an angel so they could talk to it. The fact that Zach and Zorian were in a hurry and were pushing for her to set up the ritual quickly did not help matters. Thankfully, after bringing in Alanic to vouch for them and explaining several times that Zach had been given some kind of mission by the angels that he had forgotten, made her reluctantly agree to their request.

While this was going on, their other preparations continued. The Silent Doorway Adepts had finally agreed to open a passage to Koth, and Zach and Zorian used it to quickly claim the imperial orb. They did not establish contact with Daimen for the moment. The original plan was to evacuate everyone to Koth the moment a gate there was established, but that plan was now looking a lot less practical than it used to be. Talking everyone

into cooperating with their plan while keeping them ignorant about the time loop was... impractical, to say the least.

Zorian was still a little pissed off that Zach had never tried to stop him when they had been discussing doing that, even though he *knew* this was practically suicide on his part. But then again... the situation *was* kind of hopeless. How would they ever be able to contain the knowledge of the time loop when they had no control over Red Robe and he had very little reason to keep things a total secret? Not to mention the problem of Zorian himself...

Princess was claimed as normal and bound to Zorian. Zach's situation was deemed too unstable to have Princess depend on him. They had no idea how the bond with Princess would interact with his 'mysterious rules', and whether its presence would make it more complicated to adjust the contract he had with the angels. Plus, if Zach was compelled to go on a rampage or something, it was best he didn't also have a loyal hydra at his disposal as well. His current skills were a headache enough.

Xvim also joined their little group of time loop aware individuals. They had already started talking to him before Zorian found out about the contract, so it was pointless to back off from him *now*... plus, they could really use his help.

Finally, the scheduled day of the summoning had arrived. Zach, Zorian, Alanic, and Xvim came together to Kylae's temple, where they were greeted by Batak, the friendly green-haired priest that Zorian had met so long ago. Even though Zach and Zorian had been kind of rude and impatient these last few days, the young priest had never lost his temper around them and remained polite and helpful to the very end. He led them to the interior of the temple, which had been dramatically rearranged in the preparation for the summoning ritual.

The chairs and furniture had all been shoved to the walls to make space in the center, and a complicated circular spell formula had been inscribed on the floor in blue paint. Kylae was not the only priest present inside – eight more lower-ranking attendant priests had been brought in from elsewhere, and were currently scurrying around the modified main hall, double-checking the spell formula circle and making last-minute corrections. Additionally, there was a tall, male priest observing the proceedings with a cool, detached look on his face. His fancy blue robes, decorated in gold and silver, meant that he was someone pretty high in the Triumvirate Church hierarchy. He gave them a chilly, unfriendly look when they entered the hall, and then purposely ignored them.

"This is more involved than I thought it would be," Zorian whispered to Batak.

"Ah-ha... I don't think you really realize the sort of thing you started," Batak told him with a quiet, nervous chuckle. "Even in the Triumvirate Church, it is not every day you get to summon an angel for a talk. This is a big deal. It's especially a big deal when someone pulls as many strings as you did and does it all on such short notice. This has lot of people sitting up and taking notice, I hear."

Pulling strings? Zorian didn't remember doing that...

He looked at Alanic, who noticed his look and gave him a small shrug.

"You said it was important," Alanic said unrepentantly. "I agreed with you."

They eventually retreated to the side and let Kylae and her fellow priests finish things. The preparations were lengthy, however, and Zorian couldn't help but wonder if all of this was really necessary. There were lots of chanting and arcane rituals being performed, such as burning of incense and ritualistic bell ringing. Very little of it resembled structured magic as Zorian understood it. That was interesting because as far as he knew, angels could be summoned through any old summoning spell; it was just a matter of knowing how to contact them properly and them actually deigning to answer the summons.

Did all these little rituals count as proper contact procedure or was this just empty tradition that the Triumvirate Church insisted on following?

He didn't actually ask that question, though. He had antagonized them enough recently with his request, and he knew from Alanic that the Triumvirate Church had some very scary resources to call upon when someone angered them enough. He wasn't in the time loop anymore.

After what felt like an hour, the actual spellcasting began. Neither Zach nor Zorian had much experience with summoning spells, as they were useless and impossible to train inside the time loop, so the whole process was largely a mystery to them. All they saw was the circular spell formula on the floor lighting up with a soft glow and the air above it rippling like hot summer air.

"We've decided to summon a low-ranking angel to start with," Batak explained to them in a low voice. He wasn't involved in the summoning and seemed to have been assigned as their guide and minder instead. "Even if it cannot help you, it will inform its superiors about the issue and they'll decide what to do about it from there."

"That's fine," Zorian said. Low-ranking was fine. Less chance of it completely overpowering them that way.

"...servant of the Highest Ones, I implore you to grace us with your presence," Kylae intoned solemnly. "We, the lowly children of the dust, have a need for your infinite wisdom and guid- urk!"

Uh oh. This doesn't sound too good...

"What's happening?" Zach and Batak asked out-loud at the same time.

"The summoning is getting hijacked!" the blue robed priest said in a panicky voice. "I don't understand! We performed all the rites correctly! The demons shouldn't be able to—"

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“It’s not the demons,” Kylae said firmly. She was calmer than the blue robed priest, but her voice still trembled a little. “It’s being hijacked by another angel. Someone high up in the angelic hierarchy has used their rights of seniority to substitute themselves with the angel we were trying to summon.”

She then winced and stumbled in place. The other priests followed her action soon after, some of them falling on their knees.

“It’s... it’s too much,” one of the attendant priests gasped. “We can’t supply enough mana for this...”

In the center of the summoning circle, a vague fuzzy outline flickered in and out of existence. Every summoning spell had to incarnate the spirit being summoned into something. A shell, a vessel that would allow them exist in and interact with the material world. The more powerful the spirit, the fancier the vessel had to be to contain them and let them manifest their power... and thus, the more mana one had to pay to create an ectoplasmic shell suitable for them.

The angel that had substituted itself into their summoning ritual was apparently *very* mana hungry to summon.

Before anyone could say anything, Zach pushed Batak aside and stepped up to the summoning circle. He observed the whole thing for a few seconds and then started pouring his vast mana reserves into the ritual. He may not have been familiar with summoning magic, but simply supplying power to the whole thing was not too difficult to figure out.

Zorian, Alanic and Xvim followed his example immediately afterwards. A few seconds later, Batak woke up from his initial daze and hurriedly joined them in trying to power the summoning.

Zorian’s mana reserves dipped dangerously low almost as soon as he started pouring mana into the summoning ritual. It wasn’t by choice – the angel on the other side of the ritual was aggressively pulling on every available mana source to fuel its descent to the material plane. No wonder the priests had reacted like they did. Having one’s mana reserves forcibly drained in such fashion wasn’t lethal, but it wasn’t a pleasant experience either.

Finally, after everyone in the room had run dry of mana, the fuzzy ectoplasmic form in the center of the summoning circle condensed itself into a glowing white ball and then erupted into an explosion of fire.

A brief moment of panic surged in Zorian’s heart when he realized there was a wall of flames coming at them and that he was entirely out of mana and practically defenseless. Thankfully, the explosion of flames suddenly reversed itself before it reached them and collapsed into a writhing ball of fiery ectoplasm before suddenly sprouting black branches and metallic surfaces.

Eventually the angel’s form stabilized and Zorian finally got his first look at an angel.

It wasn’t human-looking in the slightest. Most old, powerful spirits weren’t, but somehow Zorian didn’t expect an angel to look so... strange.

The angel was shaped like a black, floating, cross-shaped tree with four sets of branches and no roots. Or maybe it would be more accurate to imagine four trees that had their lower half cut off and were then glued together through their trunk into a cross-shaped pattern. The branches were leafless, and burning orange eyes grew on them instead. The eyes were animated, constantly moving and taking in everything around the angel. Translucent orange flames enveloped the branches, coiling around them like a multitude of snakes and releasing crackling sounds reminiscent of real branches burning in flames.

Floating behind the tree of eyes was a gently spinning ring of silvery metal. The ring was densely covered in tiny golden characters that Zorian didn’t recognize, and which seemed entirely alien to his eyes, unlike anything he had ever seen. Behind it, several ghostly ribbons of multicolored light extended in all directions from the angel, straining Zorian’s eyes and blurring the angel’s form. If one squinted and tilted their head the right way, they kind of looked like six pairs of wings.

Zorian felt some of the eyes swivel in his direction, and he suddenly felt naked and exposed. It was as if the angel’s eyes had seen right through him and peered straight into the depths of his soul, observing, analyzing, judging...

Zorian instinctively took a step back from the angel, and then suddenly realized the entire hall was unnaturally quiet and still.

Only he, Zach and the angel remained in the hall. Everyone else was just... gone.

Zorian was getting uncomfortable flashbacks to his first meeting with Panaxeth.

“Do not be afraid,” the angel said. Its voice was booming, and resonated painfully in Zorian’s ears and chest. **“I have come to help.”**

“What... where is everyone?” Zach asked in confusion.

“They should not hear this,” the angel responded.

“So you just... shunted us off to some private space?” Zach frowned. “Also, can’t you talk a little more quietly?”

“My time here is limited,” the angel cautioned. It made no attempt to lower its voice for them. It was still uncomfortably loud and resonant, and

Zorian thought he could faintly hear additional voices repeating its words whenever it spoke. **“You must not waste time.”**

Zorian supposed the angel had a point there. Even though it had taken all their mana, a spirit of this level probably couldn’t stay manifested on the material plane for very long. They had to make the most of it.

“Did Zach enter into a contract with you?” Zorian asked.

“**Yes,**” the angel immediately confirmed.

Zorian waited for a second, but the angel seemed disinclined to clarify more than that.

Ugh.

“My enemies made me completely forget about that,” Zach said with a frown.

“**They did not,**” the angel countered.

Zach made a strange face.

“Yes they did,” he said, laughing in a frustrated manner. “Why would I lie about it to you of all people?”

“**They did not make you forget because you never even knew you had made a contract with us,**” the angel said. “**If they do know that you have made a contract with us, it is because they have guessed correctly.**”

“Zach... never knew he’d made a contract with you?” Zorian asked incredulously. “How would that work?”

“**We went through a great deal of effort to mask our involvement,**” the angel said. “**Our current interference... is already overstepping certain boundaries that we would rather not cross. It would have been best for everyone if nobody had realized we had a hand in this.**”

“But how would I make a contract with you without realizing it?” Zach insisted. “That doesn’t make any sense!”

“**We contacted you through a dream,**” the angel told him. “**You had no idea who was making the offer when you accepted the contract.**”

Zach’s face went through several different expressions as he processed that.

Zorian just buried his face into his palms and took a deep breath.

Zach...

“That’s... that’s slander!” Zach protested. “I’d never do something stupid like that! Even I know it’s dumb as hell to accept spiritual contracts from mysterious people that contact you in your dreams!”

“**You being foolish enough to take the offer was one of the reasons we chose you as our champion,**” the angel told him bluntly.

“Well, uh...” Zach fumbled. “You know what? Forget it. Even if what you say is true, I still ended up mind wiped of critical information inside the time loop. I didn’t even know how to return to the real world! You included so many things in this... contract I made with you, so why didn’t you include some basic information like that in there as well?”

“**We did,**” the angel responded. “**You simply never satisfied the conditions necessary to access the information.**”

What?

“What?” demanded Zach. “What do you mean by that?”

“**You had a goal, did you not?**” the angel challenged. “**You had to stop the invasion without informing anyone about the time loop. Had you ever succeeded at that, the contract would have given you information about the time loop and how to leave it.**”

“You never explained to him how the time loop worked to begin with,” Zorian realized. “Giving him the exit method right from the start would mean he could leave at any point he wished, even before he was capable of stopping Panaxeth’s release the way you wanted him to.”

“**The hearts of men are weak and fall easily to temptation,**” the angel confirmed. “**If he could not handle the relentless weathering of time and become the savior we need, it would have been better for him to never emerge from the Sovereign Gate at all.**”

“You...” Zach began.

“**You chose this,**” the angel reminded him, completely unrepentant. “**And with that in mind, I would like an explanation. What happened in there?**”

“You don’t know?” Zorian asked curiously.

“Would I be asking if I did?” the angel asked rhetorically. **“The inner workings of the Sovereign Gate are opaque to us. Much like the Black Rooms you are familiar with, the Sovereign Gate is completely isolated from the rest of the world once activated. We have inferred some things, but we would like an unambiguous answer.”**

Zach and Zorian gave the angel a quick summary of what had occurred inside the time loop, taking pains to emphasize Panaxeth's interference with the normal operation of the time loop and how Red Robe's and Silverlake's presence in the real world made the entire task of stopping the invasion very difficult. Finally, they explained Zorian's situation and how his presence made the idea of eliminating all knowledge of the time loop outside of Zach basically impossible.

“A disappointing result,” the angel concluded. **“The task we gave you was not that difficult. Why did you allow things to get so complicated?”**

“Not that difficult!?” Zach repeated incredulously. “Do you know how difficult it is to stop an army on your lonesome, without being able to explain to people where your skills come from or how you know things?”

“Even though we initiated the Sovereign Gate prematurely, you still had hundreds of chances to get things right,” the angel said. **“I suspect you have a skewed perspective on the difficulty of the problem. In the original scenario, you would have been tackling an unaware force oblivious to your shifting schemes. Even with our restrictions, it should not have been difficult to figure out a solution when you have infinite attempts and your enemy never learns from your mistakes. Instead, you have been competing against a rival time looper. Regardless of how it happened, that is your own failing. Not ours.”**

Zach looked like he was about to start yelling at the angel, but eventually restrained himself. He scoffed disdainfully at the spirit, and then folded his hands over his chest in silence.

They didn't actually know how Red Robe got included as a time looper, so it was difficult to counter the angel's claims there.

“So you deliberately activated the Sovereign Gate a month before the invasion,” Zorian noted. “You could tell what was going to happen a month in advance?”

“The future is hazy and constantly changing, but some things are more certain than others,” the angel said. **“Unless something was done, Panaxeth's release was practically set in stone.”**

“Why not just inform the Triumvirate Church and let them handle it?” Zorian asked.

“Strange as this may sound to you, that would have been far worse than what we ended up doing,” the angel responded. **“We are not supposed to meddle in mortal conflicts.”**

“Why me?” Zach suddenly asked. “If you have such an accurate way of predicting the future, surely you knew I wasn't a good choice.”

“On the contrary,” the angel disagreed. **“You were *the best* choice. That is why we settled on you in the end.”**

“Best how?” Zach asked suspiciously.

“It is a secret,” the angel responded. **“There were considerable restrictions in regards to candidates. They had to begin the month in Cyoria. They needed to have a certain potential and mentality. They needed to have considerable freedom of movement and association. They needed to satisfy the ethical guidelines. And so much more. I cannot tell you the details.”**

“If Zorian began the month in Cyoria, would he also be a candidate?” Zach asked.

Zorian gave him a strange look. Why would he ask that?

“Heavens no,” the angel said. **“He fails just about every criterion, especially in regards to mentality. I am surprised he was even willing to risk his life in this manner, based on his previous actions and attitudes.”**

Annoyingly, Zach seemed really pleased to hear that response.

Zorian folded his arms over his chest in dissatisfaction. Jerks, the both of them.

“What is my status at the moment, then?” Zorian asked. “I defied the laws of the time loop and got out into the real world, but I notice you are not making a move against me. Are you fine with my presence, then?”

The angel's burning eyes focused on him more closely, studying him in great detail for a couple of seconds. Zorian squirmed uncomfortably under its gaze, but stood his ground and stubbornly kept staring back at the angel without flinching.

“You are a forbidden existence, and you have committed grave sins to be where you are right now,” the angel judged. **“However, we are not without mercy and understanding. So long as the primordial's release is stopped in the end, we are willing to overlook some things.”**

“So... I'm safe from your wrath?” Zorian summarized.

"If the primordial remains chained by the end of the month," the angel stressed. **"If not, then we will be forced to directly intervene in the material world. At that point, it costs us nothing to be extra thorough and eliminate all possible complications. You understand, yes?"**

"Of course," Zorian confirmed.

Even though he had made no contract with the angels, his life also depended on the outcome of the invasion. If he and Zach failed to stop Red Robe and Silverlake from releasing Panaxeth, the angels would take care of him all the same.

"If you're fine with Zorian, does that mean that my contract can be renegotiated now?" Zach asked hopefully. "Because the way things are now..."

"We cannot renegotiate the contract," the angel said. **"It simply cannot be done."**

"But you're the one who made it," Zach protested. "Why wouldn't you be able to change it?"

"It is divine magic," the angel pointed out. **"We obviously didn't make it."**

Of course. No one could cast divine magic in the current age, not even the angels. Only the gods themselves were capable of that. Everyone else, including their spiritual servants, were just tapping into artifacts and resources left behind when the gods went silent.

"How about just removing it?" Zorian tried.

"Also not possible," the angel responded. **"It is deliberately designed to be next to impossible to remove once placed. I am afraid there is nothing we can do about it."**

"But the way things are going, I'll die at the end of the month, even if I stop the primordial from getting out," Zach pointed out. "Isn't that just a little unfair? It's obvious the situation has changed from the time I agreed to the contract... and even you admitted the way you got me to agree to it was kind of dodgy and inappropriate."

"We cannot absolve you of fulfilling your part of the bargain," the angel stubbornly said. **"It simply is not within our power to do so. The only thing I can promise you is that if you find the way to remove or evade the contract in some fashion, we will not seek to punish you for it."**

Zach's eyes widened at the statement.

"You will not seek to... you're saying if I found a way to trick the contract on my own, you would have gone after me for it?" he asked incredulously.

"We are not the primordials," the angel told him. **"Though our actions are restricted, we are far from powerless in regards to the material world. Even if you could trick the spell left by the gods, it would do you no good if we were also not willing to look the other way and accept this outcome. You made a solemn pact with us, and we have done our side of the bargain. We have every right to be harsh and demand that you fulfill your obligation to the letter... but as I said to your friend, we are not without mercy and understanding. So long as the primordial's release is stopped in the end, we are willing to overlook some things."**

"So I still have to do the impossible," complained Zach. "It's just that, if I succeed at that, you won't come after me in response."

"You can view it that way, I suppose," the angel responded. The spirit froze for a moment, its eyes staring off somewhere into the distance, as if listening to some distant words that neither Zach nor Zorian could hear. **"My time here grows short. If you have anything else you need of me, say it quickly."**

"Give me the actual contents of the contract Zach signed with you," Zorian demanded. "Zach can't tell me what it says and I need to know."

For a while, the angel said nothing. Then, its branches swayed on unseen winds for a few seconds, and a ray of burning orange light erupted without warning and struck Zach in the chest. Rather than harming him, however, the ray harmlessly sank into his chest and was absorbed without a trace.

Before either Zach or Zorian could ask what the hell that was about, a series of burning letters started materializing in the air in front of Zach.

And kept going...

...and going...

...and going.

Pages and pages of text, going on and on and on about what was expected of Zach. Zorian expected the contract to be a couple of concise sentences, since that was what a geas spell would look like... but apparently he was wrong. The contract instead consisted of a massive legal document, complete with that peculiar legal word choice that made official documents hard to understand even if you speak the language.

It was good that he could flawlessly memorize everything he could see, because there was no way he could understand this thing without a few

hours to pore over it. And possibly some actual legal help.

“For heaven’s sake, Zach...” Zorian sighed. “How the hell could you agree to this? There is no way you actually read all this and understood its implications.”

“I don’t remember any of it!” Zach protested. “It was my stupid younger self, okay? Gods know *your* younger self was just as stupid in his own way!”

Well, he got him there... but still. This was something else.

“He did not actually read the contract,” the angel added in helpfully. **“Still, we had summarized the relevant parts to him. He has to stop the invasion of Cyoria from achieving its goal or he will die at the end of the month. He cannot let anyone know about the existence of the time loop or he’ll die at the end of the month. He cannot kill a ruler of any nation, or otherwise directly cause a nation to collapse into anarchy or he’ll die at the end of the month. Restrictions were placed on what kind of mind and soul magic he can learn, because the ethical committee would not approve the project otherwise. He is also completely forbidden from talking about the specifics of the contract he signed. Anyone who forcibly sees the contents of the contract, such as through a deep memory scan, must be neutralized in whatever manner is practical. Finally, the contract is completely dissolved at the end of the month, allowing him to live life freely from that point afterwards.”**

“Can you tell me how you defined ‘knows about the time loop’?” Zorian asked.

“It is all in the contract,” the angel responded, one of its branches casually waving towards Zach. **“I know you memorized it.”**

The angel once again stilled for a moment, seemingly listening to something in the distance.

“I must go,” it said. **“You have one more question.”**

“If the primordial becomes free, is it the end of the world as we know it?” Zach immediately asked, giving no chance for Zorian to think about this last chance to question the spirit.

“Probably not,” the angel admitted. **“Nevertheless, you still would not want this to happen... and not just because of the dire consequences for you personally. The Highest Ones had placed a great many... triggers... into the core that governs this world. If conditions satisfying a trigger are detected, automatic countermeasures are initiated. A primordial gaining access to the material plane would activate several of them. You do not want that to happen. *No one* wants that to happen. Much of our duties involve making sure none of the triggers can be activated, for the sake of both the spirit world and the material one. Most of the triggers look out for things the Highest Ones had considered existential threats... and they had a very ‘scorched earth’ policy when dealing with existential threats.”**

Having said that, the angel suddenly swooped down towards the ground, and one of its branches lightly reached towards the stone floor beneath them. Even though its branches looked thin and fragile, they scooped out a chunk of stone from the floor like it was nothing but wet clay... and then started shaping it just as easily.

Black branches twisted and tapped the stone like hundreds of tiny fingers, chipping off pieces in a flurry of rapid movement. In less than three seconds, the chunk of rock became a smooth, glossy cube that was then thrust directly into Zorian’s hands.

It was the weirdest thing, because it didn’t look like magic – instead it looked as if the angel physically shaped the chunk of stone through a combination of inhuman strength, speed, and precision.

“Take this,” the angel said. **“Use it to summon me for the final battle.”**

“How do you know there will be a final battle?” asked Zorian.

“The future is hazy and constantly changing, but some things are more certain than others,” the angel said, echoing one of its earlier statements.

And then it was gone, and the temple hall was once again loud and full of people. Alanic, Xvim, Batak, Kylae, and the other priests quickly surrounded them, demanding to know what had occurred. From their perspective they just suddenly disappeared for a while and now they are mysterious back.

Zach and Zorian ignored them for a moment, focusing on the cube in Zorian’s hands.

It wasn’t as smooth as Zorian originally thought it was. It was densely covered with strange writing; the same kind of writing that covered the silver ring that floated behind the angel. There was nothing obviously magical about it, but the cube had a strange sheen to it when the light hit it just right and the characters did seem to have some kind of pattern to them...

In the end he carefully pocketed the cube and put it out of his mind for the moment. Before he dived into the specifics of Zach’s contract and studied the cube, they had one more meeting to go through.

Red Robe had invited them for a talk...

As Red Robe had noted in his brief letter to them, Zach and Zorian already knew how to contact him with information about the meeting. Their simulacrum clashed all the time, and it was no problem to just throw a letter on the ground during one of those confrontations and then just walk away.

Using that method, Zach and Zorian eventually arranged for a meeting with Red Robe on the roof of one of the academy buildings. It was a sufficiently public location that neither side could really prepare a trap for the other there. Plus, the academy wards were actually pretty good now that Zach and Zorian covertly talked them into changing their ward keys. Even Zach and Zorian had to be a little careful around them, since the new security voided their knowledge as much as it did Red Robe's.

The meeting was arranged at midnight, and everyone arrived exactly on time. One side consisted of Zach, Zorian, Xvim, and Alanic. The other had Red Robe, Silverlake, and Quatach-Ichl.

Red Robe was wearing his usual red robe as a disguise, his face hidden in a patch of darkness behind the hood. Silverlake was as Zorian last saw her – a young, attractive woman wearing a form-fitting dress. She seemed very happy and pleased with herself, grinning from ear to ear as she looked at them... a fact that made Zach obviously fume at her. It just made her grin wider.

And then there was Quatach-Ichl. He was not in his skeletal form for this meeting, opting to come in his human guise instead. He looked calm, composed, and confident. He greeted them politely with a small bow before turning silent and just observing things.

Zorian sighed inwardly. He knew it was a futile dream, but he had been hoping Red Robe and Silverlake hadn't initiated the old lich into their deep secrets. This made everything so much harder...

"Ha ha!" Silverlake cackled. "See, I told you they would bring those two with them and none other. Pay up!"

"We never actually agreed to any bets," Red Robe protested.

"Bah! You're supposed to play along for appearances' sake!" Silverlake said, scowling at him. "Whatever. Zorian, did you reconsider my offer? It still stands, you know?"

"Shut up," Red Robe snapped at her. "Everyone, I'd like to apologize for her actions recently. I know you probably think I sent her to sow dissent into your group, but that was entirely her own idea. She seems to think there is a genuine chance of convincing mister Kazinski to join us in freeing the primordial, but we all know that is just a fantasy."

Yeah, as if Zorian was going to believe that. He fully believed that Silverlake being there was an attempt to make Zorian and Zach fight amongst each other. He also suspected it was an attempt by Red Robe and Silverlake to reduce the number of enemies lined up against them, since Zorian was far less likely to keep telling people about the time loop if he knew that would get Zach killed. Which was what ended up happening in the end.

One thing he didn't believe for a moment was the idea that Silverlake actually made an honest offer for him to join her. Her natural instinct was to exploit others, not work with them.

"As if your plan is any better," Silverlake complained. "Why do you think—"

"I thought we agreed I'll be doing the talking?" Red Robe protested with a sigh.

Silverlake clacked her tongue dismissively and then conjured herself a chair to sit on.

Quatach-Ichl did not react at all to his companion's antics, opting to study Zorian and his group instead.

A short and very uncomfortably silence descended on the scene. Everyone involved was tense and seemed to be ready to attack at a moment's notice. Even Silverlake, who was sitting on a conjured chair and tried to give off an impression of being bored and inattentive, was clearly twitching whenever someone made an unexpected move.

"What is this all about?" Zach finally asked. "You're the one who invited us here, so why are you silent all of a sudden? Don't waste our time."

"Ah... even after all this time, you still haven't changed. Still so impatient..." Red Robe said softly, as if reminiscing about something.

Zach frowned at him, clearly considering the merits of just starting a battle here and now.

"I see you came here unmasked," Red Robe commented.

"You already know who we are," Zach shrugged. "Is there any point in hiding our faces?"

"True," Red Robe nodded. "Well, I guess there's no point in hiding my identity any longer, either."

He pulled his hood down, and the patch of darkness that hid his face suddenly disappeared.

It was Veyers. The same face, the same blonde hair, the same orange, slitted eyes. The main difference was that his hair was well-groomed, his

eyes lacked some of that ferocity and violence he had seen in Veyers recently, and his entire attitude was calm and more assured.

"I'm guessing this isn't much of a surprise to you," Red Robe said. Without the voice masking spells embedded into the hood of his robe, even his voice was recognizably that of Veyers. Just calmer and quieter. "Still, I hope you take this gesture of good will as just that. I'm not the monster you think I am, and I really think we can come to a sort of agreement here."

Zorian studied the boy in front of him for a few seconds before shaking his head.

"You say it's a gesture of good will and you show us a fake face and identity," Zorian told him. "How do you expect us to agree to anything when you opened the talks with such a brazen deception?"

Veyers looked honestly taken aback at the accusation.

"You're overthinking things," Silverlake said, rolling her eyes at him. "It's really him. Who else could it be, really?"

"No, he's not Veyers," Zorian insisted. "It never made sense and still doesn't."

Zach sent Zorian an almost imperceptible frown. He clearly didn't understand why Zorian was so certain, but didn't want to call him on it.

Zorian didn't blame him. He had long had his suspicions, but it was only when he saw the true form of Zach's angelic contract that he became completely certain...

"Are you asking me to *prove* that I'm Veyers?" Red Robe said with an amused laugh. "What would even satisfy you?"

"Every student has to give their mana signature to the academy for identification purposes," Xvim suddenly said, reaching into his jacket pocket and retrieving an inconspicuous looking ball out of it. He displayed it for everyone to see. "Proving whether or not you're Veyers... should be an extremely simple matter."

Red Robe stared at the ball for a few seconds before bursting into short, barking laughter.

"Oh hell..." he said, chuckling to himself. "I can't believe I overlooked something as simple as that..."

Silverlake gave him a shocked look.

"Feeling dumb, now?" Red Robe said, giving her a contemptuous look. "You spent all these days interacting with me and never suspected a thing, but mister Kazinski here saw through it immediately. Maybe you should have asked to join him instead."

He then ignored her and turned to face Zorian fully.

"I guess you also know who I really am?" he asked, tilting his head to the side with a self-indulgent smile.

"You're Jornak, Veyers's lawyer friend," Zorian said. "I'm guessing Veyers introduced you to Zach, and you hit it off with each other since you have both been cheated out of your inheritance and empathized with each other because of it. He didn't realize you have ties to the Esoteric Order of the Celestial Dragon until it was too late."

"The Cult of the Dragon is nothing to me," Red Robe said. He still continued wearing Veyers's face. "I was never seriously loyal to them, even before the time loop."

"So why..." Zach asked him, looking at him with confused eyes. "If Zorian could trick the time loop into letting him leave, then you..."

"You don't understand," Red Robe said, shaking his head sadly. "You just wouldn't understand, no matter how I tried to convince you. This knowledge... this power... it's just *begging* to be used. Shutur-Tarana changed the world entirely when he left the time loop. Why can't I? Why couldn't we?"

Zach seemed taken aback at the question.

"Have you two ever tried to look into what our country has been doing these past few years?" Red Robe said, looking at Zorian. "I just wanted to figure out how to ensure justice for me and Zach at first. However, I couldn't stop myself from looking... and the more I looked, the more awful things I found. The prosperity we enjoy right now is all built atop of a mountain of lies, theft, unspeakable corruption and even straight up murder. Even if I got justice for myself and Zach, it's all just a drop in the bucket."

"The other countries are no better," Alanic pointed out.

"Yes! Yes, I know that!" Red Robe said, agreeing vigorously. "I've looked into them as well, and it was just as disgusting. And... even if one wanted to shut their eyes and ignore all the violations, the current state of peace is just a fragile illusion. Another round of Splinter Wars will occur soon, with all the pain and suffering that entails. Something had to be done. I had to do something. But Zach wouldn't hear any of it. He just wanted to stop the invasion, get the money his caretaker had taken from him and look away from the ugliness of the world. We had this incredible opportunity to change things for the better, and he was fine letting it slip through his fingers."

"I hate to break it to you, but you're trying to raze an entire city of half a million people to the ground and feed their souls to a wraith creation

machine,” Zach told him. “If that’s your vision of ‘changing things for the better’, I’m not surprised my forgotten self would have none of it.”

“Things wouldn’t have been so drastic if you had agreed to work with me on this,” Red Robe said. “Though yes, some unpleasantness would still have to get done. Things have to get worse before they get better.”

There was a short pause as everyone processed Red Robe’s... Jornak’s statements. Jornak decided to take this chance to drop his disguise and assume his real form. He took a deep breath and then suddenly became taller, his facial structure shifting and changing. A few seconds later, Veyers was gone – in his place was a perfect copy of Jornak as Zorian remembered him...

...except that there was a spark of intensity in this Jornak’s eyes which simply hadn’t existed in him the last time they had spoken. The Jornak that Zorian had known was a nervous, risk-averse man that harbored no desire to change the world or enact some grand scheme. Zorian knew this because he had read his thoughts and memories several times, and had seen nothing particularly suspicious about them.

Then again, wasn’t Zorian the same? This was just one more proof that the time loop was capable of radically changing a person. For better or for worse.

Of course, this *could* all just be another disguise... but Zorian rather doubted it. He was pretty sure Red Robe really was Jornak. That’s why Veyers had to be soul killed in the time loop and erased out of Zach’s mind... because Veyers would know if Jornak was acting inconsistently from restart to restart, and Veyers always crashed their first classes of the year and could thus interact with Zach at any time. If Zach regularly spoke to Veyers over the course of many restarts, the other boy would surely mention how his best friend Jornak was missing from his house or doing strange things that differed radically from restart to restart. In order for Jornak to drop off Zach’s perception, Veyers had to go away.

“You know what? Why don’t you just tell us why you invited us here?” Zach suddenly told Jornak. “Surely it isn’t to get us to join you, right?”

“No, I know this is impossible,” Jornak said. “In the end, neither of you are willing to dirty your hands with this, even if doing so would prevent far more suffering in the end. No, I invited you here to arrange for a truce.”

“A truce?” Zorian asked incredulously.

“Yes. I want us to stop fighting until the day of the summer festival,” Jornak clarified. “We’ll decide a winner and loser among us in one massive battle at the end of the month, just like it was always meant to be. In the meantime, you’ll stop making raids on our forces and we’ll make no moves against you.”

“That seems like a deal that completely favors *you*,” Zorian pointed out. “Why would we shoot ourselves in the foot by agreeing to this?”

Jornak smiled at the question and took out a brown stone with a crudely carved flame symbol on it. It didn’t seem magical in the slightest and Zorian did not recognize it, but Zach immediately paled upon sighting it.

“Because I have wraith bombs scattered throughout the major cities on the continent, ready to activate at my command. Because I know exactly who to assassinate and how in order to immediately trigger a new continental war. And,” he shook his stone token as he said this, “because I got Ogarj and his group to work with me. Your choice.”

97. Illusory

Chapter 097 Illusory

Standing on the roof of one of the academy buildings, the two groups stared at one another without speaking. The situation had already been tense, and Jornak's threats only made it more uneasy and unstable. Zorian suspected that if one of them made a single suspicious move, the other side would attack and the whole meeting would instantly degenerate into violence.

Probably the only reason that hadn't happened thus far was that both sides realized they couldn't meaningfully hurt the other. They had picked this place for a reason. It was too exposed, too close to powerful mages standing watch, and too heavily protected by a warding scheme that neither side was keyed in on. If a battle were to start, it would be hard to deal a finishing blow and decide anything. Even if one side gained the upper hand in the fighting, there was no way for them to keep their opponents from simply running away. They would just be revealing their trump cards and making outside observers even more aware of the secret war being waged all around them.

Zorian watched the stone token in Jornak's hand while considering his threats in his head.

The wraith bombs were kind of expected, though Zorian did not really think they would be using them outside of Cyoria. He thought they were intended to be used as support for the invasion itself, not as a way to blackmail them into a truce. As for the threat of an assassination campaign that could start another war... well, Zorian wasn't sure he entirely believed that. How would Jornak actually test this? Zach never mentioned any sudden wars erupting in the time loop, and he surely would have if he witnessed any. In Zorian's opinion, Jornak was just making an educated guess, based on the various information he gathered in the time loop, and it was an open question what would really happen if he were to kill a bunch of really important people in quick succession.

Then again, during that fateful incident where Quatach-Ichl tried to mutilate Zach's soul and brought Zorian into the time loop, Zach ended up in a coma for quite a few restarts... and it was very likely that Zorian spent a number of restarts in a similar state as well. Perhaps it was during some of these 'lost restarts' that Jornak tested such large-scale schemes for viability...

And then there was Oganj – the infamous dragon mage that had killed an entire army and one of the Immortal Eleven sent to deal with him, the terrifying dragon that had menaced northern Altazia for centuries now. Zorian was a little mystified why Jornak was invoking his name so smugly. Sure, Oganj was an immensely powerful opponent, even by dragon standards... but hadn't Zach already killed him once? He distinctly remembered Zach going through a great number of short restarts in order to–

Hmm

He glanced at Zach again. His friend did not seem as calm about Oganj's involvement as Zorian thought he would be.

[What am I missing here?] Zorian asked Zach, sending him a telepathic message. [Didn't you already prove you can best Oganj?]

[I'm not even sure I could repeat that feat inside the time loop, let alone here in the outside world.] Zach immediately sent back.

[Are you saying you winning was a fluke?] Zorian asked, surprised.

[It wasn't a *fluke*,] Zach responded, sounding faintly outraged in his thoughts. [I beat Oganj fair and square. However, I kind of brute forced things and took advantage of the fact I could learn from our fights and Oganj couldn't. Unless I caught him off-guard, unless I timed things just right, unless I knew what spells he usually uses and counters my moves with... I'm not sure I could beat him in a straight fight.]

Huh... Zorian did not often hear this kind of admission from Zach. If there was anything that Zach was good at, it was a straight fight. Then again, his main advantage – his massive mana reserves – was not as big of a deal against a dragon as it was against human mages. All dragons had impossibly huge mana reserves by human standards.

[Is Oganj more powerful than Quatach-Ichl?] Zorian asked.

[Not even close,] Zach said immediately. [He doesn't have the huge variety of spells that Quatach-Ichl does, his body is too large to teleport around easily, and if you kill his body, he will actually die. The old bag of bones is still the toughest opponent I ever faced. Still, Oganj is incredibly powerful. Even worse... he has students.]

[Students?] Zorian asked curiously. [As in, dragon ones?]

[What else?] Zach responded. [Even though dragons are usually solitary, dragon mages had to find a way to pass on their skills to a new generation. Otherwise, their traditions would never spread and would eventually die out. For that reason, all dragon mages occasionally take a young dragon as a student to pass on their teachings. Usually a dragon mage will only have one student at any particular time, but Oganj is more powerful and confident than most dragon mages. He currently has two students.]

Crap...

[Three dragon mages...] he lamented. [Even if the two students were mere beginners, this is still bad news.]

Three dragons working together was already a cause for panic for most people – having them all be dragon mages as well made a terrifying group that would give even Zach and Zorian pause.

“Are you done talking to each other?” Jornak suddenly asked. “Just so you know, when I say I can get Oganj and his group to work with me, I don’t just mean his two students. You see, Oganj has been making connections with other dragon mages, and even regular dragons. You may not know this, but human-dragon relations have been steadily becoming worse lately, what with Eldemar and other northern countries constantly pushing deeper into the wilderness with their colonists. As solitary as they are, dragons are still intelligent beings and they can see where this is going. Some of them have been wondering if they should temporarily band together to halt or at least divert human advances, and Oganj is something of a logical figure to rally around in that case. If he moves against Eldemar, there could be as many as 20, or even 30 dragons following behind him.”

Zorian couldn’t help but twitch at the explanation. His first instinct was to dismiss Jornak’s claims as pure fiction, but… there were precedents for large-scale dragon attacks happening. Usually when humans attacked dragon nesting grounds or killed too many dragons in too short of a time, but still.

And 30 dragons? That would take an entire army to stop… except that an army was a lot less mobile than a group of 30 dragons, which meant Oganj’s group could advance practically unchallenged through Eldemar’s territory, laying waste to all they encountered and simply fleeing whenever they were confronted with a force big enough to deal real damage. It would take an entire group of ultra-powerful mages to counter such a flight of dragons, and assembling such a group would take months. If Eldemar was simultaneously suffering from assassinations of its prominent leaders and the entire continent was teetering on the brink of another war… it was questionable whether it would be assembled at all.

It was interesting, though. Some dragons had friendly relations with humans, but Oganj wasn’t one of them. Considering his antagonistic past with humanity, it couldn’t have been easy to convince him to work with Jornak. Still, Zach was adamant that the stone token in Jornak’s hands was Oganj’s calling card and was genuine. That meant he probably did reach some kind of agreement with the old dragon mage.

It was becoming apparent that, while Zach and Zorian had largely focused on accumulation of personal power and skills, Jornak had spent most of his time trying to investigate the various states and organizations in their surroundings in order to figure out how to manipulate them. Probably a smart decision, considering he wanted to enact some kind of grand change in the entire continent and possibly create his own version of the Ikosian Empire with him on top. Personal power alone couldn’t do that.

Thinking on it some more, it was likely that Jornak’s focus on recruiting others to help him originated from pure necessity. If he had started off as a temporary looper, like Zorian suspected, it made sense that he was focused on trying to leverage people around him to accomplish his goals. He was not a master mage, and he’d had a limited amount of time to work with, so slowly training to become good enough to accomplish things himself had not been a possible option.

“You know, nothing you said really addresses my question from earlier,” Zorian pointed out to Jornak. “Delaying the conflict until the summer festival does not benefit us in any way. You and Silverlake will die if you can’t release the primordial before the deadline, and you can only make an attempt on the day of the summer festival. So it makes sense that you want to postpone the conflict until then. However, Zach and me have every reason to push things and try to resolve things sooner. Nothing you said changes that. In the end, all you did was name a bunch of threats and try to blackmail us into agreeing to a terrible deal.”

“Yes, that’s entirely true,” Jornak said calmly, nodding slightly at him in agreement. “The truth is I don’t think I can keep the conflict manageable at the rate it is going. It’s only been a few days, but we’re already raising red flags everywhere. At this rate, we’re going to end up dragging the Eldemarian government into it whether we want to or not. Not even the local mage guild, subverted as it is, can fully suppress what is happening. And if that happens, then the release of the primordial becomes all but impossible to pull off.”

“You’re losing the fight and getting desperate,” Zach said.

“I wouldn’t phrase it that way,” Jornak said carefully. “But it is definitely true that I, and Silverlake here, are not in a good position. We made a deal with the primordial to release it or die, and we can’t weasel out of it. If we can’t release Panaxeth from his prison by the end of the month, everything else will become pointless. However, should everything really fall apart that severely, why wouldn’t I drag you all down along with me? If you drive me into a corner like that, I will obviously turn to destructive and extreme methods.”

“Zorian is right. This is just brazen blackmail,” Zach said flatly, frowning at the man in front of him.

“I’m just explaining my logic,” Jornak said. “I think it makes perfect sense for me to escalate things if we continue down this path. In the current situation, Eldemar can do as they wish and focus on sorting out the situation in Cyoria at their leisure. Meanwhile, if I kick off another Splinter War, release hundreds of wraiths in all major cities, and get a group of dragons to lay waste to the entirety of northern Eldemar… well, it just *might* give them more pressing matters to worry about. And a narrow chance to live is better than having no chance at all. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Zach and Zorian said nothing to that.

“See, I think you’re reasonable people,” Jornak continued, undaunted by their silence and frosty glares. If anything, he grew more animated in his speech and mannerisms. “You didn’t immediately run off to inform the Crown about what is happening. You spared the life of Veyers, even though he was clearly connected to me in some way. You came to this meeting to see what I have to say. Therefore, I think you’re going to be reasonable about this. After all, even if you agree to this truce, you still have a high chance of stopping us in the end. Letting us delay the battle until the end of the month may be a little suboptimal for you, but it’s not a catastrophe. If you push me too far, we both lose.”

"If the sides were reversed, would you take your own deal?" Xvim suddenly asked, interrupting his explanation.

Jornak hesitated for a moment, mouth open, before his mouth snapped shut and he shook his head.

"Not a chance," he admitted.

Silverlake laughed at the admission, a sharp cackling laughter that somehow looked more appropriate on her old withered form than on her current young one.

"Then how can you call it being reasonable?" Xvim probed further.

"Because you are not me," Jornak said. "I wouldn't accept it because I wouldn't care about the death and destruction, so long as I win in the end. I accepted this as a price for what I want to do a long time ago. You four? I'm guessing you are far more reluctant to make that sacrifice."

He was... probably right about that. If it were just Zorian and Xvim making decisions, *maybe* they would have decided to cold-heartedly ignore the threats and continue pressuring Jornak and his group. Maybe. However, there was no way either Alanic or Zach would be fine with that. Especially Alanic, since he clearly cared a lot about Eldemar – not just the people, but the country itself, as well.

For a while the scene was quiet, as Zorian and the rest of his group discussed the situation in front of them via telepathy. Jornak and his group were probably discussing something through magical means too, considering their body language and brief looks, though Zorian did not really know if they were using telepathy or something else.

Probably something else, as all three were under the mind blank spell.

It was a good thing they had decided not to bring Spear of Resolve with them, he mused. Her telepathic prowess would have been largely useless against the people in front of them and her skills at other forms of magic were relatively humble. She couldn't teleport away, or even just fly off into the distance. If a fight were to break out, she would have been a rock around their neck – unable to contribute to the battle, incapable of quickly retreating, yet important enough that Jornak and Quatach-Ichl would definitely want to see her dead.

No, it was best she stayed safe in the depths of her web for now.

"If we agree to this, how can we be sure you won't be here tomorrow to demand further concessions in exchange for not wrecking everything?" Zach finally asked.

"As we have already established, this truce is more in our favor than yours. Why would I risk things like that?" Jornak asked with a raised eyebrow. "In my opinion, *I'm* the one who should be worried. You have every incentive to agree to the truce and then dishonor it later. How can I be sure you won't just take advantage of the truce to build up your forces and dishonor it a few days later? I can't. All I can do is immediately make good of my threats in response."

Zorian clacked his tongue at the explanation. So this truce was basically toothless and could fall apart at any moment if one side pushed more than the other could tolerate. And there would definitely be plenty of pushing and testing of waters, that much was clear – if any side saw a chance to gain an advantage by dishonoring the deal, they would do so in a heartbeat.

"Threats, threats, and more threats. Just so you know, if you come later to demand more from us, I will immediately attack you, consequences be damned," Zach told him darkly.

"Does that mean we have an agreement?" Jornak said with a self-satisfied smirk.

"Ha ha! Of course they're going to agree," Silverlake suddenly piped in, jumping up from her conjured chair and stretching in an exaggerated manner. She ignored Jornak's annoyed look and stepped forward with a grin. "They're all too touchy-feely to risk such devastation just to stop us a little earlier... but more importantly, they recently found out that Zach will have issues surviving this month. It sure would be nice if they could take a step back from all the fighting in order to figure out what to do about that..."

The atmosphere immediately got even more tense and gloomy. Zorian had always known that Silverlake wouldn't have informed him about Zach's contract purely on a whim, and now it seemed like one of the big reasons for it was to put pressure on them to agree to this truce. It was as Silverlake said – they needed time and resources to figure out what could be done about this, and it would be hard to focus on this if they were constantly fighting their enemies during this time, spending their time, money, and mana on getting an upper hand.

"How did you even find out about that?" Zach asked with a frown, directing his question at Jornak instead of Silverlake. Clearly he felt the lawyer was the source of the information. "I mean, even I didn't know I made a deal with the angels, so how...?"

"You did know," Jornak said, shaking his head. "The angels didn't tell you who they were, but you are not *completely* stupid." Zach scowled at him but said nothing. "There are only so many powers capable of doing what they did. You eventually figured out who it could be and raided church archives to see if they had records of similar deals being made. They did. In fact, they had examples of past angelic contracts – many, many examples. Even if none of them were directly applicable to your situation, they still held a lot of clues for those who knew how to read them. You brought them to me, and we worked together to piece together the general nature of your contract. I don't dare claim I understand it completely, since I've never seen the actual contract and you can't directly talk about it, but I know enough."

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Zorian wasn't surprised at this. Back when the angel they had summoned caused the contract to appear, he immediately noticed that the contract was written in very legal terms. More importantly, they were *modern*, familiar legal terms, the sort you would see in any sort of legal document in Eldemar. At first glance at least, the contract looked like something you might get if you visited a mundane lawyer in Cyoria and asked them to write up a contract for a business deal or something similar.

That meant the angels had lots of experience when it came to making these contracts. Zach shouldn't be the only person working under this kind of contract. There should be others. Perhaps many others, and not all of them could have a contract backed by divine magic. No matter how secretive the angels were, examples of past contracts would exist somewhere out there.

And with examples of past contracts in hand, some creativity when answering questions, and an actual lawyer to consult with... it probably wasn't impossible to figure out what is happening and how to convey it to others without tripping the angelic restrictions.

"You know," Silverlake began, "Panaxeth's escape does not necessarily have to be for real."

Zorian gave her a strange look.

"The contract we're under says we just have to let Panaxeth out of the seal and our job is done," she continued. "If the primordial is resealed immediately afterwards, even if we are the ones who do it, the contract will not punish us."

"That just shows how utterly confident Panaxeth is in being able to handle everything, including all of us combined, once it is out of the cage made by the gods," Zorian told her. "Don't tell me you actually think you can seal it back in?"

"I'm not sure you know this, but the gods placed numerous contingencies on Panaxeth's prison, and on the prisons of all trapped primordials, for that matter," Silverlake said. "The moment he gets out, Panaxeth will get seriously weakened. Even the primordial is not sure how badly the contingencies will hurt him. If Panaxeth was at the peak of his powers, I would obviously be a fool to try and fight him, but if he's weakened badly enough, it is entirely possible. Hell, those cultists trying to take control of Panaxeth? Maybe they're not as dumb as we thought they are. They've overestimated their mind magic capabilities, yes, but if they had a master telepath and his hundreds of aranean friends..."

"No," Zorian told her.

"It was just a thought," Silverlake said easily, not arguing him over it. "An idle thought. I don't really think us mere mortals could seriously control an entity on the level of Panaxeth, but perhaps we might be able to muddle his thoughts and hinder him long enough to push him back into the seal. Wouldn't that be nice? Me and Red Robe... sorry, Jornak... I still can't believe that little shit lied to me about something so petty... and that I fell for it..."

Zorian gave her an annoyed look as she started muttering to herself again and she cackled at him in response. Some habits were hard to break, it seemed, even if she had suddenly regained her youth.

"Anyway, if you agree to this, then this whole conflict could be avoided. We get to weasel out of our contract and the primordial would still be sealed at the end of the month, which means that part of the angelic contract will be fulfilled, at least. We no longer have any reason to fight you or support the invasion. Happy ending for everyone!"

"I know I've been quiet throughout this entire meeting, but surely you didn't forget I'm standing right here, listening to you?" Quatach-Ichl asked her, raising his eyebrow at him. "This ending of yours certainly isn't happy for me. And if I'm not happy, *no one* is going to be happy."

Silverlake clacked her tongue before giving Jornak a look of distaste.

"I told you we shouldn't have invited him along," she told him loudly. "What good is he here, anyway?"

"Actually, that reminds me of something I've been wondering about for a while now," Zorian spoke up, butting in on their argument. "Namely, why is Quatach-Ichl going along with this?"

The ancient lich gave him a curious look. "What do you mean?"

"Shouldn't you *want* Jornak to make good on his threats?" Zorian asked him. "Why are you here, helping him bring about this truce? Why not purposely sabotage the talks and let Jornak damage Eldemar as much as possible. That's what you're here for, no?"

"Ha," Quatach-Ichl said. "No, not exactly. I'm trying to push the continent into something more favorable for Ulquaan Ibasa, not cause widespread chaos and uncertainty."

"Oh, right. I remember now. You're trying to install Falkinea as the local hegemon," Zorian said loudly, pretending he was just loudly thinking. He made a couple of 'random' gestures with his hands, which he hoped would look completely incomprehensible to everyone except Quatach-Ichl. It was something he learned while traveling through Xlotic with Zach and Neolu, and should be completely opaque to anyone who has never been there. "Still, weakening Eldemar and the surrounding countries can only help you in that regard."

"You seem to know a fair deal about me," Quatach-Ichl noted, giving him a searching look. "We must have interacted pretty heavily in the past. Interesting, considering we seem to essentially be natural enemies. Anyway, I don't think I agree with you on this. Let's just leave it at that."

Besides, why are you trying to convince me that I should start another continental war right now? Shouldn't *that* be against *your* goals?"

"I was just curious," Zorian said, before falling silent.

Jornak and Silverlake gave them both suspicious looks, faintly aware that something more had been said between the lines of that conversation, before shrugging it off and continuing with the negotiation.

The meeting lasted for another hour, most of which was spent making vague (and not-so-vague) threats towards one another, but eventually they reached an agreement of sorts.

There would be a truce. How long it would last, Zorian wasn't sure. He would be first to admit that he intended to dishonor it the moment he saw a good chance to do so. He was sure Jornak and Silverlake felt the same way. For the moment, though, open conflict between the two groups was put on hold.

After everyone left, the roof of the academy building remained dark and silent for a while before two people teleported on top again.

One was Zorian.

And the other was Quatach-Ichl.

"So," the ancient lich began. "What exactly did you invite me here for, Mister Kazinski?"

"I'm going to try and talk you into giving up on this invasion," Zorian told him bluntly.

Quatach-Ichl raised his eyebrow at him. "Continue," he told him calmly.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Zorian began, "but your current thoughts are that if the primordial is released and lays waste to our surroundings, the angels are eventually going to stop it before it can do too much damage. After all, you have seen the might of the angels personally, and you are certain they can do it. So unsealing Panaxeth would destroy Cyoria and deal a lot of damage to Eldemar, but it would have no real effect on Ulquaan Ibasa or even the Altazian continent as a whole..."

The ancient lich stared at him silently for a second.

"I'll repeat what I said earlier... you seem to know a fair deal about me. Curious. Very curious. I wonder just how much help you got out of my... other self. But that's a topic for later. Yes, that is pretty much how I see the situation. Am I wrong?"

"You are wrong, yes," Zorian said. "I have summoned an angel and spoke with him. It. Whatever it was."

He took the cube out of his pocket and showed it to the lich. He hadn't had a chance to study the cube yet and deciphered its uses, but he hoped that Quatach-Ichl, being experienced as he was, would be able to recognize it as an angelic artifact anyway.

Quatach-Ichl leaned forward, silently studying the cube in Zorian's hands. He did not ask to hold it (not that Zorian would have given it to him), but eventually he leaned back and took a deep breath.

"It must have been a pretty high-ranking angel you spoke with," Quatach-Ichl said, sounding honestly a little impressed. "Then again, considering what kind of situation you are involved in, I supposed it's to be expected."

"The angel told me about the contingencies that Silverlake had spoken about earlier. They aren't just some simple local effect, like a divine warding field or a stored spell," Zorian said, putting the cube back into his pocket. "They are security measures woven into the core of the world... and triggering them could have effects that would be *global* in scale. I'm not sure how far-reaching the effects would be, but there is absolutely no guarantee that Ulquaan Ibasa would not be affected."

Quatach-Ichl frowned at him slightly, not saying anything.

"Just as importantly," continued Zorian, "if the primordial is released into the world, the angels will be given free rein to descend into the material world and intervene directly to stop the primordial. At that point, they also intend to get rid of all the loose ends wandering around. Like a bunch of people that escaped from the time loop into the real world or that one annoying lich that made the whole thing possible to begin with..."

"I see," Quatach-Ichl said calmly. "You're saying the angels will go after me if I help release the primordial."

"Yes," Zorian confirmed.

The lich stared at him intensely, as if trying to look into his soul to see if he was telling the truth. Zorian's posture remained relaxed and his eyes stared right back at the undead mage in front of him. He was too old and experienced to be unnerved by something as simple as that.

"I think you're exaggerating things," Quatach-Ichl finally said, looking away from him for a moment and thoughtfully tapping his finger against his leg. "Yes, there is certainly a danger of that happening, but angels are laboring under many restrictions. In any case, if I were that skittish about taking chances, I would not be where I am right now. A big part of why being a lich is so great is that you can take crazy risks without dying for good."

Zorian frowned. Truthfully, he did not *really* think he could convince Quatach-Ichl to just give up on the invasion and go home... but he didn't expect the lich to dismiss the threat of angels so readily. Then again, he was right about liches like him being uniquely suited for taking risks. They had their own personal resurrection point. It was almost like being a time looper, in a way.

Oh well. It was worth a try.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Zorian said, shaking his head. He turned to leave.

"You intend to evacuate your loved ones to Koth, at the Taramatula Estate, right?" Quatach-Ichl suddenly asked him.

Zorian jolted into full alertness, spinning around to face the lich. He gave him a shocked, searching look.

"Don't look at me like that. Silverlake knows about it, so obviously me and that Jornak fellow also know," Quatach-Ichl told him bluntly. "Don't do it. Jornak has somehow managed to reverse-engineer my permanent gates within the time loop, the thieving wretch. Even as we speak, he is sending a simulacrum to Koth to build a gate there. If you dump all your people in Koth, they will not be safe – you'll just place them all in one spot so Jornak can conveniently capture them all in one fell swoop. Then he'll have a whole bunch of hostages to threaten you with."

"Why—" began Zorian.

"I don't like him," Quatach-Ichl said. "Besides, he's trying to become the overlord of the entire continent. While I want to say he's an arrogant idiot who bit off more than he can chew, the truth is that this time loop you all underwent is one hell of a boon. If he's right about the first emperor of Ikosia using the same method for his ascent to power, then I cannot afford to dismiss his ambitions as a mere delusion. I'd prefer to have him dead by the end of all this, even if that means you emerge victorious as a consequence. At least you and Mister Noveda have no political ambitions."

"And if that causes your own invasion to fail?" Zorian asked curiously.

"You agreed to this truce partially because you know you still have a good chance to win, even if you take a handicap like that," the lich said. "I believe the same about my chances. We'll see each other on the battlefield, Mister Kazinski."

Before Zorian could say anything else, Quatach-Ichl was gone.

- break -

Not long after the end of the meeting, Zorian went to meet with Spear of Resolve. Part of that was to inform her of what had happened there – although it was decided she would not participate in the talks, she was still a crucial part of their forces and someone who knew about the time loop. Additionally, she and her aranea normally constantly pressured the invaders and their cephalic rat allies, so it was important he told her about the truce as soon as possible.

However, if anyone from their group were to see them at the moment, they would be shocked at what they were seeing. Zorian and Spear of Resolve were not meeting each other in the dark tunnels beneath Cyoria – instead, they were walking through Cyoria's main square in plain view of everyone. Throngs of people of all ages wandered around the place, laughing and talking and arguing, but none of them paid much attention to a teenager and a huge jumping spider walking beside him. Some of them glanced curiously at Spear of Resolve – it was clear they could see her – but then they just continued on their merry way, completely unconcerned by the giant spider wandering around the town square.

Some children running past them accidentally dropped a ball near her and she deftly stopped it with her long, hairy leg – those spider limbs were more dexterous than Zorian gave them credit for – and lightly sent it back to them. They awkwardly thanked her for returning the ball to them and then ran off while loudly arguing about something completely unrelated.

"This is an interesting experience," Spear of Resolve commented, watching them fade into the throng of people surrounding them. She was talking vocally this time, making use of a sound spell, rather than speaking to him telepathically. "Anyway, back to our current topic... no, I don't think there was anything else you could have done. You could have just refused the truce, of course, but I have no doubt our enemy would have done as he promised. Personally, I am glad that crisis has been temporarily averted."

"Why?" Zorian gave her a curious look. "None of the threats would really affect you and your web."

"The wraith bombs terrify me," Spear of Resolve confided. "I had the misfortune to meet one of those things once. They can pass through solid stone and they only have to brush against you to do serious damage. They aren't immune to mind magic, thankfully, but they are *highly* resistant to it. Having hundreds, or even thousands of those things prowling around through Cyoria's underworld would essentially guarantee our extinction."

"Ah," nodded Zorian. "Yes, that makes sense."

"Still, while I'm glad we delayed a disaster, that's all this is. A delay. Even if the truce holds, we still must figure out a way to counter his threats before the end of the month," Spear of Resolve continued. "I'm sure you realized this, but this man is guaranteed to use these things in the end, no matter what deal was struck."

A massive flock of pigeons suddenly flew overhead. Some of the birds flew low, speeding right past Zorian and other nearby people, narrowly swerving left and right to avoid hitting anything. People around them stopped and pointed, animatedly discussing the disruption, but Zorian and Spear of Resolve just kept walking.

Eventually, the two of them left the town square and walked into a nearby street. They entered into a nearby restaurant and decided to sit down for a while. Of course, the chairs were designed for humans and not very convenient for Spear of Resolve. Thus, they called the staff and got them to place a stack of wooden boards on top of the seat, so that the aranea could stand on them and still be high enough to interact with the table (and Zorian) properly.

“So,” Zorian then began. “How many aranea in your web know about the time loop, anyway?”

“Pretty much all of them,” Spear of Resolve said, curiously tinkering with the plate, metal utensils, and glass placed in front of her.

Zorian sighed heavily. “Of course.”

“Sorry,” she told him. She didn’t sound very sorry, in all honesty. “Word spreads around fast among us. Especially if it’s something so strange like time travel. It was inevitable that it would become known by everyone by now.”

“What if you asked them to subject themselves to memory modification?” Zorian asked.

Spear of Resolve was silent for a while.

“It would be... difficult,” she eventually said.

“But possible?” Zorian asked hopefully.

“Potentially possible,” she admitted reluctantly. “There have been events where the entire web agreed to have memories of a certain incident erased for this or that reason. It is always a controversial decision, however. I would have to burn through a lot of social capital to make it happen. And for what? As things currently stand, our sacrifice will not save your friend. What about that unkillable lich that you never really managed to kill? What about Xvim and Alanic? What about *you*? I don’t think it’s fair to ask this of us.”

“I’ve talked to Xvim and Alanic,” Zorian said. “They are... not entirely opposed to losing some of their memory. I think they could be convinced to go along with it in the end.”

“That still leaves the lich and you as the huge, looming issues,” the matriarch remarked.

“Yes, that’s true,” Zorian agreed. “Incidentally, what about me? Do you think—”

“No,” Spear of Resolve immediately said. “I’ve seen your thoughts. You are practically defined by this experience of being stuck in the time loop. You spent as much time inside as you did out of it. In my opinion, no one can erase your knowledge of the time loop without metaphorically taking a sledgehammer to your mind. I really wouldn’t recommend it.”

“I see,” Zorian said quietly. Part of him was relieved to hear that. He really didn’t like the idea of losing such a massive chunk of his memories for any reason.

But how can they save Zach, then? Was Panaxeth really right in saying that one of them would have to die?

He was far more selfish than Zach, he realized. Zach had already decided to die if it means he has to kill Zorian in order to live. If the situation was reversed, Zorian wasn’t sure he could accept his own approaching death so easily.

He was quiet for a few seconds, lost in thought, before shaking his head and focusing on Spear of Resolve again. She was quietly studying him with her large, pitch black eyes, still standing on the stack of wooden boards that the staff of the restaurant placed on her chair.

The nearby waitress asked her if she wanted something to drink, undaunted by the fact she was talking to a giant spider, but the matriarch politely refused her.

“Anyway,” Zorian suddenly said, sweeping his hand around them. “What do you think about all of this?”

“What, the city and the restaurant?” Spear of Resolve asked. Zorian nodded. “It’s nice. Novel.”

“Nothing jumps out at you?” he asked with interest.

“You mean, other than the fact people around us are ridiculously accepting of me?” the matriarch asked rhetorically. “Well, there are a few minor details here and there. The vibrations I’m sensing through my feet do not quite match up with what I’m used to, and it’s sometimes obvious that the conversations in the background are pure gibberish if you listen to them closely, but otherwise it all looks very convincing.”

“Recreating exotic senses like your tremor sense is a pain in the ass,” Zorian admitted. “I did my best, but I’m not surprised I didn’t quite succeed.”

“I’m honestly shocked that you managed to make all this so convincing to my aranean senses,” the matriarch said. “It’s not just a matter of mind magic skill – you must have a very firm grasp of our perspective of seeing the world to succeed at this. I’m guessing you read many, many aranean minds inside the time loop.”

“I actually shapeshifted into an aranea a bunch of times, just to really see what it was like,” Zorian said.

"Ah. Maybe I should try that and be a human for a day," Spear of Resolve mused. "I'm betting it would be an unforgettable experience. Anyway, why don't we stop here for today?"

"Fine," Zorian agreed. "Truthfully, I'm starting to get a little mentally tired from maintaining this for so long."

Without warning, the world around them blurred and melted, like it was falling apart at the seams. In only a few moments, the two found themselves sitting on the cold stony floor of a small cavern in Cyoria's underground.

The city and the people in it were gone, like they never existed.

Indeed, that was what happened. Everything they saw had literally happened all in their heads. It was nothing but a mental illusion that Zorian had summoned around them.

"It's still going to need some work if you really want to use it in the way you hope to," Spear of Resolve remarked.

"I know," Zorian agreed. "I'm going to need your help with this."

"That won't be a problem," the matriarch said. "Maybe I'm not powerful enough to directly confront our enemies, but this is exactly my sort of problem. I assure you, I am *very* good at mind magic."

They talked for a few more minutes before Zorian decided it was time to go home for the day. It had been a long day and he had to sleep on things before he could consider how to go forward.

"One moment, please," the matriarch said before he could leave. "I understand the logic regarding my vulnerability to enemy action and I agree it is wisest for me to stay in the safety of our settlement for now... but I am a little unsatisfied with our current state of communication. No offense, but I'm not comfortable being totally reliant on you for all contact between us."

"So...?" Zorian asked curiously.

"So I decided to assign you a liaison," she said.

"A liaison?" Zorian repeated. "I... guess that's fine, yes."

"Great. I'll call her over right now. I'm sure you'll get along perfectly," Spear of Resolve said with a trace of humor in her voice.

Why...?

Before he could say anything, a smallish aranea excitedly skittered into the room, jumped right next to him and then excitedly started circling around him, thoroughly checking him out.

[Hi, hi!] A cheerful, bubbly voice suddenly sounded in his mind. [I'm Enthusiastic Seeker of Novelty, but you can just call me Novelty! Do you want to be my friend?]

98. Beneath the Surface

Chapter 098 Beneath the Surface

After the two groups of time travelers agreed to the shaky truce, the daily fighting stopped and the situation in Cyoria stabilized. Zach and Zorian no longer sent their simulacrum to raid invader bases and assassinate their leaders, and the invaders seemed to have no interest in testing their luck with them. Zorian had been worried that their enemies would try to strike at them indirectly, perhaps by sending the law enforcement after them or by attacking targets technically unrelated to them, but fortunately, they did no such thing.

Not that the two groups were entirely ignoring each other just because they weren't fighting, of course. Zach and Zorian were constantly monitoring invader movements, trying to figure out what they were doing and what their secrets were. Where they had placed all those wraith bombs Red Robe was threatening them with, for instance. Red Robe and his allies were similarly spying on them in return. Although both groups were clearly aware of each other's surveillance, there was an unspoken agreement that this was perfectly acceptable and the truce continued.

Even though this was just the calm before the storm, Zorian found himself kind of enjoying it. Too many things had happened recently, barely days apart from each other, and he had never really had time to sit down and process it all properly. They'd failed to get their group physically out of the time loop, and he ended up killing his old self after entering the real world. Zach had almost died at the start of the month, and he was certain to die at the end of it if they couldn't find a solution to the angelic contract he was working under. He doubted he would figure out something insightful about that just because he spent a few days mulling things over, but it would make him feel a little better, at least.

Of course, he couldn't really justify wasting time right now, truce or no truce. Things still needed to be done, preparations made. Thus, he decided to simply spend more time in his workshop, building up his arsenal of bombs, golems, and magical devices. Something that was both useful and relaxing. He had actually wanted to set aside more time for magical artifice for a while now, but the frantic pace of their activities in these past few days made that all but impossible. Just building enough simulacrum bodies and equipping them for the daily skirmishes was challenging enough.

In any case, Zorian was currently sitting in his workshop – a spacious room in the Noveda Mansion that Zach had generously donated for his purposes – and staring at a shiny metal plate in his hands, considering things. The large wooden table in front of him was an absolute mess of tools, half-processed materials, technical reference books, and hastily drawn blueprints that probably only made sense to him and no one else. The rest of the room was not much better. Tall, dangerous looking golems stood lined up next to one of the walls, some of them with gaping holes in their chests, still missing critical components before they could be completed. A stack of small metal cylinders densely covered in glowing lines and magical glyphs lay seemingly forgotten in one of the corners.

Zorian glanced at the half-finished construction on the table in front of him before returning his attention to the metal plates in his hand. The device he was building was still barely formed, but a perceptive onlooker would be able to puzzle out that it was a fairly large and very complicated cube. The center of it consisted of several rare and expensive crystals, which were then surrounded by a plethora of gears and interlocking pieces of metal, wood, and stone. Most of it was already done, just waiting for him to put it all together and cast the necessary spells, but he still had to make the outer chassis of the cube.

[What are you making?] a cheery, excitable voice suddenly sounded in his mind.

Zorian glanced at Novelty, who was currently wandering around the room and inspecting everything within her reach, caressing the items with her hairy spider legs and occasionally taking a nibble when she thought he wasn't looking. Most of his allies had no real interest in his workshop and what he did there, as they had no interest or deep understanding of magical artifice, but just about everything human-related was new and exciting for Novelty so she insisted on coming along. He suspected she would get bored of it all very soon, but for now she was surprisingly well behaved.

It was amusing, he thought to himself. Once upon a time, her presence here would have driven him up the wall and he would have done all he could to get rid of her. Now, he found her antics to be... kind of nostalgic. She reminded him of an older, simpler time. A time when Novelty had been entirely qualified to teach him mind magic and the aranea had been his only friends. Even though Spear of Resolve had intended to betray him in the end – something he had never actually revealed to the aranea here in the real world – he still felt gratitude towards her and her web.

He sometimes wondered what his life would have been like if they had somehow survived that fateful restart. Would the final outcome have been better with them around, or was their doom a necessary price for him to develop into what he was today? After all, without that reckless ploy he and Spear of Resolve concocted, Red Robe might have decided to stick around in the time loop for a long time. Zorian could easily imagine a situation where he never contacted Zach at all, constantly moving in the shadows in fear of attracting Red Robe's attention, the aranea his only ally...

[Hey! Why aren't you answering me?] Novelty protested.

What? Oh right, his project...

[It's secret,] he told her, shaking his head.

[Secret project...] she said, tapping her legs on the floor excitedly. Rather than backing off, she seemed only more fascinated by the secrecy. [Is it a weapon? Ooh, maybe it's a collapsible golem that transforms into a giant spider when a command word is spoken!]

[Why would I make a golem in the form of a giant spider, of all things?] he asked her, raising an eyebrow at her.

[Well, everything is better with spiders,] she told him matter-of-factly. [Plus, I heard you humans found us cute.]

Zorian gave her an incredulous look.

[What? What?] she demanded, shuffling from side to side in agitation.

[I... think one of your friends played a prank on you or something.] Zorian said diplomatically.

[No way!] she protested. [I have it on good authority that... I mean, you humans like small, furry animals, right? I saw your little sister playing with that black cat yesterday, and some people are taking care of dogs and stuff...]

[I'm afraid humans don't really place you in the same category as cats and dogs,] Zorian told her. [In fact, a sizable number of humans think spiders are pretty... horrifying.]

[Even giant spiders?] Novelty asked, visibly incredulous.

[Especially giant spiders,] Zorian said, laughing.

[How mean!] Novelty whined, her entire body vibrating in a clear show of annoyance.

Idly, Zorian wondered if painting Novelty pink and wrapping her in ribbons and glitter would make her cute enough for people to coo over. He could probably talk Novelty into going along with it...

Well. Something to think about if they managed to survive the month.

Fortunately, Novelty got over the incident very quickly and continued her exploration of Zorian's workshop instead of brooding over the whole event.

Zorian left her to her exploration. He closed his eyes for a moment, took a deep breath, and when he opened his eyes again the metal plate in front of him was densely covered in spell formula markings.

They weren't real, of course. The whole thing was just a mental illusion – a visualization of what the end result would look like based on his plans. Spotting a few possible flaws and failure points, he quickly went through a lengthy series of complicated calculations inside his head, almost instantly calculating problems that would have taken another spell formula crafter an entire afternoon of diligent calculation using pen and paper. The visualization of the end result blurred for a moment and then shifted into a different configuration that took these new calculations into account.

The process repeated itself several times, gradually refining the design. Most other artificers would have to spend a lot of time and mana making test plates and waste hours upon hours every time something had to be recalculated or adjusted, but Zorian's mental enhancements allowed him to sidestep most of that process.

Of course, all this work wouldn't even have to be done if it weren't for the fact that he had lost most of his spell formula blueprints while crossing over into the real world. So much work lost...

Thankfully, spell formulas were one of the fields he was most confident in.

He suddenly realized Novelty was poking a small metal sphere he left on a nearby chair. He pointed his hand towards her, causing invisible waves of telekinetic force to seize her entire body, and then gently but firmly dragged her away from the offending object.

“Don't touch that,” he told her verbally. “It's dangerous.”

She gave him an indecipherable look, staring at him quietly for a few seconds.

“What?” he asked her.

[You're pretty scary,] she told him. [I didn't even see you cast anything. You just casually pointed at me and I suddenly couldn't move! And then you just dragged me off like it's nothing... I thought mages like you needed to mumble and wave when they do their weird human magic?]

“They do. I'm just very, very good at this,” he told her. Though this did remind him that he needed to curb these kinds of moments as much as possible, since this kind of casual use of unstructured magic was not something a teenage mage like him should possess. Holding back for years and years was going to be hard...

[How did you even know what I was doing?] she continued. [Your back was turned! I'm sure of it!]

“This whole room is crisscrossed with a mesh of hair-thin mana threads centered on me,” Zorian told her. “Whenever you pass through them, I can sense it.”

[Like an invisible web?] she asked.

“Yes, exactly,” he agreed. It was a detection trick he had learned at some point in the time loop, inspired by Taiven's old trick of flooding her surroundings with her mana to detect hidden attacks and enemies. He didn't have the mana reserves to copy her trick exactly, but he didn't really

have to. Shaping the mana into a mass of threads was much cheaper than simply flooding every nook and cranny with his mana, yet just as effective for his purposes. The only downside was that this kind of ‘detection web’ required insanely good shaping skills to execute, but that was not really something Zorian had trouble with.

[Scary...] she repeated unhappily.

She glanced at the metal sphere she had been poking before he stopped her, and then gave him a speculative look.

[So what’s that thing anyway?] she said, pointing at the small sphere with one of her legs. [You didn’t complain when I was touch– err, I mean looking at the other things in the room, but you immediately reacted now? What is it?]

“It’s a hollow metal sphere holding a pocket dimension inside,” he told her. “It’s supposed to suck in and contain a creature inside. Like a portable prison for powerful monsters.”

[I... don’t understand,] she complained. [That’s meant to capture people? But it’s so small! I’d never fit inside!]

Oh, right... not everyone was familiar with the concept of expanded spaces and pocket dimensions and whatnot.

“It’s bigger on the inside than on the outside. There is an entire room inside that little metal ball. You’d fit in just fine,” he explained.

Novelty was quiet for a second, trying to process this.

[Oh. How weird,] she eventually said. [You shouldn’t leave it lying around like that, then. What if someone stumbles upon it when you’re not around and gets sucked in? They could starve to death before you remember to check inside!]

“Give me some credit. I did put some safeguards on it. It’s just that it’s meant specifically for capturing giant spiders, so I’m not sure if the safeguards would work properly for an aranea like you. I kind of forgot I left it lying around when I let you come today,” Zorian explained.

[Oh. Wait, why are you making tools for capturing giant spiders?] Novelty asked, suddenly sounding concerned.

“It’s a secret,” Zorian said. “It has nothing to do with aranea, though, so you can rest easy.”

Plus, if he wanted to deal with the aranea, he wouldn’t need to resort to such complicated and expensive methods. But he didn’t really say that out loud. Novelty already thought he was scarily powerful, after all, no need to feed her paranoia further.

[I kind of want to get inside now to see what it’s like,] Novelty eventually admitted, staring intently at the sphere.

Zorian snorted at the admission. And here he thought he was scaring the poor thing. Nosy little spider couldn’t resist sticking her legs and fangs absolutely everywhere...

“It’s meant to be a prison, so it’s pretty bare,” Zorian told her. “Wait a few days and I’ll show you something similar on a far larger, more interesting scale. There is an entire palace in there. And Princess. I guess I can introduce you to her at that time.”

[Princess? You know royalty?] Novelty said, sounding very fascinated.

“Princess isn’t really an officially recognized ruler of any place, but she’s very... majestic. Very memorable. I’m sure you’ll be suitably impressed after seeing her,” Zorian said, smiling evilly inside.

[Huh. You know, you’re pretty nice to me,] Novelty remarked.

“Yes, I’m a pretty great guy, aren’t I?” Zorian indulgently agreed.

[Did we know each other? Before, I mean? In the future? Err, I mean... this is so confusing... you know what I mean!] Novelty fumbled, waving her front legs in front of her frustratingly.

Zorian tapped his finger on the table thoughtfully. He never actually told the aranea the fine details about what happened in the time loop, and definitely didn’t mention Novelty, as she wasn’t terribly relevant in the grand scheme of things.

“What gave you that idea?” he asked her.

[It just seems like you know me a little too well,] she said. [It’s true, isn’t it? We totally knew each other in the future you came from, didn’t we?]

“You taught me mind magic a few times,” Zorian admitted.

[I was your teacher?] Novelty said incredulously. If she was human, she would have probably gasped. [But that means... I wasn’t just your friend, I was your senior! You should be paying your respects to me!]

“Keep dreaming,” Zorian said. “It was just a couple of basic lessons, and you’re younger than I am.”

[The matriarch said you don’t even qualify as a real adult in human terms, whereas I already went through the maturation ceremony. So there,] Novelty insisted stubbornly.

She almost immediately drooped down in an exaggerated gesture of defeat, though.

[Though... if I were honest... I kind of want you to be my teacher instead,] she admitted. [I kind of want to try learning human magic, and you're the only human mage I know, so... you'd be willing to help your future teacher out, wouldn't you?]

“Sure,” Zorian shrugged. “I already have a huge list of people I need to help out once this is all settled, what’s one more person on the list? You’re going to have to wait for this month to end, though.”

[Yes!] she cheered. [I’ll wait! It’s totally not a problem! Patience is my best feature!]

It took an inhuman amount of self-control for Zorian not to roll his eyes at her.

[What?] she demanded.

“Liar,” he told her flatly.

[How can you talk like that to your teacher?] she complained. [Kids these days, no respect...]

Zorian blocked her out and turned back to the metal plate on the table in front of him.

- break -

In a small but familiar tavern in Cyoria, simulacrum number three sat alone in a corner, curiously studying his surroundings. The insides of the tavern were dark, the air stale, but the place was still familiar to the simulacrum even after all these years. This was the tavern where he used to talk with Haslush Izketeri, the detective who taught him divination way back when he had still been a novice mage. Now, he would be meeting his old divination teacher again, this time in the real world.

He was disguised for the occasion. At the moment, the simulacrum looked like an older middle-aged man, with graying hair and a bushy, prominent mustache. A formal brown suit, a weathered wooden cane, and a roll of yesterday’s newspapers completed a picture of a regular, nondescript man that he hoped wouldn’t attract too much attention. However, based on the frequent glances he was getting from other people, he was pretty sure he failed at looking like he belonged here. It was likely that regular visitors to this tavern already knew each other and that a newcomer like him was automatically noteworthy, or maybe he just wasn’t as good at pretending as he thought he was. In any case, it didn’t matter much, since he intended to discard this identity entirely after today’s talk.

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Eventually a familiar man approached his table. Middle aged, dressed in a cheap, rumpled suit and kind of unkempt, Haslush looked just like he remembered him. He scanned the tavern quickly, his eyes soon falling on the disguised simulacrum. The simulacrum met his gaze, and they stared at each other silently for a second. Haslush had a sleepy, lazy look on his face the whole time as he studied him, but the simulacrum could see a trace of wariness bleed into his posture. The information provided by his empathy and soul perception reinforced this. Eventually, the detective averted his eyes, rubbed his nose for a second, and then casually ambled over to the simulacrum’s table.

“Hi there. Do you mind if I sit here?” Haslush asked in a lazy voice.

“Not at all. After all, I did ask to meet you here,” the simulacrum said.

“Ah, so you *were* the one that asked to see me,” Haslush said, nodding to himself. He plopped heavily into the chair in front of him, ignoring the ominous creaking of the wood beneath him, and ordered himself a drink. “Why all this cloak and dagger stuff, if I may ask? You didn’t even give me your name in that letter you sent me.”

“With good reason,” the simulacrum said. “We’d both be in danger if you knew who I am.”

“But I already know your face now so—” Haslush began, before suddenly frowning. He narrowed his eyes at the simulacrum, his irises glittering with a subtle divination spell. “This isn’t your real appearance, is it?”

“No,” the simulacrum admitted, shaking his head. “For reasons of convenience, you can call me ‘Kesir’, though that isn’t my real name either. I’m just a throwaway simulacrum. After this talk, I will vanish into ectoplasmic smoke and we’ll hopefully never speak again.”

“A simulacrum?” Haslush repeated, visibly taken aback.

Zorian understood the reaction. Simulacra were high-level magic, not something that one regularly encountered.

Rather than saying anything, the simulacrum extended his arm between them and willed it to unravel for a second. It quickly grew blurry and dissolved into a mass of glowing blue smoke, before suddenly reforming itself back into his arm.

For this particular meeting, he didn’t inhabit the usual golem body that most of Zorian’s simulacra were equipped with these days. The fewer traces he left here today, the better. He was pretty sure he had covered his tracks well enough to stop Red Robe from knowing about this meeting, but it was still best to minimize risks.

"Well, I'll be damned. That's not a piece of magic you see every day, that's for sure," Haslush said, recovering his calm, lazy façade. "Are you sure you got the right person for this, though? This sounds almost like a job for spies and crown agents, not little old me. I'm just your average detective, Mister Kesir."

"For reasons that will soon become obvious, I can't contact anyone particularly high ranked, or things will get really bad," the simulacrum said. He took a large leather paper holder out of his jacket pocket, deliberately making the entire process visible to the man in front of him.

Haslush's eyes widened imperceptibly when the simulacrum retrieved a large object from a jacket pocket it couldn't possibly fit into. It was just a temporary pocket dimension, not even a permanent expanded space, but most people would have still never encountered that sort of thing in their entire life. More than even the simulacrum, pocket dimension creation was a rare form of magic.

"Please take a look at this," the simulacrum told the man, handing him a stack of pictures and documents before leaning back in his chair and patiently waiting.

Haslush cautiously leafed through the papers, periodically frowning and tapping his fingers on the table. His expression worsened as time went by, and at some point he ordered some really strong alcohol to get through the rest, but eventually he skimmed through the whole stack. There wasn't enough time for him to comb through the whole thing, but even a casual glance through the documents Zorian gathered painted a grim picture.

"This is insane," Haslush eventually said, downing an entire glass of hard alcohol and slamming it on the table in front of him. Some of the nearby tavern patrons glanced at them curiously for a moment. "A full scale invasion of the city with the local mage guild in on the whole thing? How can something like this be real? A conspiracy this grand and far-reaching should be impossible to pull off."

"The invaders are using permanent gates – a concept that has not been known to exist until now. On top of that, the local authorities have been hopelessly infiltrated and are working with the invaders to cover up the whole thing. It's very real," the simulacrum said.

"You're one of them, aren't you?" Haslush suddenly said. "A defector. That's the only way you could possibly know all this and have this much evidence."

"I'm not one of them," the simulacrum insisted, "but they do have a certain amount of influence over me, or else I wouldn't be moving in the shadows like this. If I go public with this, the results will be... disastrous."

"Really?" Haslush asked, raising his eyebrow at him. "A mage of your caliber..."

"I didn't say I would die. Of course I can always run away and hide. I said the consequences would be *disastrous*," the simulacrum clarified.

"More disastrous than the city being invaded by monsters, demons, and the undead?" Haslush asked dubiously.

"Yes," the simulacrum said.

Haslush waited for a second, but the simulacrum didn't intend to clarify. What he was telling the detective was unbelievable enough without getting into the whole wraith bomb situation or the possibility of an army of dragons laying waste to northern Eldemar.

"Wouldn't the same be true if I were to make this public?" Haslush asked.

"Yes," the simulacrum admitted. "To be honest, the enemy would instantly realize where you got your information from, so you trying to alert people to this would be no different than me doing it myself. Well, other than the fact you'd be much easier to silence than me."

"Lovely," Haslush said calmly. "So you don't actually want me to make these documents known to anyone?"

"I obviously can't stop you from doing what you feel is right," the simulacrum said. "But I wouldn't recommend it, no."

"What do you expect me to do with this, then?" Haslush asked, waving the leather paper holder in front of him. He looked genuinely curious, rather than angry.

The simulacrum was actually rather impressed with how Haslush was behaving. Most people were either stubbornly disbelieving or had trouble thinking straight when something like this was dumped into their lap. In fact, Haslush wasn't the first person they were contacting about this, and he wouldn't be the last, but he was the one who had had the best reaction thus far. This didn't mean he would end up being useful in the end, of course, but it was encouraging.

"I don't know," the simulacrum said. "Although it may seem like I'm holding all the cards here, I'm actually not sure what should be done here. I'm not a professional spy or master manipulator. I'm hoping that you will know what to do with this better than I do."

Haslush stared at him quietly for a second before leafing through the pages a few more times. It was just an idle gesture. The simulacrum could see he wasn't really reading things, just idly flipping through the documents as he mulled things over.

He eventually snapped the paper holder shut and pushed it aside before massaging his temples for a bit.

"This is insane," he said.

"Yes, you already said that," the simulacrum noted.

"Well, I feel like repeating myself," Haslush told him, giving him a weak glare. "I suppose this does help explain all the weird attacks and sudden deaths my department has been flooded with lately. Who else did you tell about this?"

"What makes you think I told others?" the simulacrum asked, surprised.

"Who?" Haslush insisted, not offering any explanations.

The simulacrum eventually relented and gave him some names. Kylae and the other priests in the city, which were slowly being informed about the invasion. Some of the shifters living in the city whose children were going to be used in the ritual. A few other policemen and detectives Zach and Zorian had identified as reliable while inside the time loop. And so on.

"That's more people than I thought," Haslush noted. "Aren't you afraid someone will talk?"

"It's always a possibility, but I feel I judged people correctly," the simulacrum said. "I'm a mind reader, after all."

Haslush immediately graced him with a string of colorful curses before casting mental defense spells on himself.

"Of course you're a mind mage, too..." the detective grumbled. "Anyway, since you so graciously left it up to me to decide how to handle this, I will visit these people and see if we can figure something out. But if we decide to go higher with this information..."

"Then everything goes to hell, probably," the simulacrum said. "Though... maybe that would be for the best. I don't think there is a perfect answer to be had, here. Maybe triggering everything sooner rather than later is actually the right move, I don't know. Whatever you decide, I'll support you as much as I can... but I'm not all powerful. Don't be surprised if you end up dead after talking to the wrong person."

"I'll keep that in mind," Haslush said thoughtfully. "I'm still not tired of living. I can assure you that much. Plus, I know better than anyone how disgustingly underhanded the mage guild can be about protecting people who really don't deserve state protection, just because they are useful in some way... but let's not talk about that right now. Do you have anything else for me?"

"Yes," the simulacrum said, retrieving a paper envelope sealed with ornate red wax. "Here, have this."

"What is it?" Haslush asked, flipping the envelope curiously in his hands.

"Don't open this until the end of the month," the simulacrum warned him. "Otherwise I will assume the letter has been compromised and abandon that particular place. That said, there is a key to a post office box inside. It's empty right now, but if the worst happens, there will be a package inside at the end of the month, explaining everything and containing some information to be distributed to various people."

"Insurance in case you die, eh?" Haslush guessed. He casually stuffed the envelope in his pocket, carelessly crumpling it in the process. "Alright. Do you think—"

But the simulacrum was already unraveling, quickly becoming intangible ectoplasmic smoke.

Before he completely dissolved, he thought he heard Haslush say something about rudeness.

- break -

In Imaya's kitchen, there was a large and curious gathering. Zorian, Imaya, Kirielle, Kael, Kana, Rea, Nockha, Taiven and Xvim were all present. They weren't doing anything terribly important – the older people present were playing a game of cards and having scattered conversations, while the three little girls ran around playing with dolls. In the beginning they also participated in the card game, but they were not very good at it, so they eventually wandered off to do their thing.

These sorts of meetings had happened a few times already, but they'd never had so many people before. In addition, Xvim's presence was an unusual event, to say the least.

Zorian thoughtfully fingered one of the cards in his hand, purposely ignoring Taiven, who was sitting beside him and craning her neck in an attempt to 'stealthily' peek at his hand. Times like this were a bit of a guilty pleasure for him, since they were entirely unproductive and he realistically shouldn't waste time on them. The reasonable response to Imaya's request to join them in their game would be to say he's busy and go back to analyzing Zach's contract again, but... he was only human. Sometimes, he just wanted to play cards and relax, even when the fate of the whole city was at stake.

Xvim was present here for a reason, though. With the discovery of Zach's contract and the fact Red Robe was sending a simulacrum to Koth to take his friends hostage, he was presented again with the question of what to do about his friends and family in the upcoming invasion. He clearly couldn't leave them to wander the city on invasion day, ignorant of the threat. However, he also couldn't just tell them about the time loop and dump them all at the Taramatula Estate in Koth.

In the end, it was decided that Zach and Zorian shouldn't be doing the evacuation of all these people in the first place. Some people – Taiven for example – reacted very poorly to Zach and Zorian revealing crazy powerful abilities that they shouldn't have, and others might refuse to cooperate with a bunch of teenagers trying to drag them off to a completely unknown place all of a sudden. It was better to have an adult in a position of authority to contact the people. Someone in on the whole story, capable of advanced dimensionalism, and respectable looking. That made Xvim the prime candidate, especially since he claimed he could talk Ilsa into accompanying him and lending additional weight to his words. Ilsa was

Imaya's best friend, so she would probably trust her if she said Imaya had accompanied them and hid for a few days.

But it was still best if Xvim wasn't a total stranger to the people he intended to contact, so it was agreed that he would visit Imaya's place one day. Officially, the visit was because he had to discuss something with Zorian, since he was his mentor and all, but the real reason was so that he could introduce himself to everyone. That way, when he and Imaya came knocking to people and told them that they had to evacuate out of the city for a few days because an attack was imminent, they would hopefully be more open to the idea.

As for Zorian, it was his job to arrange things so that most people were actually present when Xvim visited.

He thought he had done a decent job there, to be honest.

"Mister Chao sure is diligent in his work," Rea remarked, throwing a card at the center of the table. "You don't often see teachers making a personal visit to their student's home. I only ever saw it once, and that was because the student in question had vandalized another student's belongings, not because of anything good. Then again, I did hear that Cyoria's Royal Academy of Magical Arts is on a different level than most places..."

"I usually don't make this kind of personal visit, of course," Xvim said, casually throwing a card of his own on top of hers. Zorian thought the man would be awkward or annoyed when presented with this kind of social gathering over a card game, but Xvim showed no discomfort with the situation whatsoever. He wasn't exactly relaxed, but he gave off the same sort of severe, dignified atmosphere he always did. "Sadly, most students today are very lazy and lack proper dedication to truly master their chosen fields. They want shortcuts and instant results, and the modern academy curriculum encourages that sort of attitude."

"It's the Weeping, isn't it?" Kael said softly.

"Indeed," Xvim nodded solemnly. "With the death of so many mages, the academy received a directive from on high to lower its standards. In more ways than one. On one hand, this meant children from wealthy, but not traditionally magical families could attend our institution far more easily than in the past, and I have no issue with that. Unfortunately, it also meant that some of the more boring and unpleasant but necessary lessons were removed in favor of 'practical education' and other nonsensical words. As if foundation building is not practical..."

The conversation continued for a while in this vein, with people chipping in with their thoughts from time to time. Zorian noticed Taiven staring at him at one time, but she averted her gaze when he glanced at her. She had probably started to notice that there was something weird going on with him. Well, other than him being a telepath and hanging out with sapient underground spiders. Thankfully, she was still wary of confronting him about it, so he didn't have to figure out how to explain anything for now. She was one of the people who reacted very badly to him being suddenly absurdly powerful and competent, so delaying that confrontation for as long as possible was for the best.

He was still debating whether it would be better to have her join the fighting on invasion day or to simply hide her along with all the rest. On one hand, having her join the chaotic final fight would be extremely dangerous and there was a high chance she could die. He would be devastated if that happened. On the other hand, she was a warrior mage looking for a chance to get actual experience and make a name for herself, and he was pretty sure she would choose to stay and fight if she had a choice. Did he have the right to take that choice away from her just because he would hate to see her die or get seriously hurt?

He remembered his younger self and how much he hated his parents' attempts to dictate his life for him. Taiven's parents were already trying to keep her safe by steering her away from dangerous professions and she resented them for it. If he made this choice for her, how was he any different from his mother? He would be worse, probably, because at least his mother had never used advanced magic to compel him to obey.

Ugh. He put that decision aside for now. He could tackle that later.

He suddenly realized that Kirielle had brought her new toy to show off for her friends and that it was attracting attention from the adults as well. It was a small golem Zorian had made for her. Kirielle had already painted a face on it and added hair and a dress and other little touches, so by now it looked almost like an animate doll rather than a golem.

[I hope you realize this is a very eye-catching toy, Mister Kazinski,] a voice said in his head. Zorian was startled to realize it was Xvim, contacting him telepathically. Xvim wasn't psychic and Zorian hadn't seen him casting any spells. Then again, it was Xvim... and as he liked to say, there was a shaping exercise for everything. [Laymen may ignore that golem as a curiosity, but any decent mage will know how difficult it is to produce such a thing.]

[I know, but that golem isn't just a toy,] Zorian sent back. [Beneath its harmless façade, that thing is packed full of weapons and defensive wards. It is a veritable tiny murder machine. This way I get to give Kirielle a powerful bodyguard without being too obvious about it.]

[Ah,] Xvim responded, surprised. [I am admittedly not an artificer, but your ability in that field never ceases to amaze me. I suppose I could understand why you fear the government as much as you do. Your ability to make devices alone would make the authorities do everything in their power to gain control over you.]

[Yeah,] Zorian agreed uneasily. He knew that his abilities would get out at some point, but that would hopefully be years in the future. By that point he should have cemented his position a bit and would be able to resist being pressured against his will.

[I think your sister's friends are going to be very jealous of her, though,] Xvim noticed, observing their reactions.

[I'm actually hoping they will ask for a 'doll' of their own,] Zorian admitted. [That way I get to put another two bodyguards among people close to

me.]

Xvim had nothing to say to that.

Eventually the game ended and people decided it was time to disperse. Zorian was about half-way back to his room when he suddenly felt a stream of knowledge flood into his mind.

It was from the simulacrum he had left studying Zach's contract.

The document was hard to understand. The language used was very complex and weirdly structured, and there was a lot of text to read through. However, Zorian was pretty sure he understood the basic points by now.

Two points stuck out to him

One was that the release of the primordial was tied to the activation of the divine safeguards on its prison. If the safeguards activated before the month was done, regardless of the reason why, Zach was considered to have failed in his mission. Zach's perception did not matter here – the contract could detect the activation of the safeguards innately, and was apparently tied to them on some intangible level. Zorian could not detect this connection on Zach, but the contract claimed it existed, so it probably did. Divine magic was headache-inducing bullshit, anyway. Zorian suspected that this part of the contract was the core of it. It was clearly the most important part of it; it was defined near the very beginning of the document and had the most unambiguous terms.

The second thing was the definition of time loop knowledge. Zorian had been hoping that enforcement of this clause depended purely on Zach's perception of what counted and what didn't, which would make it really easy to manipulate it through warping Zach's perceptions, but it wasn't quite that simple. The contract defined exactly what counted as informing people about the existence of the time loop. Telling people he was a time traveler, describing his experiences in such a way as to make it clear he had gone through the same month multiple times, describing future events in a way that made it clear he had already experienced them all ran afoul of the terms of the contract. In fact, that part of the contract went into considerable detail to close any sort of loophole that would allow Zach to tell people about his experiences in the time loop. Even telling people he came 'from another world' was not okay. It was obvious for a while now that the angels *really* didn't want anyone to know about the time loop, but reading the contract really drove the point home for Zorian.

Which caused an ominous feeling to arise in his heart. After all, the contract had an expiration date. At the end of the month, it would dissolve and Zach would no longer be bound by it. That meant that after the month went by, Zach would be free to make his experiences as public as he wanted to make them.

Were the angels really fine with that? The contract strongly suggested they weren't, but there was really nothing stopping Zach from doing just that. Maybe not immediately after the month ended, but as years and decades went by? A person might get tempted to write a book or something before he died...

It would probably be very convenient for the angels if Zach and Zorian stopped Panaxeth's release, but perished some time afterwards...

His paranoia aside, the good news was that the enforcement of that particular clause of the contract depended entirely on Zach's own perception, just like Zorian suspected. *Zach* was the one who determined whether a violation of the contract had occurred or not. If someone knew about the time loop but Zach never found out about it, the contract would never know either. It pulled information straight from Zach's senses, thoughts, and memories.

Zorian knew a couple of mental enhancements that might be used to manipulate that, but Zach's restrictions when it came to mind magic prevented him from teaching them to his fellow time traveler. Not that they had time for that, but still. Zorian had a feeling the mind magic restrictions weren't just due to 'ethical concerns'.

Curiously, there was nothing in the contract stopping Zach from doing what Zorian planned to do and just giving people research notes that they had written themselves. Even though such information was clearly made through time travel, and some of the more perceptive and open-minded recipients would probably realize they came from some future version of themselves, it wasn't actually against the rules. At least not to Zorian's amateur eyes. So long as the notes never said where they came from and only incidentally hinted at their origin, they were fine from the contract perspective.

This was good, because Zorian had an important task to accomplish in the coming days. He had to talk to his older brother Daimen. He obviously wasn't going to be sending his friends and family to the Taramatula estate now, since he knew that Red Robe was setting up an ambush party there to take advantage of that. Nonetheless, the fact remained that his older brother and the Taramatula were now in danger because of him. If only for that reason, he had to talk to them.

And he doubted he could convince Daimen to accept him as the legitimate Zorian without utilizing the notes his older brother had written for himself inside the time loop.

Even with them, he was definitely not looking forward to that conversation...

99. Powderkeg

Chapter 099 Powderkeg

Arranging a meeting with Daimen was easy this time. Not that it had ever been truly difficult to do that, but after learning the basics of the local language and customs over the restarts, the task had become totally trivial. He just had to approach the Taramatula in the right way, and they didn't even bother trying to turn him away – they went to fetch Daimen after only a few minutes of convincing, leaving Zorian to wait at the entrance.

He was currently flipping through Daimen's notebooks to pass the time, ignoring the strange looks given to him by the gate guards. The notebook was coded, but that couldn't stop Zorian at all. With his mental enhancements active, he could decode the text in an instant, so long as he knew the key. Not that there was anything really interesting recorded in the notebooks. Daimen had written those in consultation with Zorian, so this was more about Zorian reminding himself what they put in there than discovering something new and exciting. He thought about trying to strike up a conversation with the guards currently observing him, but he knew from previous experience they weren't the talkative sort. It didn't help that his grasp of the local language was pretty shaky still.

After a while, Zorian flipped through the last of the notebooks he had brought along and closed it shut. He impatiently rocked back and forth in place, taking in the sights around him through his various senses. In his mind sense and soul sense, the bees coming and going from the Taramatula estate looked like streams of tiny glittering stars.

Pretty. He turned his back towards the gate and observed the wall of plant life surrounding the estate. He had been here many times in the past, but he had rarely paid much attention to the lands surrounding the place. Ignoring the guards and their alarmed inquiries about where he was going, he promptly wandered off into the wilds and started exploring.

The jungle surrounding the Taramatula estate was kind of beautiful, he realized. No doubt a large part of that was deliberate design by the Taramatula, but still. There were paths cut into the vegetation to make the area more accessible to humans, and flowers were everywhere. Zorian followed the paths with no particular purpose in mind, mentally repelling snakes and biting insects whenever they got too close to him. No large predatory animals bothered him. The Taramatula had probably cleared them all out from the vicinity of their home.

Eventually he stopped walking, staring at a particularly large white flower that had a great many bees swarming over it. A voice sounded from behind him not long afterwards.

"It really is you. Damn it, Zorian, couldn't you have waited at the entrance just a little bit? If you wanted to look at bees, there are like a million of them inside the estate..."

It was Daimen, of course. Zorian slowly turned around, observing his eldest brother with a complex expression. Interacting with people he had gotten to know as temporary loopers before the end was always rather uncomfortable, and never was this as true as it was right now. The last time he saw Daimen, his brother had sacrificed himself to ensure Zorian could get out of the time loop alive.

Xvim had sacrificed himself too, of course. So had many other temporary loopers. However, Daimen's choice to burn his whole life force to stabilize the passage into the real world had left a particularly deep impression on Zorian because... it was Daimen. He would have never expected his eldest brother to sacrifice himself for him.

He had never completely forgiven Daimen for what happened in his childhood, he realized. Interacting with his eldest brother in the time loop, he grudgingly came to accept he was being kind of petty and that he needed his brother's help, but a part of him would always see Daimen as an enemy. Now that part of him was angry and upset, because he realized he owed a life debt to Daimen now. Even if the Daimen in front of him knew nothing of it, Zorian himself could never pretend it wasn't real.

"What?" Daimen demanded. He sounded pretty annoyed. "Why are you staring at me like that?"

"We haven't seen each other in a while, but I feel like I saw you only days ago," said Zorian after a second of pause.

"Ha! Yes, your big brother is just as handsome and dashing as always," Daimen said, puffing his chest in an exaggerated manner. He then gave Zorian a scrutinizing look. "You've certainly changed, though."

Like always, Daimen doubted his identity upon their first meeting. Quite sensible, considering the distances he would have to traverse just to end up here.

"Yeah, well, people change rapidly during their teenage years," Zorian commented calmly.

"No, it's more than that," Daimen said, shaking his head. "Even your posture is different. You look calmer. More confident."

"Confident?" Zorian asked incredulously. He felt anything but confident at the moment. He was under a tremendous amount of stress at the moment.

"Yeah," Daimen said. "It seems the academy has been a good influence on you."

He looked around until he spotted a nearby fallen tree and then casually waved his hand at it. A gust of wind immediately blew away all the dirt and leaves on top of it, after which Daimen plopped down on the tree with a heavy sigh. He then gave Zorian a piercing look.

“Why are you here, Zorian?” he asked. “Actually, scratch that. *How* are you here?”

“Teleportation,” Zorian said. In reality he had opened a dimensional gate straight to Koth, but it was best to keep that secret for now. “I got someone to transport me directly to you.”

“Transport you directly... Zorian, do you have any idea how dangerous that is!?” Daimen spluttered at him

“Of course I do,” Zorian told him. “It’s just that I had no choice but to do this. I had to talk to you as soon as possible.”

Daimen stared at him for a few seconds, discreetly casting a few divination spells at Zorian and considering something. Zorian patiently waited for him to finish and pretended he didn’t notice the divination spells directed at him.

“You’re in trouble, aren’t you?” Daimen finally asked with a long-suffering sigh.

“Yes,” Zorian admitted. “Big trouble.”

“I knew it,” Daimen said flatly. “Damn it, Zorian... this is the sort of thing I’d expect out of Fortov, not you. Alright, just... tell me what you have gotten yourself into and I’ll see how I can help you. But you owe me big time for this! How did you get enough money to pay for teleportation here, anyway? You didn’t steal from Mother and Father, did you?”

“No, I have plenty of money,” Zorian said, shaking his head.

Daimen swore under his breath. He seemed even more displeased with that idea than with Zorian stealing money from his family. In all likelihood, he assumed Zorian must have gotten the money illegally.

Which, now that he thought about it, was pretty much correct. He got most of his current funds by stealing them from the invaders, after all.

“Anyway, my issue is that invaders from Ulquaan Ibasa and the cultists of the World Dragon are going to jointly invade Cyoria on the night of the summer festival in order to release the primordial trapped beneath the city and harvest the souls of everyone currently living there,” Zorian summarized.

Daimen gave him a strange look.

“What?” he asked with an incredulous laugh.

“Ulquaan Ibasa, the isle of the exiles, is invading Cyoria through a permanent dimensional portal hidden beneath the city,” Zorian said.

“A-ha,” Daimen said slowly.

“Much of the city’s leadership has been subverted by the Esoteric Order of the Celestial Dragon, better known as the Cult of the World Dragon. They are working together with the Ibasaans to keep the invasion preparations secret and will directly aid them when they actually invade the city,” Zorian continued.

“I see,” Daimen said, giving him a sour look. “You are definitely Zorian. Only he would come here with such a ridiculous story. A real imposter would surely cobble together a far more convincing scheme than this.”

“I’m glad you think so,” Zorian told him calmly. “Anyway, I don’t really expect you to do much about the invasion itself. That whole situation is kind of beyond you. Unfortunately, the invaders know I’m one of the chief people opposing them, so they’re going to go after you and the Taramatula to get leverage over me. That’s why I hurried over here like this. I had to warn you before it was too late.”

Daimen suddenly frowned, becoming a little more serious.

“Zorian, this isn’t funny,” Daimen protested severely.

“I know,” Zorian sighed. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry for getting you into this mess. All I can do is offer you information, and maybe shelter, if you need one. Though convincing the Taramatula to evacuate their ancestral estate and leave it at the mercy of the invaders is probably a tall order, so...”

“You know what? I don’t have time for your bullshit,” Daimen told him, anger and annoyance mixing in his voice and posture. He got up from his seat and dusted himself off. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be going back to my work. When you’re ready to have a serious talk, we can—”

Zorian took the imperial orb out of his jacket pocket and held it in front of him, in plain view of Daimen.

Daimen froze at the sight, staring dumbfounded at the orb for several seconds.

“Is that...?” he began.

"It's the imperial orb, yes," Zorian nodded. "Sorry about that. I know you've been looking for it for a while now, but I am in dire need of it."

"What? Why..." Daimen said in an uncomprehending manner, unable to accept what he was seeing.

"Considering my earlier story, it should be self-explanatory why I need it," Zorian noted.

"Not that! I mean... aargh!" Daimen groaned. "How did you get that!? Why do you have that? This doesn't make any sense!"

"Here," Zorian said, reaching into his jacket pocket again and handing Daimen the notebooks he had written for himself during the time loop. "Read this and things will hopefully make more sense."

Daimen quickly snatched the notebooks out of Zorian's hands before giving the imperial orb an intense look. He then snatched the imperial orb as well before retreating back to his log to study them both. Zorian let the orb go, unconcerned. Daimen was a great mage, but he was no Quatach-Ichl. If Zorian wanted to get the orb back, he could do so at any time, regardless of Daimen's wishes.

Daimen flipped through the notebooks with one hand while fondling the imperial orb in the other, occasionally muttering to himself in a low voice.

"What? This can't be right... oh, I remember this one. I was going to check this in the next few months... how does he even *know* this?" Daimen muttered. "Wait a minute..."

He suddenly shut up and started pacing like a caged tiger, reading a particular passage. He eventually spun in place and turned towards Zorian in an aggressive manner.

"What is this!?" he demanded. "Did... did I write this?"

"Yes," Zorian confirmed.

"But... I don't remember ever writing this," Daimen frowned.

"Yes," Zorian agreed.

"Don't you 'yes' at me!" Daimen protested. "Give me an explanation!"

"I can't," Zorian said, shaking his head.

"Oh come on, do you seriously expect me to believe you have no idea how this came to be?" Daimen said, waving the notebook in front of Zorian's face.

"I know how the notebooks came to be, of course," Zorian said. "I even helped you write them. It's just that I can't give you an explanation."

"You... helped me write these?" Daimen asked, looking at him strangely. He shook his head to clear his thoughts. "No, ignore that question. *Why* can't you give me an explanation?"

"Because lives depend on it," Zorian told him. "I know I'm asking a lot here, but please trust me on this. The consequences of me telling you these things would be truly dire. My friend could die. I could die. The whole city of Cyoria could die."

"That thing again," Daimen frowned at him. "This... invasion of yours."

"In the end, everything comes back to that," Zorian confirmed, nodding. "Oh, and give me back the imperial orb, please."

He stretched out his hand towards Daimen, observing his reaction. Daimen glanced at the imperial orb in his hand, and then back at Zorian again, his expression deep in thought for a moment.

Then he thrust the orb back into Zorian's outstretched hand and returned to his log, flipping through the notebooks again.

"I don't want to believe this, but there is so much stuff here," Daimen eventually said, his voice a little more subdued. "These notebooks... they represent years of work, and I remember nothing of it. Did I really lose years of my life somehow? It couldn't be. I would have noticed something this big, there is no way you can rip out such vast swathes of someone's memory without completely messing them up!"

"As I said, I can't talk about that," Zorian told him.

"I can't accept that," Daimen said, not taking his eyes off the notebook he was reading.

Zorian ignored him.

"You're in danger," he told Daimen. "You and the Taramatula both. Originally I intended to evacuate my friends and Kirielle here to shelter them from the attack and unfortunately the enemy got their hands on that information. Now they intend to attack this place to get their hands on some hostages to pressure me with. You need to alert the Taramatula and prepare yourself for the incoming attack, okay?"

Truthfully, Zorian could simply destroy Red Robe's simulacrum once it arrived at Koth, ending the possibility of the threat that way. However, he did not want to do that. As callous as it was, he felt that making Red Robe waste all his time and mana on this was preferable to him scrapping the plan entirely and trying to get him in some other fashion. A predictable threat was better than a completely unknown one.

"So this invasion of yours is so powerful their reach extends all the way to Koth as well?" Daimen asked him, looking at him like he was an idiot.

"I already told you they have access to permanent gates, so why does this surprise you?" Zorian asked, giving him the same look back. "They only need one person to build a gate and they can shuffle their forces to and from any place on the globe."

"And what do you mean you wanted to evacuate Kirielle here, isn't she with Mother and Father?" Daimen continued, ignoring Zorian's remark.

"No, she's with me," Zorian said.

Daimen made a show of looking around, even peering beneath the log he was sitting on. Zorian rolled his eyes at him.

"I left her in Cyoria, of course," Zorian told him.

"You left her alone while you traveled to Koth?" Daimen asked flatly, sounding very unamused.

"Calm down," Zorian told him. "It's only for a few hours."

"What? What do you mean 'for a few hours'?" Daimen protested. "Traveling to Koth takes *days*, even with teleportation!"

"We'll discuss that later, okay?" Zorian tried.

"No, we can't discuss that later! This whole thing is insane and quite frankly I'm starting to question if you're even actually Zorian!" Daimen said, giving him a heated glare. "My brother is fifteen years old and there is no way he would involve himself with something like this. In fact, even if he wanted to get involved, he doesn't have the skills to do so! Who are you really and what did you do to Zorian?"

Zorian was silent for a moment. It was a good question, really. In truth, the real Zorian had died at the start of the month. He had stolen his body and identity, letting his soul move on to the afterlife. Daimen wasn't actually wrong to think of him as an imposter.

If the Daimen in front of him knew the truth, would he consider him his real brother or would he do his best to avenge the real Zorian? Temporary looper Daimen felt that sacrificing his life so that Zorian could replace the original was right and proper, but this Daimen might not agree.

It was amusing, Zorian thought to himself bitterly. Years ago, he wouldn't have given a damn about what Daimen thought of him and his choices. Now he found himself dreading his judgment, should his eldest brother ever find out the truth.

"The notebook in your hand," said Zorian, pointing his finger at the book Daimen was tightly clutching in his hands, "is proof that things have happened which you have no memory of. Therefore, should it really surprise you that I am also not how you remember me? I could show you some skills you taught me. Minor things, but things that should be immediately obvious as your own magical insights. Would that convince you?"

"I need an explanation," Daimen insisted, clutching the notebook in his hands so tightly his fingers turned white from blood loss.

"I'll give you one at the end of the month," said Zorian. "After the summer festival."

That was amusing, too. Zorian had used this excuse so many times in the past, while he was still inside the time loop. The only difference was that, back then, this offer meant he didn't really have to explain anything. The loop would restart before the deadline was reached.

"After this *invasion* of yours," Daimen noted shrewdly.

"Yes. As I said, lives depend on it," Zorian insisted.

"You expect me to help you out for a mere promise of an explanation after the deed is done?" Daimen asked him.

"No," Zorian said, shaking his head. "All I want is for you to take my warning seriously and to make sure the Taramatula do the same. So long as you survive the month and protect your fiancée's family from the invaders, I will consider this a success."

Daimen stared at him angrily for a few seconds, before rising from his log again.

"Let's go," he told Zorian.

"Go where?" Zorian asked, taken aback at the statement.

"To Cyoria," Daimen said matter-of-factly. "You're going back there now, aren't you?"

"Yeah," Zorian admitted. "So you want to go with me?"

"I need to confirm things personally," Daimen said. "And check up on Kirielle, just in case. Let's go."

"Just like that?" Zorian asked for confirmation.

“Is there a problem?” Daimen asked, frowning at him.

“Well, aren’t your fiancée and her family going to freak out if you suddenly disappear for a few days?” Zorian told him, cocking his head sideways. “I mean, surely you want to explain things to them before we set off.”

Of course, Zorian could just get him back to Koth in a few hours, but Daimen didn’t really know he could open a Gate between continents at will...

Sure enough, Daimen’s eyes widened in sudden realization and he slapped himself in the forehead a few times.

“Focus, focus...” he mumbled to himself. “Alright, so we’re going to put the journey on hold for now. I... need to talk to a few people first.”

- break -

In the depths of the Ziggurat of the Sun taken over by the sulrothum, a strange meeting was taking place. Zach and Zorian stood before a huge stone dais that contained this tribe’s sacred fire. The high priest and his honor guard stood in front of the fire, looking down at the two arrivals. The massive bonfire writhed and crackled in a strange, somewhat ominous manner, casting light and shadows alike on the surrounding walls.

Both sides silently scrutinized each other for a full minute before the sulrothum high priest decided to break the ice.

“Welcome, guests,” the high priest said. “We have been expecting you.”

“You have?” Zorian asked curiously.

That was quite unusual, since their visit here was completely unannounced.

“The angels have informed us of your coming,” the high priest told them.

Of course. Zorian had kind of expected that, to be honest. Funnily enough, the angels were not nearly as willing to contact human organizations to help them out. For example, Zach and Zorian had been in secret talks with the Triumvirate Church representatives, and at no point did the angels contact the Church hierarchy to make the negotiations go more smoothly. But a random sulrothum tribe in the middle of the Xlotic desert merited them sending actual instruction? Just what made this tribe of devil wasps so special, anyway?

“Did they inform you *why* we were coming?” Zach asked them.

“You’re here to ask for help, of course,” the high priest said easily. “A great battle is about to take place, pitting the allies of heaven against an ancient evil.”

“Well... yeah, that’s what we’re here for,” Zach admitted after a second.

“We accept,” the high priest immediately said.

“Just like that?” Zach asked incredulously, arching his eyebrow.

“What more is there to say?” the high priest asked rhetorically. “Only cowards would shirk from this kind of battle. To fight and die in the name of heaven is glorious. Surely you understand this? I can sense the mark of the angels shining bright on you.”

“The mark of heaven...” Zach said sourly. “Yay. What an *honor*.”

The high priest’s multifaceted eyes stared at Zach for a second, antennae twitching, trying to interpret his statement.

“Children often do not understand the importance of what their parents try to teach them,” the high priest eventually remarked.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Zach asked, annoyed.

“Just a random remark,” the sulrothum high priest said, waving his hand in front of him dismissively. A very human gesture. Zorian wondered if sulrothum really did that, or if the high priest was familiar enough with human customs to mimic their habits. “I just realized you are quite young in human terms.”

“We thank you for your help from the bottom of our hearts,” Zorian quickly said, cutting Zach off from continuing the pointless argument. “If it’s all right with you, we’d like to discuss battle plans.”

“Let’s,” agreed the high priest.

- break -

In a small, out-of-the-way alley on the outskirts of Cyoria, simulacrum number two was painting a picture on a wall. It was a small, abstract picture the size of a human head, vaguely resembling an eyeball if one viewed it from the right angle.

To a casual observer, the painting would likely look like a random graffiti, the likes of which were quite common in Cyoria. The city was crawling with young mages, after all, and they often used their newly gained magic skills to vandalize the walls of nearby buildings. Painting spells were

beginner stuff, and nearly every mage was capable of using them

But the painting was more than just idle amusement. So much more. After half an hour, the simulacrum carefully connected the last two lines of the drawing, causing a faint blue sigil to momentarily flash into existence within the painting, before quickly fading away from sight.

After observing his handiwork for a few more seconds, the simulacrum placed his hand on the painting, activated the spell formula hidden within it, and then dived into it with his mind.

Almost immediately, a sea of glowing suns popped into existence inside his mind, connected by a dense web of light. His mind raced from one sun to the next, his mind sense and telepathy manifesting itself throughout the whole network. There were sigils like this one scattered throughout most of the city by now, and through them, Zorian's mind powers could envelop nearly all of Cyoria. Every building, every street was within his reach. He could see and invade the minds of anyone and anything, from the lowest pigeon to the most high-ranking mage...

He quickly retracted his mind from the sigil, afraid he would get noticed by someone. This had to stay an absolute secret. No one, not even his closest allies, were allowed to know about the sigil network.

Taking one last look at the painting, simulacrum number two nodded to himself and wandered off to place more sigils elsewhere. Some of these paintings were bound to be found and erased by the city authorities and building owners, so it was best if he had some spares scattered around.

"99 telepathy nodes on the wall, 99 telepathy nodes... take one down, wipe it away, 98 telepathy nodes on the wall..." the simulacrum hummed to himself.

He had lots of work to do today.

- break -

In one of the empty academy classrooms, Zorian and Tinami sat facing each other, both silent.

Well, for a few moments, at least.

"Are you serious?" Tinami asked incredulously. "You can connect me with the legendary aranea?"

"I'm not sure I would call them 'legendary,'" Zorian remarked. "They're more common than you'd think, and a bit underwhelming once you get to know them. But yes, I can indeed do that."

He had gotten to talk to Tinami the same way he did in the past – by answering her call to have someone help her practice her telepathy skills. Naturally, the moment she experienced his innate mental skills, she wanted to know how he got them, and that quickly led the conversation to the topic of aranea.

The point of all this, of course, was to get House Aope involved in preparations for the invasion. They had shown themselves to be quite resourceful and capable the one time he and Spear of Resolve had brought them into the whole invasion conspiracy. The awful, catastrophic outcome of that restart aside, the Aope had played their part perfectly.

Hopefully the rumors of House Aope being bad luck were just superstitious nonsense and history wouldn't really repeat itself like that, right? After all, House Aope couldn't have reached its current status if it was really cursed...

Paranoia aside, he was taking quite a risk by interacting with Tinami like this. Not because he thought House Aope would mess up their invasion preparations or anything like that, but because of the attention it would bring to him personally. Officially, Zorian was just connecting Tinami and House Aope with the aranea, and anything else they talked about had nothing to do with him. In practice, there was no way the leaders of House Aope would be naïve enough to swallow that story. This was equivalent to putting a giant beacon on top of his head, telling the Aope leadership that he was worth paying attention to. Not exactly conducive to his plans to lay low after this whole thing is resolved.

Still, there was no helping it. The situation was precarious enough that he needed their help if he could get it.

"You know, you're more interesting than I thought you were," Tinami remarked, giving him a shrewd look.

"Err, thanks," Zorian said awkwardly.

"Not that way," she hurriedly clarified. "What I meant was... you're venturing into the tunnels beneath the city and taking lessons from giant sapient spiders living there. I never would have guessed you were that... driven."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Zorian said after a short pause.

"It is," Tinami confirmed. "By the way, how come you're missing so many classes? You know that looks pretty bad on your record, right? Even if you're more capable than you look, you should still pay attention to your reputation."

"Don't lecture me. You sound like my mother," Zorian told her. Tinami didn't seem amused. "Anyway, I'm really busy with something right now and I can't come to class. I already told my mentor about it and he said it was alright. I should be able to start attending classes again after the summer festival."

Assuming he was still alive and the city remained standing, that is.

"It's your life, I guess," Tinami shrugged. "These meetings... we'll continue with these, yes?"

"Sure," Zorian said. "As long as you wish."

"I get the feeling this is far more to my benefit than yours," Tinami noted.

"Kind of," Zorian agreed. "But I *am* learning things here, so it's okay. This isn't a zero sum game."

He wasn't even lying. Attending these practice sessions with Tinami would hopefully clue him in on what kind of skill level was considered normal among human mind mages. He had a feeling that would be crucial information in the near future.

Tinami gave him a weird look when he said that, though.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said quickly. "Nothing at all."

- break -

In the skies above Iasku Mansion, a lone iron beak was slowly circling the surrounding forest. The huge flock of iron beaks that guarded the place had long since noticed it, and were watching it carefully, but they did feel a certain level of kinship with a fellow iron beak, even if it was a foreign one, so they did not attack it.

The iron beak was actually Zorian, who had used a potion to shapeshift into the said bird. What he was doing was crazy, but if it could work...

He slowly approached the iron beak flock, probing it with his mind and soul, looking for flock leaders and weak links. Sudomir and the invaders had these iron beaks controlled through blackmail, having seized their nests and subverted their leadership, but the flock had never submitted totally. It was intelligent enough to recognize blackmail and listen to simple orders, but also smart enough to hold a grudge and plot revenge.

For hours Zorian circled the flock, speaking to them mind-to-mind, subtly subverting the mind magic used by invaders to control iron beak leaders. If it were anyone else doing it, they would have likely made a mistake somewhere and alerted the monster handlers that something was happening and that the flock had gone out of control. But Zorian was good. Too good for the Ibasan monster controllers to detect anything.

As time went by, the iron beak flock paid more and more attention to the thoughts and images being fed into their heads. They were quiet and still, but their eyes shone with increasingly malicious glee.

Soon.

- break -

The day of the summer festival swiftly approached. Most of the preparations were complete, but there was always more that could be done and their actions got ever more frantic and desperate as the deadline loomed ever closer. Perhaps it was just Zorian's mind playing tricks on him, but it seemed to him that even uninvolved people, like Imaya and Kirielle, could sense the heavy atmosphere and became more serious as a result.

As the end approached, Zach and Zorian evacuated most of the people close to them out of the city. Having already seen how that sort of thing could go wrong with their original plan to get everyone to Koth, they did not group everyone together at the same place like they had before. Instead they picked five different sanctuaries and distributed people among them. In addition to Xvim, Daimen also got himself involved with the evacuation, drawing on his own connections and experience to make things go more smoothly.

His brother was still not happy with the amount of secrecy Zorian presented him with, but he seemed to realize the seriousness of the situation in the end, and agreed to cooperate with them until the situation was resolved.

After the summer festival was over, however, he was going to come to Zorian for that explanation he was promised. He was quite vocal about *that*.

Unfortunately, the evacuation wasn't entirely successful. While most people agreed to go into hiding when told there would be fighting in the city during the summer festival, Taiven and Rea refused to go.

In Taiven's case, the reason was exactly what Zorian had been afraid of – she thought of it more as an opportunity to prove herself than a dangerous situation to avoid. She was a fully-qualified battlemage, after all. All she needed now was some actual field experience. Zorian understood all that, but he also understood that she was a known friend of his to their enemies, which meant they would be directing far more forces at her than her skills and reputation warranted. Her combat skills, impressive as they were for her age, were not enough.

Was he selfish for not explaining that to her? Probably. If he told her the invaders would be gunning for her because of him, that would raise all sorts of questions about why that is so, and probably lead to her either finding out everything about him or feeling betrayed and hating him forever for it.

But maybe her hating him forever was worth it if it meant she would survive the month...

As for Rea, she was fine with having her daughter and husband out of danger, but she refused to go into hiding herself. Her explanation for this was that she was confident enough in her own combat skills and had to guard their house from looting. They were a very poor family, she said, and their move to Cyoria had exhausted all of their savings. If their house ended up looted or destroyed, they would be utterly ruined.

Zorian was wracking his head about how to talk her into abandoning the house – when Rea ended up inviting him to her house on her own initiative. Zorian was quite surprised at this, as this wasn't something Rea typically did. Did she somehow catch wind of his own involvement in all this?

When he finally arrived at her place, however, he was greeted with another surprise: there were two more people already there.

One was Haslugh, the detective that taught him divination and that he had already recruited into their anti-invasion efforts. He gave Zorian a curious look, but there was no trace of recognition in his eyes. He probably did not suspect Zorian.

The other was, shockingly, Raynie. His classmate was clutching a cup of hot, steaming tea that Rea brought her with pale fingers, a blank expression on her face. She looked terrible.

It took a while for her to wrench herself out of her thoughts and notice someone had arrived, but when she did she gave him a shocked look.

“Zorian? What are you doing here?” Raynie asked.

“I invited him here,” Rea said matter-of-factly.

“Him? He’s the guy you said could help me?” Raynie asked incredulously. “But he’s just a student! What could he possibly do?”

“I have a feeling mister Kazinski here is more than *just* a student,” said Rea, giving Zorian a knowing look. “In any case, why don’t you tell Zorian what happened so that he knows what he’s dealing with.”

Haslugh observed the situation calmly, giving Zorian a thorough look but not saying anything. Zorian was really uncomfortable at the whole situation.

Raynie stared at him questioningly for a few seconds, before she once again lowered her head and stared at her tea cup in a defeated manner.

“My brother has been kidnapped,” she quietly said.

100. Sacrifice

Chapter 100

Sacrifice

Standing in Rea's home, Zorian ignored the curious gazes leveled at him from Rea and Haslush and kept silent, calmly considering things. A million questions swam through his head. Why were these three gathered in Rea's house, despite the fact they shouldn't even know about each other? Why did Rea think he could help in this situation and what were their enemies even thinking when they orchestrated this kidnapping? Was this some kind of strike against him and Zach? Why not go after all of his classmates, then?

Raynie did not give him a lot of time to ponder those questions, though, and took his silence as a sign she should keep going.

"My family doesn't live in Cyoria, so I didn't even know it happened at first. It wasn't until my family discovered some signs the kidnappers might have originated from Cyoria that they contacted me, several days later, and asked me for help," Raynie explained quietly. "I was shocked. Shocked that it happened, and... umm..."

She fumbled with her words for a few seconds before falling into an awkward silence and lowering her head even further. She looked quite pitiable at the moment.

"That they asked for your help with this?" Zorian tried.

She flinched slightly and gave him a shocked look for a second. Guilt, sadness, and confusion emanated from her in an equal mix. However, she quickly schooled her expression and cleared her throat with a trace of panic.

"Y-Yes, exactly! I'm just an academy student, what can I even do?" she said hurriedly. "I want to help my little brother, of course, but this is way above me! So I... contacted the police about it... and they eventually pointed me at detective Izketeri here, who agreed to help. And... here we are, I guess." She took a deep breath after finishing her explanation and gave Zorian a disbelieving, but slightly hopeful look. "No offense, Zorian, but I'm still not sure how you can help me with this."

"Neither am I," Zorian told her honestly.

He could *help*, of course. How he should go about doing that, however, was something he couldn't decide on at the moment.

Raynie's expression immediately dimmed after his admission, but he didn't let that bother him. He couldn't ruin all their plans just to assure her everything would be alright.

He glanced at Rea and she glanced back at him, completely unconcerned with whether or not she had judged him wrong. What exactly gave her the confidence that he was someone who could make a difference here? No matter how he wracked his head, he couldn't figure it out.

"You're pretty calm about this," Haslush commented from the side, giving him a shrewd look.

"Panicking wouldn't help anyone," Zorian commented, unconcerned with the veiled accusation. That wasn't enough to prove anything.

"That's not how people work, but alright," Haslush said with a light shrug. "I guess you're just an exceptionally calm person."

This probably wasn't a deliberate attack on him and Zach, Zorian decided. While Raynie was one of their classmates, neither of them were very close to her in the time loop. Zorian did feel a certain kinship towards her, due to her messed up family situation, but Silverlake shouldn't know that. Therefore, Jornak and the rest shouldn't either.

The fact their enemies kidnapped Raynie's brother was probably just an accident. Since Zorian sabotaged their efforts to kidnap shifter children in the city of Cyoria and its surroundings, they looked further away for suitable targets. They *needed* those sacrifices, after all. Without the primordial essence contained in the blood of shifter children, the primordial's prison couldn't be opened. In the time loop, the Sovereign Gate could serve as a substitute key, but out here in the real world that wasn't possible.

As it turned out, Raynie's brother was one of the children the invaders ended up targeting in their expanded search. Did they even know they were targeting the family of someone who went to class with Zach and Zorian? Then again, even if they did, they may have thought it wouldn't matter. Raynie's relationship with her family was not exactly the best. It wouldn't be out of line to assume she would be glad to have her brother out of the picture.

"I have to say, though, I'm surprised to see you here," Zorian told Raynie. "I didn't know you and Rea knew each other."

In fact, considering her disdain towards cat shifters, he would expect Raynie to purposely stay away from Rea.

"Err, we don't," Raynie said, giving Rea an unsure look. "Detective Izketeri is the one who brought me here. He thought she might be able to help."

"We have received reports of a group targeting shifter children some time ago, so we have been in contact with city shifters about the issue," Haslush clarified, idly studying some kind of metal disc in his hands, flipping it over from time to time. Zorian recognized it as one of the

communication devices the cultists and Ibans sometimes used to coordinate their actions. Apparently the detective hadn't been sitting idly all this time. "Ms. Sashal was one of the... *less adversarial* contacts we established during that time. I figured it wouldn't hurt to bring your classmate here to see if she had some insight into the situation."

"I'm just a humble housewife, so how could I offer insight into a situation like that?" Rea said with a slight smile, shaking her head lightly. "Still, the mother in me can't help but empathize with the pain of having your little brother stolen away by some heartless fiends. In another life, that could have been my little Nocka in his place, no?"

She gave Zorian a piercing look, but he just raised his eyebrow at her in response.

"What are you implying?" he bluntly asked after a few seconds.

"I know you are connected to the evacuation effort that has been going on recently, and that it's not a minor connection either," Rea told him with an exaggerated sigh. "Your scent is present on almost everyone that has come to talk to me about getting Nocka and the rest of us out of the city. You have several adult friends who all treat you with respect, and even a little deference, more like you're their leader than a precocious teenager. You are known as a diligent and hard-working student, but you've been skipping all your classes for weeks now, doing gods know what."

"Stupid cat shifters and their superhuman sense of smell..." Zorian grumbled internally. He was pretty sure she wouldn't have gotten suspicious and started connecting things if there were no scent clues to attract her attention.

"Plus, when Ms. Sashal mentioned you, I couldn't help but notice that your older brother Daimen, who is said to be in Koth, has been very active in the city lately," Haslush added from the side. He placed the communication disc he was fiddling with in his pocket and focused his full attention on Zorian. "Almost like some kind of emergency has popped up, forcing him to drop whatever he had been doing to rush back to Eldemar, no?"

"Oh, come on. Me and my brother almost never interact with one another," Zorian told him. "You seem to have investigated me, surely you know that much? How would I know anything about what he has been doing?"

"But you do know he's here in Cyoria right now?" Haslush pressed.

"Of course. He dropped by to let me know he's in the city. It's just common courtesy. We *are* family, after all," Zorian said with a shrug. He saw no point in telling an obvious lie and pretending he never saw Daimen recently.

"Do you two seriously believe Zorian is some kind of secret agent?" Raynie asked incredulously from the side, her eyes shifting between the three of them in rapid succession.

"He definitely knows more than he lets on," Rea shrugged. "Considering the situation, I figured it wouldn't hurt to try to wring some information out of him. It's your brother's life on the line here."

"It, it doesn't have to be," Raynie tried anxiously. "Maybe it's just a ransom thing and they just haven't gotten to state their demands. It's—"

"You're lying to yourself and you know it," Rea said, giving her a knowing look. "When a shifter child gets kidnapped, nine times out of ten it's because the kidnappers want their blood essence. With so much time having passed, it's a question whether your brother is still alive at this point."

Raynie paled at the reminder.

"Let's not be all doom and gloom here. I'm sure her brother is still very much alive," Haslush hurriedly assured Raynie. "The ritual they are kidnapping all these children for is only due to happen on the night of the summer festival. They need to keep her brother alive for a while yet."

"Hm. If you say so," Rea said. "Still, that date is just around the corner. If that's our deadline, we don't really have much to work with."

"Look, what do you even expect of me?" Zorian asked Rea, frowning at her slightly. "I don't know where any kidnapped children are being kept. Do you think I would just sit on that information if I knew?"

It wasn't like Zach and Zorian didn't try to sabotage the primordial release ritual by denying the invaders the needed sacrifices. The problem was that they couldn't possibly round up every shifter child on the continent and hide them away – no matter how thorough they were, their enemies could always throw a wider net and go after some shifter community that Zach and Zorian didn't even know about. Jornak had spent decades preparing for this. Zorian suspected the power-mad lawyer would have found the needed sacrifices no matter what they did.

Of course, if Zach and Zorian could locate the place where the shifter children were being kept, he was all for launching a rescue operation. Without the needed sacrifices, Panaxeth couldn't get free, which would be an automatic win in a sense. It would be worth it to trigger the final battle before the summer festival if they could inflict such a critical blow on their opposition. The problem was that Zorian genuinely had no idea where Raynie's brother could be held. It could very well be that those children were being kept on Ulquaan Ibasa, Koth or some other distant place.

They could be anywhere on the planet, so finding them was like searching for a needle in a haystack.

"I don't know," Rea admitted. "I know you're involved with this somehow, but I don't know in what way. Maybe you really can't do anything for poor Raynie here, but I'm hoping you can. I know she thinks I'm just a scheming, skulking cat, but I really do want to help her."

"What!?" Raynie protested. "I don't—"

"It's fine," Rea said with a chuckle, gesturing with her hand towards Raynie to quiet her down. "I get it. There's too much bad blood between our peoples to let go on a whim. And I get why Zorian here is feeling defensive and denying everything. I suppose it must feel like I led him here into some sort of ambush."

"Didn't you?" Zorian asked, raising his eyebrow at her.

"No... well, yes, I guess I kind of did," Rea admitted. "But considering you've been less than honest with me these past few weeks, I think you should be able to stomach a little underhandedness."

Zorian opened his mouth to defend himself but she raised her palm to stop him.

"I understand," Rea said. "I'm not angry with you. You wanted to get your sister's friend and her family out of danger, but you didn't want to reveal your secrets. I would have probably made the same choice in your place. I'm just curious... was our first meeting really an accident?"

"Yes," Zorian said easily. From a certain perspective it was true. "I'm not terribly social. If my little sister wasn't such a giant busybody and insisted I accompany Nochka to her home, the idea would have never occurred to me. Getting Nochka's bike out of the river so she could stop crying would be enough for me."

"Oh, is that what really happened?" Rea laughed. "You know, Nochka later told me a bunch of mean boys were trying to take her bike away from her and you chased them off and then escorted her home in case they came back."

Oops. He should have synchronized stories with Nochka, apparently. He didn't think it was a big secret!

"Err, of course Nochka's version is the correct one," Zorian assured her. "Don't mind my earlier ramblings, I just got confused for a moment."

"Sure, sure," Rea said indulgently. "It was very heroic of you to defend my precious daughter from random ruffians like that..."

For a while, Haslush and Raynie watched them curiously as they talked, not interrupting their interaction. However, while Haslush was a grown man and an experienced detective, Raynie was just a teenager and under a lot of stress at the moment. As such, she soon became impatient.

"You... Zorian, can you help me with this or not?" she loudly asked, impatience and frustration in her voice.

Zorian stared at her for a second before opening his mouth to apologize and tell her he was just an academy student and that there was nothing he could do to help her brother...

...but then he shut his mouth and started thinking about something.

It suddenly dawned on him that their enemies may have made a huge mistake when they kidnapped Raynie's brother.

After a few seconds, he focused back on the redhead girl staring at him expectantly and stared back straight into her eyes.

"You know what?" he told her. "I actually think there is something I can do. But I'm going to need your help."

Haslush silently leaned forward, his lazy-looking posture shifting into one of alertness.

"Me?" she asked, taken aback. She shifted in her seat uncomfortably. "But I'm just an academy student."

"So am I," Zorian told her. "Here's what we need to do..."

- break -

In the port city of Luja, there was a small abandoned warehouse. It was a dark, uninviting place – the walls were moldy and crumbling, the floors were full of rat droppings and glass shards from broken bottles, and the windows and doors were crudely barricaded with wooden boards. There were a number of such places in Luja, as it was a large port town where trading companies were starting up and going bankrupt on a regular basis. Most abandoned warehouses would eventually find a new buyer and be fixed up into useable condition, but it wasn't unusual for places like this to stay unoccupied for months or even years as old owners tried to hold on to them in hopes of getting a better price later.

As it happened though, this particular place held a dark secret. In the back of the warehouse, shielded from view by a mountain of rotting crates and boards, there was a black egg-like object attached to the floor with a mass of root-like tendrils. Spiral lines were etched into the black oval, beginning at the bottom and reaching all the way to the tip. Perceptive individuals would note that the oval almost looked like a giant black flower bulb on the verge of unfolding into a proper flower.

Or maybe a container, patiently waiting for the day it could unleash its contents upon its oblivious surroundings.

Zach, Zorian and Alanic stood some distance away from the black oval, staring at it grimly. They dared not approach, lest they activate the hidden wards and traps strategically placed around it.

"This is the fourth one we found," Alanic commented. "One in Cyoria, two in Korsa, and now one in Luja. Just how many wraith bombs did these

people make?"

"There has to be more than one of these things in Cyoria," Zorian commented. "There is no way they would place two in Korsa and then leave only one for Cyoria. Korsa is important, but Cyoria is a far more critical location. We just haven't found the others."

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"There are probably a few in the capital city as well," Zach said. "Jornak seems to have a downright personal grudge with our country's leadership. No way would he miss the chance to strike at them at the heart of their power. Plus, considering what he said about Sulamnon and Falkrinea, there's bound to be a few of these bombs reserved for them as well..."

"We'll never be able to find more than a fraction of them," Alanic commented grimly. "This is going to be a disaster. Entire city districts could end up being devoured by wraiths. The cleanup will take years."

He glanced at Zach and Zorian unhappily, but neither of them said anything. There was nothing to say, really. They knew this as well.

"You still don't know how to neutralize these things without triggering them?" Alanic asked with a trace of resignation in his voice. He already suspected the answer he was going to get.

Sure enough, Zach and Zorian shook their heads in denial.

"They're superbly well made," Zorian told him. "Jornak must have spent ages refining the design in the time loop. Any tampering I can think of will set one off, as well as alert our enemies to our actions. The only way we can deal with these is by employing the same tactics we used on the previous wraith bombs – set up a specialized ward field just outside the bomb's defensive field and try to contain the wraiths once they're released. It should be effective, but I obviously haven't tested it, so..."

"I see," Alanic said. He turned around towards the wraith bomb again, staring at it as if it that was going to suddenly provide him with some new insights. "You don't have to waste time on that. I'll contact the church higher ups and send them to perform another containment job here. I still say we should trigger these things the moment we find them and deal with the consequences."

"And I still say we shouldn't," Zorian argued back. "These wraith bombs *can* be harmlessly disarmed. Jornak has a method to do so, I'm sure. I just need to rip it out of his head."

"You really think you can do that?" Zach asked doubtfully. "We'd have to capture Jornak alive for that to happen. That seems... difficult."

"These wraith bombs are set to collectively go off the instant Jornak dies, so we want to avoid killing him if at all possible, anyway," Zorian pointed out. "Not to mention the other surprises he may have left for us in the case of his death. For all his megalomania, he clearly realized there's a real chance he's going to lose this conflict and made contingencies to account for it."

Zach snorted derisively.

"Too many contingencies, if you ask me," Zach said. "He put so much time into making sure everyone suffers if he loses... what does he even gain out of that? It's just petty. Sore loser."

"Well, we were just discussing how we should try to capture him instead of killing him outright," Alanic noted. "So it's not *just* pettiness. But yes, I get the feeling this is more than just about power for Jornak. He wants revenge."

"Revenge?" Zach asked, surprised. "On who?"

"Everyone," Alanic said, still staring at the black oval in front of them.

The smooth, glossy surface of the object squirmed and shuddered, as if hundreds of worms were moving just beneath the surface, before once again becoming still and quiet. Neither of the three were disturbed at the sight. Wraith bombs did that sometimes. On occasion, one could even see a faint outline of hands and faces on the surface of the oval – leering, maddened, crying, screaming, begging – as if a person was desperately trying to break out from the inside before being forcibly wrenched back into the depths of the device.

"Speaking from personal experience here, maybe?" Zach tried, giving Alanic a curious look.

Alanic didn't say anything for a second.

"I was a very angry person when I was young," he eventually said. "I don't want to talk about it."

All three stayed silent for a few seconds, and Zorian quietly considered the battle-priest's words. Alanic had never told them about his past, and Zorian had always respected that. Truthfully, he sometimes wondered why the man was so helpful to them in the first place. Did he see them as young troublemakers that needed to be steered from a dark path, just like someone had once steered him away from one? Or was he simply so discerning that he could accurately judge them with even the slightest exposure? Whatever the answer, Zorian was grateful for the priest's help and had no desire to open old wounds if he didn't have to.

As for the priest's speculation of Jornak's motivation... well, it could be true. Jornak – the old Jornak, the one that Zorian had talked to in the time

loop – was definitely bitter and resentful about having his rightful inheritance stolen away from him. He could see how that could grow and fester once he became a temporary looper and looked into the abyss of corruption and power plays that was Altazian politics.

In the end, it didn't even matter. No matter what reasons he had, Zorian would still have to defeat him in the end.

"In somewhat unrelated news, Silverlake is gone," Zorian suddenly spoke up, breaking the silence. "The old Silverlake, that is. She just packed up everything portable out of her hideout and disappeared one day. I don't have the faintest idea where she went."

"Do you think she'll join the battle on our enemy's side?" Zach asked, frowning.

"No, I doubt it," Zorian said. "I think she just realized she was being heavily scrutinized by some very powerful forces and got spooked. She's a coward. No way she would dive into this conflict unless someone arm-twisted her into it, and new Silverlake seemed like she wouldn't support that."

"If she's really going to stay out of this, I'm fine with her going away," Zach shrugged. "One less thing to worry about."

"I've heard reports that several mercenary companies from the neighboring countries have taken on secretive, well-paid contracts," Alanic said. "I'm not completely sure but I strongly suspect our enemies have bought themselves some more soldiers for the final battle."

Zach scowled at the news, uttering a nasty curse. Zorian's reaction was more restrained, but his face still darkened in response.

"The invaders have in general been getting restless and increasingly reckless as of late. Their preparations might be nearing their end," Alanic continued, becoming more animated. "What are we waiting for? We should attack now and seize the initiative."

"Well... the idea was always to be proactive and launch an attack before the day of the summer festival," Zach said, giving Zorian a questioning look. "However, Zorian keeps stalling, saying he needs more time. So the timing depends on him, really."

Alanic's eyes softened a bit at the statement, his posture deflating.

"Ah, the situation with Zach, right?" he asked softly. "Did you find...?"

"I'm sorry. I couldn't find a solution no matter where I looked," Zorian said with a wooden voice, not a trace of emotion on his face.

"It's fine," Zach sighed. "I've already come to terms with things. I've already written my final will and everything."

"Right. In any case, you're right. There is no point in waiting anymore. We're just giving our enemies more time. We'll attack two days from now, the day before the summer festival. I still have one final idea I want to try," Zorian said.

"The shifter thing?" Zach asked curiously. "You really think that will work?"

"If it does, it will be a huge success," Zorian pointed out.

"True," Zach agreed. "It's worth a try."

- break -

Just outside of Cyoria, there was a spherical ritual room made by Zorian and his simulacrum. Everything here was carefully crafted for only one purpose: to power up and enhance one particular divination spell. All of the walls were densely packed with complicated series of lines and endless rows of cryptic sigils, all made from precious metals and rare alchemical materials. The ground was etched with no less than six blood red magical circles, and in the center stood a small golden cube with a seemingly mundane pottery bowl. Hundreds of tiny white stars hung in the air, illuminating the space. These were actually tiny dimensional gates that connected the room to various places in the country and beyond.

Every place that was likely to house the kidnapped shifter children, in Zorian's opinion.

Currently the ritual room contained Raynie, Haslush, Rea, and three of Zorian's simulacrum. Two simulacrum were disguised as adult images, grim and silent, and were here for the sake of pretending this was a secret government operation, rather than something Zorian set up himself. Only one of them would be necessary for the ritual itself, but having two wouldn't hurt and it would be more realistic for something of this scale to require multiple people to execute.

The last simulacrum looked just like Zorian and pretended to be the original – his job was mostly to stay next to Haslush and Rea and pretend to be normal. Though considering the looks on their faces as they studied the ritual grounds, he felt he mostly failed at that already.

"My, mister Kazinski... I knew you couldn't be normal, but I have to say I didn't expect you're connected to people like *this...*" Rea said quietly. For the first time since he met her, she didn't sound confident and in control, and he instead sensed a trace of fear in her voice.

"You have no idea," Haslush said, his voice quivering. His reaction was even more extreme than Rea's; he seemed downright horrified by what he was seeing. "More money went into this room than my entire police department gets in a year. And it's all meant to empower one specific spell that is only useful for this one thing! The whole thing will be useless after today! The extravagance is mind-boggling."

Simulacrum number one shifted in place, a little uncomfortable. Zorian's perspective on money was a little skewed, yeah. This could be a real

problem in the future, but at the moment he really didn't care. He'd pay twice this much if he thought it would help.

"You don't even understand what this room means, do you?" Haslush asked Zorian, giving him a strange look.

"No?" the simulacrum told him uncertainly.

And he really didn't. Sure, the room was the best thing he could make on short notice, which probably made it amazing by regular mages' standards, but he was sure a country as big and influential as Eldemar could pull this off.

It was kind of funny, really... the original went through so much trouble to make his abilities seem more humble than they were and to attribute his achievements to some nebulous government organization. He'd even succeeded. But in the end, the mere fact he was associated with people like that was enough to alarm and awe Haslush and Rea.

He'd normally get a headache out of this, but he was just a simulacrum and wouldn't even exist in a couple of hours, so imagining Zorian having to deal with this in the future just made him laugh.

"Ah, forget it," Haslush sighed. "You're still too young and inexperienced. You're tangling with some really dangerous stuff, is all I'm going to say."

"Don't I know it," the simulacrum mumbled.

Raynie, on the other hand, was currently sitting in the middle of the ritual room, next to the golden cube and the bowl, taking deep breaths to calm herself. She was chanting some sort of song to herself in a language Zorian's simulacrum couldn't recognize. It was probably the language of her tribe. The two disguised simulacra were also sitting around the cube, forming a triangular formation around it together with Raynie. They were naturally far more calm and collected, and patiently waited for Raynie to psych herself for the upcoming ritual.

The pressure on her was enormous. This ritual would succeed or fail purely based on how she performed. Simulacrum number one was certain his fellow simulacra would perform their part of the ritual flawlessly, but the core part of the divination ritual was something only Raynie could do... because it was her brother they were trying to track down with the spell.

Divination spells were more effective the more they had to work with. In case of tracking spells, the caster needed something connected to the target. A personal item, a drop of blood, things like that. They were even more effective if the caster was personally connected to the target in some way: if they had personally spoken to the target at some point, if they were friends with them, or if they were married to one another.

As far as connections go, though, there were few things more potent than being literal family: parent and child, brother and sister.

And more potent still was to use literal blood magic to form a resonance between their common bloodline.

Finally, there was the primordial essence that existed in the blood of every shifter. Raynie was already a teenager, so most of that primordial essence was gone, integrated into her body and soul. However, traces of it should remain still. Zorian had spent quite some time with the leaders of the Cult of the World Dragon, studying their method of releasing Panaxeth, and he knew how they used primordial essence to resonate with the one in the prison and act as a key. The same method could be used to fool any mortal defensive ward or anti-divination method.

Raynie and her brother were siblings. Even if they had never interacted much, the link between them was strong. Blood magic could make it even stronger. They also both had primordial essence in their blood, and that could be used to bypass any form of divination defense the invaders put up around her brother and the rest of the sacrifices.

If the ritual they were about to undertake successfully located Raynie's brother, Zach and Zorian could liberate all the shifter children the invaders gathered during the past few weeks. Not only did that mean doing a good deed and saving a bunch of children from a gruesome death, it would also irreparably sabotage the Panaxeth release ritual. There was only one day before the summer festival. There was no way that the invaders could gather another batch of sacrifices in that short of a time.

There were a lot of ways the ritual could fail, even if they executed it flawlessly. For one thing, Zorian couldn't blanket the entire planet with dimensional gates, no matter how small they were. Not even close. It was possible he had failed to pick the right place to search at, in which case all of this was for naught. It was also possible that the invaders were keeping all the kidnapped children separated until the final moment, in which case they will just end up saving Raynie's brother and no one else. Their enemies also may have gathered enough spare children to form a second group, in which case they could still try to release Panaxeth as normal.

Zorian had a good feeling about this, though. This could work, he was sure of it. The only question now was whether Raynie was capable of doing her part.

The necessary blood magic itself wasn't that difficult. Blood magic was famously easy to perform. Too easy, according to some. Additionally, blood magic tracking spells were a very common use of blood magic and there was no need for Zorian to reinvent the wheel to make one. There were plenty of tried and true methods that Raynie could use for her attempt.

It was still blood magic, however. Raynie would have to ritually cut herself during the casting, and remain clearheaded despite the resulting pain. The mana shaping requirements for successful casting were low, but Raynie was a total beginner when it came to magic, so even that may be too much for her. Finally, whether she succeeded or failed, she would be severely weakened for at least a week after the attempt, and the traces of primordial essence in her blood would be spent.

She had one try. Not one more. If she made even a single mistake, the whole ritual would be ruined, and that would be it.

So Zorian's simulacrum patiently waited, not trying to hurry her up in any way.

Likewise, on the edge of the ritual room, Rea, Haslush and the simulacrum that actually looked like Zorian patiently waited as well.

Well, simulacrum number one patiently waited. Haslush and Rea were clearly anxious as hell about the eventual result of the ritual.

"The center of the ritual circle is protected from sounds, right?" Haslush softly asked simulacrum number one. "They can't hear us if we talk?"

"Yes," the simulacrum calmly said. "It's also protected against outside mana intrusion and the like. Unless you really go out of the way to make yourself known, you shouldn't be able to disturb them."

Of course, simulacrum number one was always mentally connected with his fellow simulacra and the original, but the two simulacra participating in the ritual were too experienced and skilled to be distracted by something like that.

"What's up with you, kid?" Haslush complained, glaring at him slightly. "Are you made of ice or something?"

"I'm just naturally stoic," the simulacrum bragged, puffing his chest up proudly. "It's okay, old man, you'll learn how to be as cool as me one of these days."

Haslush clacked his tongue at the response and no longer bothered to talk to him.

"I've looked into your classmate's family situation," Rea commented idly.

"Oh?" the simulacrum said, raising an eyebrow at her.

"It seems Raynie's relationship with her family is... less than harmonious," Rea said, cocking her head to the side and closing her eyes as if listening to something. "Her brother essentially replaced her as the clan heir when he was born. There are rumors that she was extremely resentful about it."

Simulacrum number one said nothing.

"You knew," Rea said after a while.

"Yeah," the simulacrum admitted. "Yeah, I did."

"You think she's going to purposely botch the spell?" Haslush asked, frowning.

"Quite the contrary," Rea said calmly, shaking her head. "I think she's desperate for it to succeed. She probably wished ill on her brother a lot, and now that it finally happened she feels guilty and responsible for it. Shifter tribes have a somewhat superstitious view of curses. Wishing misfortune to someone in your head is not just harmless catharsis to a lot of them."

"That's true for a lot of regular people, too," Haslush shrugged. "It's just mages that really disdain that kind of thinking."

Rea hummed thoughtfully, but did not respond. The whole group suddenly became silent as it became obvious that Raynie was finally ready to begin with the ritual.

The red-headed wolf shifter started chanting, softly at first but getting more confident as time went on. Her hand trembled as she raised a dagger above her palm and slashed into it once, twice, thrice... the motions were crude and she cut a little more deeply than was really necessary, but simulacrum number one supposed that was better than being too timid.

She held her bloodied hand above the simple-looking pottery bowl and dropped blood into it. The bowl promptly lit up with glowing blood red lines and diagrams, and a barely perceptible magical pulse spread out from the golden cube upon which the bowl sat. The white stars above them dimmed and brightened like a hundred tiny hearts.

Thin, hair-like streams of blood, barely visible from where simulacrum number one was standing, rose from the bowl and reached for the tiny dimensional gates above it. Raynie loudly gasped and swayed unsteadily as some of her life force left her, some of the threads reaching for the wounds on her hand like dozens of hungry leeches. Overwhelmed by the pain and vertigo, she dropped her dagger and almost collapsed face-first into the bowl in front of her, but with the support of two disguised simulacra and her own willpower she managed to retain consciousness. Gritting her teeth, she started slowly making gestures with her healthy hand.

Finally the last gesture of the spell was made and everything snapped into place. The dimensional gates floating above them shone with blinding light, forcing Haslush and Rea to shield their eyes, and a flood of information entered the minds of the three simulacra present.

So much information. Hundreds of places, most of them completely disconnected from each other, all of them mixing together into a giant incomprehensible mess. The spell, too vast in scope, struggled to narrow down the search on its own. It passed the task to the caster of the spell. If Raynie was doing this alone, she would have outright failed here... a beginner mage simply wasn't capable of controlling a spell of this sophistication and magnitude. But she wasn't doing this alone. Zorian's simulacra were present, and they were capable. In fact, a single one of them would have sufficed. Having three of them do this together was just overkill.

After a few seconds, simulacrum number one smiled. Almost immediately afterwards, a quick message was sent to the original by all three simulacrum. It only consisted of a single word.

“Success,” simulacrum number one mumbled.

- break -

Sitting next to a table full of battle maps, surrounded by Zach, Xvim, Alanic and the rest of the members of their little conspiracy, Zorian suddenly became alert and cleared his throat to get the attention of other people in the room. They immediately stopped whatever argument they were having and turned to him.

“We found them,” Zorian said. “Start the attack.”

- break -

On a peaceful and sunny day, just one day before the summer festival, the city of Cyoria suddenly went to hell. It was around noon when, without warning, dozens of places in the city suddenly launched volleys of magical artillery projectiles to some unseen targets just outside the city. These targets, almost as if they had been expecting something like this might happen, immediately responded with an artillery barrage of their own. In a matter of minutes, the city was burning. Numerous buildings had been partially or completely destroyed, and rogue fire elementals started wandering the city, setting everything they encountered ablaze. Neither of the two sides were done yet, though, and the exchange of magical artillery continued on for quite some time.

Then the monsters came. Skeletons, war trolls, giant lizards, massive flocks of iron beaks... all of these came pouring out of the local underworld, spreading chaos as they went. A lot of these invading monsters met a grisly end, triggering hidden traps when they tried to move through upper levels of Cyoria’s underworld, almost as if someone had foreseen their invasion routes. A lot more were held back in the depths of the earth, fighting some unseen enemy beneath the city. But even the fraction of the forces that reached the surface was nothing to scoff at.

The final battle had begun. Soon, the leaders of the two opposing forces would clash as well.

101. The Switch

Chapter 101

The Switch

Cyoria was burning. A number of important buildings had been leveled to the ground by the initial artillery exchange, and several sections of the city were ablaze with sapient fire that deliberately sought to burn as much of the city as possible. The invading soldiers did not help matters, as they had a tendency to set buildings ablaze unless there were defending forces to stop them from running amok.

Despite this, Zorian felt the situation was actually pretty good. Based on the previous invasions he had witnessed in the time loop, he had expected the city to suffer far more than it had so far. The city leadership was extremely quick to react and organize itself, despite the fact that the city hall and main barracks got totally destroyed early on, and the defending forces were far better equipped than he remembered. This was only partially the result of Zach and Zorian's machinations – it seemed that despite the two sides' agreement to keep things relatively secret and low-key, some awareness of what was happening still ended up trickling down to Cyoria's authorities.

That was good. Zach and Zorian had more important battles to fight, and couldn't afford to come to the aid of the city at this time. It was up to the city itself to douse the fires before they went out of control, and repulse the invaders pouring out of tunnels beneath the city.

Was it cold-hearted of them to leave Cyoria entirely to its own devices in a time like this? A little. However, Zorian firmly believed that what they were doing was the best way to minimize the number of casualties. Getting involved in the city fighting would no doubt cause Quatach-Ichl and other invasion leaders to make their own appearance there as well. It was not in the interest of Cyoria and its inhabitants to have a bunch of ultra-powerful mages duking it out in the city streets.

No, it was far better to go on the offense against the invaders and force the high-level mage fights to happen elsewhere. Somewhere where the invaders would have to worry about collateral damage.

This was why one of Zorian's simulacrum was leading a force composed of golems, Alanic's recruits, and mind-controlled monsters straight towards the Ibasan underground base. The base held the dimensional gate through which the Ibasan forces intended to retreat once their goals had been achieved, which meant it had to be held at all costs.

Thus, the moment the invaders realized there was a powerful army heading towards their retreat point, they had no choice but to redirect most of their forces to try and stop them. The defenders on the surface probably didn't realize this, but they were fighting a mere fraction of the invading enemies, because most of them were currently busy fighting Zorian's army in the tunnels below.

Well, the original Zorian was busy with other matters entirely, so it was more accurate to say they were fighting an army led by his simulacrum... but on this particular day, it hardly mattered. Zorian and his simulacrum were truly one, their minds fused together to an unprecedented degree. He felt less like a man with a couple of copies running around, and more like a single mind controlling multiple bodies. It was the culmination of all his research into the way Princess and the cephalic rat swarms functioned, and he previously did not dare use it outside of a testing chamber. He was afraid of such magic warping his personality and sense of self, especially if used on a regular basis, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

It should be safe to use it just this once.

Hopefully.

Currently, Zorian's simulacrum body advanced confidently towards the mass of enemies blocking the nearby tunnel entrance, unintimidated by their attempt at setting up a blockade. His army, composed of several hundred golems of various sizes, almost a hundred mages that Alanic recruited for their cause, and several hundred hook goblins and other Dungeon denizens, swarmed behind him, waiting for orders.

A pair of shining projectiles, one red, one blue, came flying at him from the enemy barricade ahead. They shone so bright they were painful to look at, as their flight created a startlingly loud screaming sound as they homed in on Zorian. He did not even bother to defend himself; it would be a waste of his limited mana. The huge bodyguard golem that never left his side raised its massive hands in front of Zorian and slapped down the incoming spells like a pair of annoying flies.

They exploded into a pair of blinding explosions that somehow strengthened and reinforced each other, becoming stronger than the sum of their parts, but it simply wasn't enough. The defensive wards of the massive bodyguard golem harmlessly neutralized the blast, leaving Zorian completely untouched.

The golem was left without so much as a scratch, as well.

Without saying anything, and before the explosion was even fully over, Zorian pointed the huge magical rifle in his hands at one of the mages that launched the attack and fired. The bullet reached the target at supersonic speeds, effortlessly punching through the defensive wards the Ibasans put on their little barricade, hitting the enemy mage in the chest before he could put up any sort of defense. It wasn't a killing blow, but the mage was out of the fight for the foreseeable future, so it might as well have been. Zorian coldly turned his rifle towards the other mage responsible for the attack, ignoring the barrage of spells coming his way or the target's frantic attempts to coat himself in as many shielding spells as humanly possible.

More than a dozen nearby golems suddenly turned towards Zorian's target, pointing their own heavy rifles at him in a single, synchronized motion.

The mage's shields blocked the first five bullets. Then the other ten or so tore into him and killed him on the spot.

As for the barrage of weak spells that was meant to distract him, it was unceremoniously blocked by a bunch of heavily-built golems that stepped up in front of him to soak them up with their tough bodies and well-made defensive wards.

Zorian gave them a thought, and a screeching swarm of hook goblins, giant centipedes, and cave lizards surged forward and charged the enemy position. The enemy responded by sending hordes of skeletons and zombies forward, and the two groups of expendable meat shields crashed against each other in the middle of the battlefield, attempting to overpower the other.

However, it quickly became obvious that the undead were losing. They may have been fearless, but they were ultimately just a mindless mob. Zorian's monster swarm, on the other hand, was more advanced than it appeared. This wasn't the first time Zorian used mind-controlled monsters as meat shields and shock troopers like this, and his methods had evolved greatly over time. His monsters no longer mindlessly charged forward, getting into each other's way and spreading their attacks thin over the entire battlefield, like they did in the past. Instead, they worked together like a cephalic rat swarm, sharing senses, focusing attacks on perceived weak points, ganging up on tough opponents, and sacrificing themselves for the good of the whole if necessary.

Suddenly, Zorian sensed ten mental and soul signatures rapidly moving towards them from all sides, invisibly tunneling towards the back of his army through solid stone.

Rock worms. Zorian scoffed inwardly and telepathically ordered the rest of the army to advance forward. The golems mindlessly obeyed, of course, but some of Alanic's human volunteers visibly flinched at the mental command, still unused to this form of communication and a little fearful of him. They did obey in the end, though, and this was all that mattered. He had avoided using them so far, both because he was trying to preserve their strength for a battle that really mattered and because he was still very uncomfortable with ordering people into battles where some of them were guaranteed to die. Unlike the mindless golems and the animal-level monsters that made up the rest of his army, the human mages and soldiers were not expendable.

The Ibasans in front of them sent out war trolls to charge out and meet them, probably hoping to capitalize on the moment of shock when the rock worms suddenly burst out of the ground and attacked them. That wouldn't be happening, of course. Silverlake must have informed Jornak about Zorian's potent mind magic capabilities, but either the information never trickled down to the people commanding the troops or they dismissed them as ridiculous, or else they would never dare use a ploy like this against him.

It happened in an instant. The charging line of war trolls was only moments away from crashing into the line of battle golems in front of them, perfectly synchronized with the tunneling rock worms that were just about to emerge in the middle of Zorian's army. Whoever was commanding the situation really knew how to arrange things to deal the maximum amount of damage and confusion in an enemy, and Zorian could literally sense the glee and anticipation in the minds of Ibasan mages as they waited with bated breaths for the inevitable catastrophe to befall the enemy...

...and then Zorian suddenly reached out to the ten approaching rock worms with his mind, tearing through the Ibasan mind-control schemes like they were made of cobwebs, and commanded them to switch targets.

And so they did. Just before the golems and war trolls were about to clash, eight of the rock worms burst out of the floor and ceiling, tackling the biggest, meanest-looking trolls to the ground and breaking their momentum. When the two groups finally met, the war troll regiment immediately crumbled before the pitiless advance of metal puppets. Tougher than steel and armed with scorching hot blades specifically designed to neutralize the trolls' natural regeneration, the golems wouldn't have had an issue even without the rock worms' help. With them distracting the leaders of the war trolls regiment, the war trolls had no chance.

Zorian kept advancing forward. In fact, he had never stopped doing so. As he got closer to the battle between the golems and war trolls, one of the war troll leaders stumbled in close to him, a rock worm stubbornly wrapped around him like a giant snake. The rock worm kept snapping its massive jaws at the war troll's face, while the war troll used both hands to desperately keep it at bay. Zorian gave a command to his huge bodyguard golem, and the metal puppet reached down with one of its massive hands, grabbed the war troll by its left leg and picked it up in the air.

The rock worm immediately let go of the troll and found another target to menace, as the massive golem started to spin the war troll above its head a few times and then hurled it straight at the barricade that the Ibasans had set up in Zorian's path.

It wouldn't have been a very effective attack normally, but the Ibasans were a bit busy at the moment. The last two rock worms that Zorian didn't send after the war trolls were instead pointed at the mages normally responsible for commanding them. Additionally, Zorian's monster horde had mostly dismembered the undead chaff sent to stop them and were currently attacking every available weak point of the barricade in the attempt to break through. As such, they could do nothing but watch as their own war trolls, large even by troll standards and clad in heavy steel armor, spun through the air and physically slammed into the boxy stone cube that served as the core of the barricade's defensive wards.

The cube shattered into hundreds of pieces, and the wards covering the fortification immediately went down with it. Without breaking his stride, Zorian retrieved the bulky grenade launcher gun from his back and fired three frost grenades straight into the biggest clumps of Ibasan mages he could see. Barely a moment afterwards, his human underlings joined him in the attack, unwilling to let such an obvious opportunity go to waste, and a wave of energy spells, bullets, and grenades came raining down on the Ibasans.

Demoralized by their repeated failures, the Ibasan forces abandoned their blockade and ran. Zorian was about to command his forces to give chase and thin down their forces when a familiar figure materialized in the air in front of him.

It was a floating humanoid wearing a scarlet red robe, his face hidden beneath a hood that masked his features under a veil of darkness.

Even after unmasking himself to them, Jornak still used his Red Robe outfit to face them

"You were hiding your abilities when we fought earlier," said Jornak, idly blocking a handful of bullets Zorian's soldiers had fired at him while simultaneously firing a streak of lightning back at them

The lightning line hit the first target in an instant, killing him on the spot, before arcing from target to target five more times, claiming three more lives and disabling two more. Zorian immediately ordered them all to withdraw. They might have held some usefulness as a distraction, but they would have to die in droves to achieve that, and he didn't want that on his soul.

The Jornak in front of him was just a simulacrum anyway, so it wasn't like they would accomplish much by putting him down.

"We both hid our true abilities," Zorian told him, firing a few rounds from his rifle at the floating figure without missing a beat. Jornak blocked them just as easily as he did the bullets from before, looking completely unconcerned. Some kind of shield specialized in defending against physical attacks like bullets? "There is nothing strange or unexpected about that."

"I really hate those things," Jornak commented. Zorian was pretty sure he was talking about the rifle in his hands. "They caused so much grief and suffering. I wish they were never invented. I'd certainly never use one of those unless I had no choice. I believe Zach feels the same. That's why it surprised me so much when you used one against me the first time we fought. In a way, you're even more honorless than I am."

Zorian did not feel like being lectured to by someone like Jornak, so he simply ordered his golems to attack and prepared to cast a spell. He didn't think the man was really here for a philosophical discussion anyway – he probably just wanted to stall Zorian with pointless talk while the enemy forces converged together and regrouped.

Almost simultaneously, both of them hasted themselves in an attempt to catch each other off-guard and let loose three spells each. The walls of the tunnels around them instantly melted, warped, and shattered. They were both unharmed for it. A faint shockwave of the clash propagated itself to the spot where Zorian's human army had retreated, prompting them to fearfully retreat even further.

Zorian frowned, looking at the red robed figure in front of him. Truthfully, he had known something like this would happen when he started this attack. He would have been seriously worried if someone hadn't shown up to stop him, since he would soon be approaching the Ibasan base. Their enemies *had* to stop him before he could shut down the dimensional portal they used to shuffle their forces from place to place. Without it, the invasion was finished before it even began.

The trouble was, the original was already fighting elsewhere, and that fight was way more important than this one. This was also the reason why the only serious opposition their enemies had sent to stop him was one of Jornak's simulacra – they were already pressed elsewhere and couldn't spare anyone else.

Truthfully, this whole operation was a bit of a deliberate distraction. He had never really expected to take the Ibasan base, because most of their forces were busy elsewhere. His main purpose was to lessen the pressure on the city and to threaten the Ibasan retreat point to the point where they would be forced to send someone important to defend it. Both of the goals had been pretty much achieved. The very fact that Jornak had been forced to send one of his simulacra and waste his mana on this was a success. At this point, it would serve his purposes just fine to simply drag this fight out as much as possible, wasting Jornak's mana and preventing him from fully committing elsewhere.

Or he could take a risk and try to eliminate the simulacrum for real – something that would force the enemy to shift even more resources to this conflict, but had a high chance of blowing up in his face if his simulacrum ended up being destroyed in the clash. All of the human recruits that followed him to this place would die soon afterwards, and the Ibasans would once again be free to focus their effort on the city above.

The indecision only lasted for a moment. He swiftly ordered his golem army into motion and then created a swarm of tiny projectiles around him. Each one was smaller than his thumb and glowed with bright orange light, circling around him like a river of stars. Though seemingly weak, each of the little orange stars contained the force of a fully-powered fireball. They were fast, maneuverable, and Zorian could hold them in reserve until he needed them. He immediately sent three of them at Jornak on curved, complicated trajectories and then followed them up with a lance of force aimed straight at his head.

Jornak's reaction to the small army of golems trying to tackle him surprised Zorian, however. Rather than use magic to evade them or waste a huge amount of mana to batter their spell-resistant bodies, he simply... punched them away. The simulacrum Jornak sent here was clearly special in some way that Zorian did not understand, because he possessed downright incomprehensible physical strength. His mere punches sent man-sized golems flying away like discarded dolls, and a well-placed kick could easily snap a knee joint and render the golem useless. Worse, Jornak's simulacrum seemed able to regenerate its ectoplasmic body with minimal effort on his part. Twice Zorian managed to severely damage him, blowing off his arm once and piercing a big hole with a force lance in his torso the other time, and in both cases the damage went away in mere seconds.

Zorian ordered his bodyguard golem to join the fray, hoping to use its size and powerful wards to simply overpower Jornak with raw strength, but this quickly backfired. Jornak took out three grenades from his pocket and threw them above his head before teleporting out of the huge golem's reach. Before Zorian could order it to withdraw, the grenades detonated without the slightest sound. A web of hair-thin dimensional fractures flashed faintly in the air, space itself shattering before the magical grenade blast, and enveloped the golem.

As potent as the great golem's defenses were, very few things could stand up to the cutting power of dimensional fractures. The thin black lines went through the golem's bulk with hardly any resistance, snuffing out its animation core and cutting up its bulk into hundreds of tiny pieces.

Zorian could only helplessly watch as his creation, one which had been crucial in his coming this far so easily, fell apart in front of his eyes.

Okay, now he was kind of angry.

He launched all of the fire stars he had circling him straight at Jornak's simulacrum, forcing him onto the defensive, and then physically charged straight at him. The enemy simulacrum hesitated for a second, no doubt wondering what had possessed Zorian to do something that stupid, before deciding this was too good of a chance to pass up. He charged as well, rushing to meet Zorian head on. Jornak's simulacrum was clearly far more powerful up close than Zorian's.

Just before they slammed into each other, Jornak's whole body became shrouded in arcing red electricity that reminded Zorian of Quatach-Ichl's favorite spell. In a blindingly fast movement, Jornak's hand flashed forward and punched straight through the chest of Zorian's simulacrum. Despite being made out of metal and alchemically treated materials, his body provided very little resistance before the ectoplasmic hand, which passed through him like a very sharp blade. Damaging red lightning immediately began spreading itself through the chest cavity of the simulacrum, irreparably damaging sensitive components.

Zorian ignored the damage. Instead, he reached out with both hands and firmly gripped the hand sticking out of his chest. Realizing that something was wrong, Jornak's simulacrum tried to wrench its hand free of the grasp, but he wasn't fast enough. Hundreds of mana threads erupted out of Zorian's palms, burrowing themselves into Jornak's ectoplasmic flesh.

Jornak's simulacrum shuddered and twitched as it tried to move, but failed to wrench itself out of Zorian's grasp. Even as Zorian's chest started to flake off around the hand stuck in it, internal components seeping out as fine black sand, Jornak's own form was getting blurrier and more indistinct. Moreover, the degradation of Jornak's simulacrum was clearly progressing faster than that of Zorian's own puppet body, more and more mana threads spreading throughout its ectoplasmic form and disrupting it on a fundamental level.

"You..." Jornak croaked incredulously, before his entire body, red cloak and all, warped and flickered like a badly-made illusion and collapsed into smoke.

Zorian's own simulacrum body then promptly collapsed on the floor, now that Jornak's hand was no longer keeping his body standing. His internals were far too ruined for him to move his limbs anymore, and just about the only thing he could still move was his head.

Eventually, the human soldiers under his command decided to check things out and cautiously approached the place of the battle.

"Hey," Zorian suddenly called out from the ground, where his crumpled simulacrum body lay motionless. A bunch of people looked at themselves before the closest soldier pointed to himself curiously. "Yeah, you with the beard. Cut off my head."

Unlawfully taken from Royal Road, this story should be reported if seen on Amazon.

"I beg your pardon?" The man asked, shocked.

"I can't move my body so it's mostly just useless weight at this point. Sadly, none of my golems are too good at fine manual dexterity, so it's up to you to cut off my head and carry it with you. You'll be my official head carrier from now on."

The man gave the body on the floor a strange look before sighing.

"This is not what I signed up for," he mumbled under his breath.

- break -

At the same time, one Zorian was fighting in the tunnels beneath Cyoria, but he was also in Koth, preparing to participate in the assault on the Ibasan base there. Jornak had made a portal link to Koth earlier in the month, in order to eventually take Zorian's friends and family hostage, and now there was a small Ibasan base hidden out there in the jungle, relatively close to the Taramatula estate.

Zorian couldn't tell if Jornak still placed any hopes on this plan. On one hand, the base was still there and the portal connection was not shut down – surely their enemies would not have done this if they knew that Zorian had opted out of using the Taramatula estate as his sanctuary? On the other hand, the base looked pretty small and understaffed to Zorian's eyes. Just a single regiment of war trolls and a small horde of undead, led by a handful of human mages? This was a pretty half-hearted operation.

Or that's what *he* thought, anyway. Orissa and the other Taramatula around him apparently did not share his sentiments.

"What a nasty surprise these people had planned for us. This would have been a disaster if the attackers had caught us off guard," Orissa commented.

"I've seen you fight," Zorian said, frowning. "A House with several dozen mages like you should have no problems repulsing a force like this, even if the war trolls and undead are more resistant to bee attacks than most targets."

Since most of their attention was placed elsewhere, Zorian was here only as a simulacrum. Moreover, he did not have an army of golems with him like the simulacrum beneath Cyoria did. He was here more as an advisor than anything – the Taramatula would be the ones who did all the fighting.

"You did?" Orissa asked curiously. "How strange. I don't remember fighting anyone while you were around. Still, while I thank you for the compliments, the simple counterpoint to your claim is that our House *doesn't* have several dozen mages like me. I am very much exceptional, both in talent and the amount of resources that have been spent on me. Most of the members of our House aren't particularly good at fighting to begin with. Most of them are primarily trackers and surveyors, using their bees purely to find things and fighting only as a last resort."

"Ah," said Zorian, wincing a little internally. Yes, he probably shouldn't take someone like Orissa to be the benchmark for your average member of the House. "So why did you insist on making this attack, then? Why not just defend your estate like I advised you to?"

"There is too much risk involved in that," Orissa said. "If our main hives are damaged in the fighting, it would be a huge blow to our operations. But more importantly... the elders want that portal."

Zorian raised his eyebrow at her. The portal... of course. The base Jornak made for this operation connected Koth directly to Altazia, bridging the vast distances between two continents with a permanent dimensional connection. The value of this was incalculable.

"And... you think you can take out this force, which you aren't sure you could defend against effectively, in such a way that you can seize the portal intact?" Zorian asked her curiously.

"There is a chance, yes," Orissa told him with a mysterious smile. "In a direct fight, I wouldn't be too confident of my chances, but thanks to your information we have a chance to take them off guard. If we can sneak enough bees into their base without them noticing, then their first indication of an impending attack will consist of getting swarmed by hundreds of magical bees each."

"You'd have to make sure to get them all or the whole thing will fail," Zorian pointed out. "If even one survives the initial attack, he will close the portal."

"Of course," Orissa said. "That's why it's important to be patient and do this slowly. You said there was no rush, yes?"

"None," Zorian admitted. This fight was relatively irrelevant in the grand scheme of things. If the Taramatula could really seize the portal, Zorian supposed they could send in some of their forces to the other side to assist them, but that was unlikely to be decisive in any way. "In fact, I wholly support your decision to be careful."

"Less chance of your needing to pull us out of the fire if we flounder?" Orissa asked knowingly.

"I'm just a moderately talented teenager," Zorian said. "I could hardly turn the tide of battle all on my own."

"Yes, I'm sure," Orissa said. "How many living people did you say were in the base?"

"Twenty eight," Zorian said with barely a thought. He then quickly pointed out to her where exactly everyone currently was so her forces wouldn't waste time scouting the base for no reason.

"You know exactly where everyone in that base is, even from this distance," Orissa said lightly. "But you're just a moderately talented teenager? Your brother should have taught you how to lie better."

"It's just a standard mind sense that all psychic people have," Zorian protested. "Just an innate ability, nothing more."

"I'm quite sure that Daimen couldn't replicate what you just did, despite being way older than you," Orissa said.

Ugh. Why was he so bad at this 'look relatively normal' thing? This was going to be a real problem in the future, he could already tell...

"You know what? I'm shutting up now," Zorian sighed. "You have a surprise attack to plan, so you should get on that, and I'll... just stand on the sidelines and let the adults handle everything from now on. Please protect me, Daimen's fiancée. My brother will never forgive you if you get his beloved little brother killed."

She set loose some of her bees on him for that.

- break -

Zorian was in the tunnels beneath Cyoria, he was in Koth, and he was even in the academy in Cyoria, setting up contingencies in case things failed to develop as they hoped.

But mostly he was at Iasku's Mansion.

In fact, Zach, Xvim, Alanic, Daimen, and most of their forces were also at Iasku's Mansion... because that's where the Ibasans held their kidnapped shifter children.

It was a bit of an obvious choice, in retrospect. It was heavily defended, it was really far from any other civilization, and it had a gate connection to the Ibasan base beneath Cyoria.

However, there had been lots of 'obvious choices' when it came to the place where the Ibasans held the shifter children, and the cost of attacking Iasku Mansion was huge. It wasn't something they would be willing to commit to unless they *knew* there was something of critical importance there.

Well, now they knew, and the mansion and its surroundings had become the site of a bitter battle. Zorian's real body was here, standing on the back of Princess as the forest burned and shuddered around them. Thousands upon thousands of undead were charging at them, ranging from simple undead boars to towering mountains of stitched up flesh that could rival even the biggest of Zorian's golems in size. Zorian's golems took care of most of them, tearing into them with grenade throwers and dismembering them with giant blades, but there were just too many of them...

Fortunately, Princess was unafraid of the horde of the walking dead, and her eight heads were ever-vigilant. Any undead that dared approach her was immediately dealt with, without Zorian having to do anything.

Immediately behind the undead horde was a rapidly approaching mass of monsters – mostly war trolls and winter wolves, with a huge swarm of iron beaks hovering above them, cawing ominously. Some rock worms were moving invisibly beneath the surface of the earth, but their controllers were wiser than the ones beneath Cyoria and made sure the worms avoided Zorian like a plague and stayed as far away from him as possible.

And in the distance, perched on the roof of the mansion, were three dragons staring intently at them.

Three living, perfectly healthy dragons, completely unrelated to the skeletal monstrosity hidden in the depths of Iasku Mansion.

Oganj and his two students, Zorian was sure. They weren't doing anything for now, but Zorian knew this wouldn't last as they got closer to the mansion itself.

The attack was meant to be a surprise, but their enemies had clearly been ready for them anyway.

Well. It would have been nice to catch their enemies completely off-guard, but he had never really thought this would be an easy battle, anyway.

After some back and forth with Zach, Zorian gave a silent signal to the menacing mass of iron beaks in the sky and suddenly the whole flock swerved to the side as one, before letting loose a massive volley of knife-like feathers at a seemingly empty patch of land.

Distant screams filled the air as the mages who were moving there under the cover of invisibility suddenly came under attack by the forces they believed were on *their* side.

Before the enemy mages could regroup, Zorian ordered Princess to charge forward towards the mansion. She did so with relish, but not before letting loose a challenging roar from all eight of her heads at the trio of dragons in the distance. Clearly riled up by the provocation, one of the dragons shook and almost flew up in the air to intercept her, but the biggest of the dragons casually slapped him down with his tail and gave him a silent glare. Visibly chastised, the smaller dragon immediately backed down.

Zorian was impressed. Although Oganj was clearly the biggest and meanest of the trio, the other two were still adult dragons. They were not known for accepting such clearly subordinate positions lightly. Oganj must be more than just a good mage if he could convince a pair of adult dragons to follow his orders like that.

In any case, Princess was like an eight-headed train that didn't need train tracks to get around. Her great speed and bulk meant that she could simply barrel through the undead horde with minimal resistance, trampling smaller corpses without slowing down and knocking the bigger stuff aside to continue forward.

Then Alanic and his fellow mages finished their spell and summoned a fiery twister inside the heart of the undead horde, where it began to suck in the undead towards the center and got increasingly bigger and stronger the more undead it consumed.

Zorian had seen that spell before, and now he even knew what the secret behind it was. The fire twister was actually trapping the souls of the undead it consumed and using them to power itself, which was why it seemingly never ran out of mana and only got stronger as it killed more and more undead. It was a rather dark piece of magic by church standards, almost *necromantic* in the way it functioned, but fighting fire with fire and all that. The fire twister would release the souls it had gathered when the spell eventually ended, letting them move on to the afterlife.

Before Zorian could celebrate too much, hundreds of red figures poured out of the mansion, flying into the sky. Zorian squinted at the sight, finding the enemies in front of him unfamiliar. They looked almost like bats, but with disturbingly humanoid bodies and faces, and snake-like tails trailing behind them. The tail had a toothy mouth at the end, Zorian eventually realized, and the tails moved around like they had a mind of their own.

[Demons,] Alanic sent to him through their telepathic link.

[Minor or major?] Zorian asked.

[There is no such thing as a minor demon,] Alanic answered him. [But I suppose these would count as 'minor'.]

Zorian clacked his tongue. Sadly, due to the way the time loop functioned, he had no experience at all in how to fight something like this. All he knew was that demons were an incredibly diverse bunch, with many strange powers that sometimes varied from individual to individual, never mind different species. Fighting them was almost as bad as fighting a human mage. You never really knew what to expect.

[Let us handle them,] another voice demanded over the telepathic link.

Zorian didn't argue, he gave his permission and a swarm of sulrothum suddenly rose into the sky with a terrible buzzing sound and flew off to intercept the demon bats.

For a while, Zorian busied himself with guiding several severing discs and decapitating war trolls and winter wolves while Princess trampled everything in her path, but gradually things began to bother him. Things were going pretty good, but he couldn't help but feel that this was because the mansion defenders weren't really giving their all to stop them. They were just sending disposable troops to buy themselves more time for... something.

The fact Oganj and his two students were just sitting there on the mansion roof and watching the battle with seemingly no intention to get involved was especially bothering him. Why were the freaking dragons not attacking!?

Hell, they hadn't even sent the skeletal dragon into the fray!

He nervously fingered the cube given to him by the angel he summoned, wondering if he should--

No. No, this wasn't the right time. Using it now would be a mistake. Something in the back of his mind insisted that this was true.

He put the cube back into his jacket pocket and made a quick conversation with Zach, Alanic, and everyone else.

Soon, an absolutely massive creature rose into the air in the distance before rapidly approaching. It was the Sulrothum holy beast, the massive sandworm that had given them so much trouble when they had tried to fight it. Now it was on their side. Flying on hundreds of translucent butterfly-like wings, the worm made a beeline for the three dragons.

At the same time, the others also made their own moves. Zorian projected a blast of repelling force in front of Princess, knocking aside some troublesome opponents that had halted her advance, and ordered her to head straight for the mansion and its guardian dragons, damn everything else. Meanwhile, a milky white orb suddenly rose into the air, carrying Zach, Xvim, Alanic, and Daimen towards the dragons with incredible speed and agility.

The dragons immediately realized they were being targeted, and rose into the air as one. Oganj bellowed out something to his two students and they each picked their own opponent – the left one went to intercept Zorian and Princess, the right one flew off to engage the massive sandworm in the sky above the mansion. As for Oganj, he seemed to have identified Zach's group as the biggest danger out of them all, and thus something he should deal with personally.

Zorian was modest enough to admit the dragon mage was probably right.

In any case, once Oganj decided it was time to fight, he did not hold back in the slightest. Zach's sphere was too fast and maneuverable for the great dragon to dodge it or breathe fire on it, so he instead reached for his magic. Waving his hands in a surprisingly human-like gesture, Oganj created an incandescent white sphere in his hand and thrust it in the opposing sphere's general direction.

Even though the attack wasn't aimed at him, and he was quite a distance away, Zorian could still feel his neck hairs raise at the amount of mana Oganj poured into the spell. Dragon magic was bullshit.

Thankfully, all of them were quite unusual in their own way, and Zach had three other people supporting him. Before the destructive sphere could actually get close to Zach's sphere and detonate, space started to bend around it, like something invisible was being wrapped around it, and then the sphere seemingly winked out of existence.

Moments later, a terrifying detonation sounded in the distance. Xvim had teleported Oganj's projectile away into a nearby region, but its detonation still sent vibrations through Zorian's chest and lit up the sky like a second sun.

Gods... no wonder Zach had died to Oganj so many times. How were they even supposed to fight someone like this!?

"Watch out, you stupid savage!" Sudomir's voice suddenly echoed all around the mansion, magically amplified and projected so that it could be heard clearly in the whole region. "You're lucky they got rid of that projectile or you'd have leveled the whole mansion! Since when is this kind of magic acceptable when you're defending a place!?"

"Shut up!" Oganj yelled back in clear human tongue, his voice just as loud as Sudomir's, despite using no magic to amplify it. "I know what I'm doing! Go whine to your dead wife instead of bothering me when I'm fighting!"

Zorian ignored the bickering between Sudomir and Oganj, because he had more immediate issues to worry about. Oganj's student was probably not as powerful as his master, but he was still a dragon mage and he was coming for him.

Zorian fired a force lance at the incoming dragon's wing, hoping to ground it. Dragon flight was magical, but they still needed their wings intact if they wanted to use it, so wing membranes were a big, well-known weakness.

Too well-known, apparently. The dragon tried to swerve out of the way of the force lance, but when Zorian revealed he could make the lance pivot in the middle of flight and change directions on a whim, he found out that the dragon also erected a shield around himself just in case. The force lance hit the shield and shattered harmlessly upon it.

Visibly narrowing his eyes at Zorian and Princess, the dragon took a deep breath and launched a stream of fire-based projectiles at them. Apparently this dragon practiced magic that allowed him to shape his breath into various projectiles like exploding fireballs and fast-moving beams of flame.

He still couldn't hit Princess. With her eight heads and her strangely-shaped body, she kind of looked like she should be clumsy and slow... but she was a divinely-enhanced beast and this impression was totally wrong. Princess was both fast and maneuverable, and not only did she skillfully dodge every projectile the young dragon mage directed at her, she even found the time to pick up various loose stones and small winter wolves that hadn't moved away fast enough and hurl them straight at the dragon in the air. She was a pretty good shot, too.

Plus, of course, she had Zorian riding on her back. Whenever she couldn't dodge something, he would just deflect it away while periodically annoying the dragon with simple force projectiles. He was pretty sure that this was the dragon that had wanted to fight Princess when she had bellowed out a challenge at the start of the battle, so he should be a fairly irritable sort.

Annoyingly, the dragon had placed mental shields on itself before the battle had even begun. They weren't much, but dragons were already a pain to affect with his powers, even without dedicated mental defenses, due to their magic resistance. The mental shield, crude as it was, simply made the idea of targeting it with mind magic a complete non-starter.

Thankfully, Zorian's hopes about the dragon's irritability proved to be correct. After repeatedly dodging his projectiles and harassing him with force spells, the dragon had apparently had enough. He could have continued flying high, outside of Zorian's and Princess's effective reach, but instead he decided to descend closer to the ground so he could catch them with a more powerful attack.

It was a good attack, Zorian had to admit. The dragon created a translucent blue ball in front of him and launched it at the pair. As it got closer, it suddenly extended into a large gelatinous dome and trapped them inside it. Princess tried to bite through it, but the gelatinous barrier resisted her efforts and even glued one of her jaws shut, forcing Zorian to cut her free. Meanwhile, the dragon clearly took time powering up some kind of massive fire spell that would incinerate them both to ashes, now that they were both trapped in a small area with no way to dodge.

Unfortunately for him, Princess could teleport.

Just before the dragon could release his spell, Princess quickly curled up into a ball and disappeared from her gelatinous prison, taking Zorian with her.

Before the dragon could realize what happened, he had already launched the fire attack at the empty dome, wasting his spell and hitting nothing. Then Princess popped into existence practically next to him and Zorian quickly fired a whole bundle of severing whips at the dragon's torso.

Being considerably tougher than a human, the dragon mage was not cut into tiny chunks by the severing whips, but they did cut into his flesh, drawing blood and wrapping too tightly around him to be easily dislodged. Especially since any struggle would just worsen his wounds. Zorian anchored the severing whips to Princess's back and ordered her to *pull*.

She did. The dragon let loose an almost girlish scream and plummeted to the ground, severing whips digging ever deeper into his flesh. Before he could gather his bearings Princess was already upon him, heads biting and snarling, and they both went down in a tangle of limbs and necks. The fight quickly degenerated into a weird but vicious wrestling match, the dragon and divine hydra rolling around the ground, knocking down small trees and smashing boulders into powder.

As for Zorian, he had thankfully already jumped off Princess's back when she went after the downed dragon, and was currently flying towards the other two dragon fights in a milky white sphere similar to the one that Zach used to confront Oganj. He felt a little bad leaving Princess to fight the dragon on her own, but he had faith she wasn't going to get herself killed in his absence. She was a pretty tough girl.

The other two fights, he soon realized, were still ongoing. In fact, they had merged into some kind of confused combined battle, thanks to two facts. One, Oganj's student couldn't really stop the flying sand worm – he could keep it busy, but the sand worm was too big and massive for the relatively tiny dragon to stop it from going wherever it wished. Secondly, the iron beaks decided, on their own initiative, to pick a fight with the two dragons. Zorian had no idea how that had happened, since picking up a reason from the minds of iron beaks itself proved unhelpful – they were just very, very angry and apparently hated the three dragons from the very moment they had shown up and 'arrogantly' claimed the mansion's roof like they owned the whole place.

Compared to dragons, the iron beaks were nothing. However, there were a lot of them, and they knew when to attack and when to retreat. Moreover, Zach and the others were protecting them, since they found the vicious corvids useful as a distraction.

Also, apparently Sudomir really didn't like the fact that his mansion, which contained his beloved wife's spirit, was in danger from all this fighting around it. As such, his voice constantly sounded from the mansion, shouting instructions at the two dragons and insults at Zach and the others. He was starting to sound increasingly incoherent as time went by, and by the time Zorian got close to the battlefield, the man had apparently had enough.

The roof of the mansion crumbled and the skeletal dragon hidden inside the top half of it started to pick itself up from the rubble.

Oganj gave the skeletal dragon, and the mansion itself, a contemptuous snort, before focusing back on his current fight.

Of course, the other combatants wouldn't allow another powerful creature to join the fight like that, so before the skeletal dragon could launch itself into the air, Daimen suddenly materialized a giant ectoplasmic body around himself and tackled it off the roof and into the ground below. Daimen had once used this spell to tangle with Princess, back before they had realized how to take control of her, and now it was being used to restrain Sudomir's skeletal dragon.

Sadly, Sudomir was no amateur when it came to building his artificial horrors, and the skeletal dragon wouldn't be so easily restrained. Daimen

gave it his best, but it was clear that he was losing... and none of the others could afford to turn their back on the other two dragons to give him a hand.

But Zorian, who had just arrived on the scene, could.

Before the two dragons could react, Zorian reached into the imperial orb that he carried with him and an absolutely massive golem popped into existence. It was six meters tall and fully made from gleaming, nigh-indestructible metal. The ground sank under its weight as it barreled towards the skeletal dragon being desperately pinned to the ground by Daimen's conjured giant. Perhaps it was just Zorian's imagination, but he could almost see an expression of pure panic in the dragon's empty eye sockets just before the metal colossus jumped on top of it and brought down its heavy spiked fists right on top of its skull.

Sadly, the moment was slightly ruined by the fact said heavy metal fists didn't shatter the skeletal dragon's skull into tiny fragments with a single blow. Instead, the golem 'just' chipped the skull and ended any hope it had of getting into the air, where its maneuverability would make it a huge threat to everyone on his side.

Before Zorian could celebrate and focus on grinding the stupid bone dragon to dust, though, a strange ripple emanated from the mansion, causing both him and everyone else to halt in their tracks.

"I really hoped this wouldn't be necessary..." Sudomir's voice sounded again, this time sounding calmer and more subdued.

[Shit!] Zach suddenly swore over their telepathic connection, and then Zorian's entire perception lurched and twisted. His vision warped, his knees buckled and bile rose to his throat, threatening to make him puke.

He immediately recognized the symptoms. It reminded him of a botched teleportation spell, except...

He quickly looked around. He was still next to Iasku Mansion, the colossus golem was still holding the skeletal dragon pinned to the ground not far from him, and the iron beaks cawed frantically in the sky above, their synchronized murder-flock wobbling chaotically in a disorganized fashion. He was impressed they hadn't dropped from the sky when the dizziness hit them.

Beyond Iasku Mansion, though, Zorian could see a building. A familiar building. And in the distance, he could see burning fires and hear the sound of city defenders facing off against marauding war trolls and hordes of undead.

It took him only a moment to realize what had transpired. During the last planar alignment, a group of mages managed to perform an incredible feat of transplanting their city from one continent to another. What Jornak and his allies did was relatively tame in comparison.

They had simply switched Iasku Mansion and its surrounding space with a piece of Cyoria.

Zorian sighed. He gave a mental order to the colossus golem and it brought down its fist once again on the skeletal dragon's skull, this time shattering it to pieces, causing the rest of its bony body to fall limp and lifeless.

Despite all their attempts, everything converged back in Cyoria in the end.

In the sky above, Oganj gave a bellowing roar as the battle began anew.

102. Giants

Chapter 102

Giants

In the middle of Cyoria, relatively close to the massive bottomless hole around which the city was built, there was an anomaly. A large mansion sat there like a lonely sentinel, surrounded by trees. No road led to it, and the surrounding forest was far too thick and wild for a city park. The area was perfectly circular, even cutting several buildings in half at the edges, as if someone had switched a portion of the northern forest with a random city district with zero care as to how it would naturally fit inside.

Which is exactly what had happened, of course. While Zorian and the others had been fighting the dragons and trying to break into Iasku Mansion, their enemies had been performing a powerful teleportation ritual to send said mansion straight into the heart of Cyoria, right next to the place where the primordial release ritual was to take place.

Zorian took a few moments to replenish his mana reserves a little and marveled at the sheer audacity of the feat. He had been curious for a while now why Quatach-Ichl, Silverlake, and Jornak weren't helping their dragon allies defend the mansion. Now he knew. This kind of ritual spell wasn't something that could be done on a whim, or stopped in the middle without consequences. Quatach-Ichl, Jornak, and Silverlake were probably all required to pull this off, and they absolutely couldn't afford to get distracted for even a moment. That's why they got the three dragon mages to guard them at this critical time. That's why they were so defensive in general.

They should have pushed them harder, Zorian thought to himself regretfully. If they had held nothing back right from the start and tried to break into the mansion with absolutely everything at their disposal, then maybe...

He shook his head, putting such thoughts to the side. This was no time for regrets and hypotheticals. Besides, in a way, luck had been on their side. Zorian had not invested too much time studying these kinds of ritual spells, but everything he knew about them told him they had to have started the ritual a long time ago. Long before Zorian had given everyone a signal to start the attack, Jornak and his allies had started casting their spell. If they had moved any slower, it was possible the fight would have started with the mansion's sudden teleportation in the middle of Cyoria. Now *that* would have been a disaster!

He observed the battleground around him, trying to figure out his next course of action.

Princess had been too far to get caught in the teleportation effect, which meant she was effectively out of the fight. It would take too much time and mana to get her to Cyoria, assuming she could even finish her fight with her draconic opponent in a timely manner. The sulrothum's flying sandworm had also been left behind, being far, *far* too big for the teleportation spell.

On the bright side, both of the divine beasts had tied up one of the dragon mages through their efforts. The one Princess had been fighting was obviously too far to get teleported, and the second one had been hit by the sandworm and flung into the distance at the time the teleportation effect hit, causing it to be left behind as well. The only dragon mage left now was Oganj, who was currently fighting Zorian's allies in the sky above the mansion.

Unfortunately, Oganj was by far the most powerful dragon mage out of the three. And they were now fighting above a highly populated city, where collateral damage was very much an issue.

On the bright side, Zach and his entire group had followed Oganj to Cyoria, and they were joined by most of the iron beaks and the sulrothum. Zach and the other human mages were currently busy keeping Oganj from leveling the city, but the other two were basically unopposed. Under the leadership of their high priest, the devil wasps had thoroughly beaten the demon bats, and were currently just mopping them up. As for the iron beaks, they were quickly recovering from their sudden change in scenery and their fighting spirit didn't seem lessened by the experience. Both groups would soon be free to join the other battlefields.

Which was good, because a flood of war trolls, various monsters, undead, and enemy mages suddenly started pouring out of Iasku Mansion.

Zorian was not surprised by this. Why else would their enemies bother transporting the entire Iasku Mansion to Cyoria unless it was filled to the brim with troops? Still, he was kind of surprised that they managed to keep so many of their forces in reserve like this. The amount of soldiers and monsters they had placed beneath Cyoria to fake the main attack wasn't small, and they had also lost a great many of their minions trying to delay them from reaching Iasku Mansion. Jornak and Quatach-Ichl must have been far more active with recruiting than they thought. It wasn't just the Altazian mercenary groups, either – looking at the enemy forces spreading out into the city, Zorian could see that many of them were of clear Ulquaan Ibasa origin. Quatach-Ichl must have paid a heavy price to reinforce his existing soldiers with these new ones.

This was a risky move by the ancient lich, Zorian felt. There were too many Ibassans here for them to retreat from the city in a timely manner, even with the help of a permanent dimensional gate. The plan was probably for the Ibasan forces to retreat the same way they had come in: by retreating to Iasku Mansion and then have it teleported again, this time out of the city. However, this was something that was much easier to disrupt than his original plan, which meant Quatach-Ichl risked losing a lot of forces today.

Idly, Zorian wondered how a huge loss in lives and tamed monsters here would reflect on Quatach-Ichl's reputation back on Ulquaan Ibasa, before deciding this wasn't the time for such thoughts. He directed the iron beaks at these new forces threatening the city, and sent a message to the Sulrothum asking them to support them. He received no response from the sulrothum high priest, but the devil wasps did start to fly towards the forces exiting Iasku Mansion, so they had clearly gotten the message.

He also sent a signal to the academy. Up until this moment, the academy staff had taken a purely defensive stance and had not gotten involved in the city fighting much, but an improvised combat force had long been gathered and organized. Now that a mass of enemies had materialized practically on their doorstep – the academy was also close to the Hole, after all – they also began pouring out and started to actively confront them.

As for Zorian, he did nothing to help their allies against the enemy forces running amok in the city. He'd done all he could for them. They would lose or triumph based on their own merits. Instead, he kept replenishing his mana and waited for-

Ah. They were finally here.

Quatach-Ichl, Silverlake, and Jornak. The three of them marched out of Iasku Mansion once the flow of troops leaving their base had slowed down to a trickle, their bearings proud and their steps never faltering. All three of them were as Zorian had come to know them. The ancient lich was in his skeletal battle form, black bones encased in gold-decorated armor and the imperial crown placed securely on top of his bony head. Sickly green light emanated from him, something that he now knew was a visible trace of a powerful ward anchored to the fancy armor he was wearing. His appearance wasn't *just* for the sake of appearances and intimidation. Jornak was still dressed in that distinctive red robe he loved to wear, his face hidden in darkness. Truthfully, Zorian still often thought of him as 'Red Robe' in his head, even though he was completely sure of his identity by this point. Finally, Silverlake was looking the most relaxed out of the three, dressed in an expensive red dress, hands clasped behind her back as she was looking around at everything around her. Zorian couldn't really hear her due to the distance between him and their group of three, but she seemed to be quietly humming some kind of tune as she walked. It was hard to connect the beautiful, black-haired woman in front of him with the withered old witch he had come to know in the time loop, but they were clearly one and the same.

All three were under the effect of mind blank. Of course.

Two more new arrivals also caught his attention. At the same time their three main enemies marched out of the mansion, a large procession of people in robes also left the mansion through another entrance. The lead people were dressed in the same kind of red robe that Jornak was wearing, and guarded tightly in the center of the procession was a large armored carriage that seemed to be shaking from time to time, as if someone was pounding on it from the inside. The group immediately set off in the direction of the Hole, barely glancing at the fights occurring around the mansion.

The second thing that caught his attention was... another Quatach-Ichl. This one was identical to the ancient lich that had just marched out of the mansion, except this one was holding a glowing red gem the size of a human fist, and was standing directly on top of the ruined roof of Iasku Mansion.

Quatach-Ichl was using a simulacrum? How interesting. As far as Zorian could tell, Quatach-Ichl was like Zach, in that he didn't like using those unless he had to. He didn't have the convenient telepathic link to his copies like Zorian did, and he probably worried about what one of his copies would do without his supervision. It was hard enough for Zorian to keep his copies in line, he couldn't imagine how many headaches other people experienced with them.

So that probably means...

The second Quatach-Ichl raised his black, skeletal hand in the air, his palm pointed at the sky, holding the glowing red gem exposed for all to see. A complicated magic circle made out of blood red light suddenly sprang up around his position. Red streams of light emanated from the gem like many whip-like tentacles, and the air above the mansion started to twist and distort like hot summer air.

Yeah. It was time.

He reached into his jacket pocket and retrieved the angel cube. Then, he deployed the imperial orb and retrieved from it a much bigger, metal cube of his own design.

Glancing to the side, he could see Daimen approaching him. His older brother had chosen to stay still for a while after the teleportation event, rather than immediately rejoining Zach and the others in fighting Oganj. He had spent a lot of mana fighting Sudomir's skeletal dragon until Zorian had come, so he probably felt it prudent to take a breather and recover some strength while he could.

"That thing on the roof is going to summon something," Daimen told him, concern creeping into his voice. "Something big."

"Demons," Zorian said. "I know. But look at those three marching towards us. Do you think we can push through them to stop the summoning?"

Daimen looked at the ancient lich, the humming witch, and the man in the red robe. He didn't know them like Zorian did, but he was a powerful and experienced mage, and could make a decent judgment. He then looked at the battle in the sky, where Zach, Alanic, and Xvim were fighting Oganj, and scowled. Their companions were too busy to come to their aid.

"Can you help me hold them off while I do some summoning of my own?" Zorian asked, giving Daimen a brief side-glance while focusing on the angel cube in his hands. He had never actually done a summoning like this before. He really hoped he didn't mess things up. That would be really anti-climactic.

He swept his hands around him and invisible forces cut deep grooves in the ground around them, forming a complicated magic circle of his own. The lines and glyphs began to glow blue.

"You won't seriously ask me to fight three master mages alone?" Daimen asked incredulously. "I think you have a very inflated view of my

capabilities here, brother."

"It's fine," Zorian insisted. "You just have to hold them off for a *little* while. Plus, you will have Mrva here as support."

Zorian pointed at the giant hulking golem standing behind them. Daimen muttered something about Zorian having a stupid naming sense, but the reminder that he had a metal colossus on his side had obviously helped breathe additional confidence into him.

"Plus..." Zorian added, placing his hand on the other, much bigger cube. "I won't be completely helpless."

Keeping his hand on said cube, Zorian copied Quatach-Ichl's gesture and raised his hand up into the air, palm facing upwards. The small angel cube greedily accepted his mana, interfacing itself with Zorian's improvised magic circle. Hundreds of tiny golden glyphs lit up on the surface of the cube, though from a distance Zorian imagined it just looked like he was holding up a miniature sun in the palm of his hand.

A vortex of multicolored light and soft wind suddenly formed around him as the angel cube started to madly draw in ambient mana in the area. A massive, mind-boggling torrent of mana was sucked into the cube, more than Zorian could have ever provided out of his own personal mana reserves, even if he sat there and powered it for several months at the time.

This wasn't how summoning rituals usually worked. If Zorian had tried to use ambient mana to help pay for the summoning like this in normal circumstances, he wouldn't just suffer mana poisoning – he would explode into ash and dust before he channeled even a quarter of the mana he was handling now. However, this time he didn't have to channel the ambient mana through himself, as with most spellcasting. The cube was somehow doing that on its own, and Zorian simply had to make sure to guide the mana across proper channels and shape the summoning spell. His mana reserves were still dropping dangerously fast, but the ritual was more taxing on his shaping skills than anything else.

Did the angel make the cube specifically to take advantage of Zorian's high shaping skills? Because this was hard. Insanely hard! Other than maybe Xvim, Zorian didn't think there was any person other than him that could stop all this mana from running out of control and ruining the titanic summoning ritual the cube wanted to execute.

Zorian wasn't entirely sure he could do this himself, actually. The difficulty was still increasing. His hand shook and beads of sweat formed on his forehead as the cube in his palm shone brighter and brighter.

'An angel's trust is a heavy thing to bear,' Zorian lamented in his head.

Focused as he was at his task, he was only partially aware of things happening around him, and even that was purely because his mind was fused with so many of his simulacrum. One of the simulacrum took over his body and senses while he focused on shaping the summoning spell, and in his current fused mental state, this allowed him to observe his surroundings in a way he would normally be unable to achieve without being distracted.

Almost immediately after he started his own summoning, Jornak, Quatach-Ichl, and Silverlake stopped their dramatic march and just plain rushed at him, hoping to stop the spell. If he hadn't been distracted by the strain of the summoning, Zorian would have found the scene funny. As it was, he just watched as the enemy trio started hurling spells at him, only for them to be stopped cold by Daimen and Mrva. Quatach-Ichl did his best to hit him with a multitude of his signature red disintegration beams, Jornak was showering the entire area with blindingly bright arcs of lightning that dodged through any static shield and obstacle in the way, and Silverlake was trying to copy Zorian by launching various potion bottles at him with the aid of telekinetic spells.

Nothing worked. Daimen recklessly burned through his mana reserves to erect massive golden shields in front of them, tanking most of the damage, and occasionally dispelled incoming projectiles by hitting them with pale blue beams and invisible waves of disrupting force. Anything that got through him was stopped by Mrva, who was tough and warded enough to simply intercept incoming projectiles with his body.

Mrva also frequently went on the offensive, picking up any rocks and boulders from the craters exposed in the fighting and throwing them with surprisingly good accuracy. He also sometimes suddenly charged at them and tried to stomp them flat – a crude but effective tactic that frequently interrupted their spellcasting and forced them to dodge.

In general, the metal colossus was far faster and more agile than its looks would suggest. It was no slow, lumbering giant. It was a golem equivalent of a dragon, and Zorian was very pleased it was performing as well as he had hoped. It was just a shame he couldn't figure out how to make Mrva fly as well.

Something to tackle when he started building version two of the colossus.

At some point, Jornak seemed to have had enough of the massive golem, and tried to get rid of Mrva the same way his simulacrum had gotten rid of Zorian's bodyguard golem back in the tunnels underneath Cyoria. Jornak threw a bunch of bombs at the charging golem and they erupted into a web of hair-thin spatial cracks that enveloped the area. Mrva was completely submerged in the spatial cracks... but he emerged completely unscathed.

The metal colossus was a lot bigger than his bodyguard golems, and had a lot more time and money invested into him. Zorian had equipped Mrva with the finest wards he could set up, and it would take more than that to take it apart.

Surprised at the fact the golem was still whole and rushing at him, Jornak panicked for a moment and tried to cast a short-range teleport to evade the threat. That was a mistake. One of the wards Zorian placed on Mrva was a teleportation ward that could be amplified to extend a fair distance from his body. The ward was a really malicious sort, too – one that didn't just disrupt the teleportation but also tried to do it in a way that made the

spell go haywire and try to kill the caster.

Enjoying this book? Seek out the original to ensure the author gets credit.

Jornak's body shuddered and lurched as his teleportation spell was violently disrupted. He was good enough to stabilize the failing spell, enough that he didn't get himself torn to pieces by the dimensional stresses, but he wasn't good enough to escape all consequences. Dazed and unable to react in time, he was almost stomped by Mrva's foot before Quatach-Ichl gestured with his hand and pulled him out of the way of the charging golem.

Pity. But no matter. Quatach-Ichl and Silverlake were perfectly lined up at the moment, so Mrva thrust both of his hands towards them, causing a huge wave of wind and kinetic force to barrel towards them.

Self-casting items were largely disappointing. They could only really produce crude blasts of force, fire and the like. For some uses, however, that was enough... especially if the blast was big enough.

Quatach-Ichl was too experienced to fall for this, and the blast only caused him to be momentarily distracted as he focused on counteracting it. Silverlake, however, wasn't that much of a fighter. The blast caught her entirely by surprise and she reacted too slowly, causing her to get knocked back into the distance.

She would be back soon, but it didn't matter. In this kind of battle, every second counted. Silverlake was the weakest among the three enemies facing them, but still very dangerous. Having her gone for a while was great.

Sadly, Mrva and Daimen had been unable to take advantage of this opportunity because two giant spheres of black bones suddenly burst out of Iasku Mansion and came barreling down at Mrva. As they got closer, they unrolled into familiar skeletal crocodilians. Zorian had seen one of them in action when he and Zach had gone to rob Eldemar's royal treasury with Quatach-Ichl, and knew exactly how powerful and resilient they were.

Back then, Quatach-Ichl said the crocodilian skeleton beast was his 'pet'. Of course he actually had more than one...

The two skeleton beasts quickly pounced upon Mrva, tying him down.

"What great allies I have," the ancient lich said, bending his skeletal neck sideways as if he was cracking his neck. His voice was amplified, allowing everyone in the vicinity to hear him. It was probably intended primarily for Jornak and Silverlake, though. "Better than nothing, I guess, but only just. You'd think literal time travelers would be better than this."

"What?" Daimen asked, confused. He had been preparing to keep the ancient lich tied down, but Quatach-Ichl's statement made him hesitate.

"Oh, he didn't tell you?" Quatach-Ichl said, sounding surprised. "Aren't you his big brother or something? Looks like family doesn't mean what it used to these days."

Before Daimen could say anything, two more simulacrum of Quatach-Ichl suddenly appeared right next to the original. Or at least Zorian guessed the lich they had been fighting thus far was the original. All three Quatach-Ichls immediately hastened themselves and turned into a blur. A split second later, each of them cast three spells each.

Nine red stars, each smaller than the tip of Zorian's finger but shining bright, immediately shot towards Zorian with blinding speed.

Daimen scrambled to block them, but it was too little, too late. The first five slammed into Daimen's golden, multi-layered barrier, blocked by it but ripping it to shreds in the process. The sixth one was stopped by Daimen himself, who retrieved a small mirror from his pocket and physically intercepted the projectile with it. His brother's prized divine artifact lived up to its divine nature and stopped the projectile cold. Unlike the time it stopped Princess's attack beam, it didn't break in the process. There was a flash of light and the red star was just gone, Daimen standing unharmed behind it.

The other three stars rushed towards Zorian completely unopposed.

Up in the sky, his three allies realized he was in danger and tried to help him, but Oganj realized what was happening too and suddenly launched an entire swarm of blindingly bright white beams to intercept them and make them unable to render aid.

Although aware of the incoming attack due to his simulacrum, Zorian did nothing to evade it. He kept stabilizing the summoning spell with all his might.

However, the large metal cube he was resting his hand on wasn't as passive. With a whirring sound of shifting metal plates and internal mechanisms coming to life, it flew in front of him, placing itself in the path of the incoming red stars.

Two of the stars swerved to the side, making sure the cube could only physically intercept one of the stars, but it didn't help. The cube seemingly fell apart at the seams, suddenly separating itself into eight smaller cubes. They positioned themselves into a rough sphere around Zorian, and a faint blue sphere of magical force, almost invisible, encased the entire area around him. The smaller cubes didn't even try to intercept the red stars after that, and the three projectiles slammed into the barrier completely unopposed.

The borderline invisible barrier barely even reacted. Anyone standing close to Zorian would see a handful of gentle ripples emanating from the

points of impact for a fraction of a second, but these quickly subsided and left no trace of damage on the shield.

To his credit, the ancient lich wasn't shocked by the sight. He simply launched into one spell barrage after another, burning through gods know how much mana to launch a multitude of spells at Zorian. Zorian was kind of worried for Daimen at this point, since this kind of onslaught could probably kill his older brother very easily if the lich decided it would be good idea to kill the distraction first. Thankfully, Daimen quickly realized the safest place to be right now was next to Zorian, being protected by his shield, and promptly retreated behind him so that Zorian's cube could protect him as well.

And protect them both the cube did. The cube was not a simple spell aid or ward stone like most such tools. It was closer in nature to a golem, and was just as expensive and complicated to build as Mrva had been. Although no magic item could truly cast a spell, only maintain one indefinitely, Zorian's cube did a pretty good job of mimicking spellcasting. A dizzying amount of protective spells were constantly maintained by the cube. By amplifying some of them and suppressing others, the cube could adjust its protections from moment to moment, creating custom shields to counter specific type of spells. It did that mostly autonomously, because Zorian had animated it in the same manner in which one would a golem. None of its operation required any mana, or even much attention from Zorian. Thus, none of Quatach-Ichl's attacks were effective.

Projectiles slammed into the impenetrable, ever-shifting barrier created by the eight small cubes orbiting Zorian, producing no effect. Larger, slower attacks were dealt with more actively, by one of the little cubes firing marbles at them. The marbles were all charged with various spell bombs, and each cube had a pocket dimension absolutely packed with them, making it unlikely they would run out of marbles any time soon. Once the marble detonated next to an attack, it would be either dispersed or weakened enough for the barrier to negate it with ease. Attempts to send ectoplasmic constructs or animated earth at them were dealt with by Daimen, who picked them apart from the safety of the cube's defense. The shield was sufficiently sophisticated that it would let Daimen's attacks pass through without obstruction, even though that was not normally possible when attacking behind another mage's shield.

Silverlake and Jornak had recovered by this point and did their best to help Quatach-Ichl, but while Mrva was being distracted by the crocodilian skeletons, he wasn't fully tied down. As such, the two had to keep the colossal golem at bay without Quatach-Ichl's help while trying to help him. It wasn't very effective.

Eventually Quatach-Ichl realized this wasn't working and that attempting to overpower Zorian in this manner was just him burning through mana for nothing. Zorian wasn't even spending any mana on defending himself, so the lich's attacks weren't even wearing him out.

"Oganj!" Quatach-Ichl suddenly shouted. "Help me crack this turtle's shell!"

"Get these idiots off me, then!" Oganj responded, trying to swat away the milky sphere flying around him out of the sky.

The ancient lich crouched and jumped, and immediately shot up into the sky like a bullet.

Daimen looked torn between pursuing the lich, even though he knew this would take him out of the safety of Zorian's shield, and trying to put more pressure on Jornak and Silverlake. He eventually decided to try and kill Jornak.

It was probably a smart decision and Zorian fully supported it. While countering whatever Quatach-Ichl was doing would probably be more useful, it would probably result in his death. Zorian would rather face more danger than see Daimen die here. Visions of a pale and bleeding Daimen, near-death after he had sacrificed his life force to allow Zorian to save himself, momentarily flooded his mind, his control over the summoning spell slipping...

No! No, focus... focus... He pushed these thoughts to the side, just like he had pushed them aside this whole month, and focused on the matter at hand. The angel summoning. It had to work, or else the enemy was going to have a whole bunch of demons on their side, and they would have nothing to counter them with.

The battle in the air intensified. Somehow Zach and Alanic found a moment to do some spell interruption of their own and directed a barrage of projectiles at Quatach-Ichl's simulacrum standing on the roof of Iasku Mansion, trying to interrupt his demon summoning. They failed, both because the flying Quatach-Ichl interfered on behalf of his copy and because Iasku Mansion still had reasonably intact defensive wards, despite all the fighting occurring around it.

But then, a disaster struck. Quatach-Ichl managed to distract Zach enough to let Oganj face just Alanic and Xvim for a moment. Rather than try to kill one of them – an action that could work, but would probably fail – the dragon mage decided to instead try to kill Zorian.

Zorian could see the logic of it. Dragon battle magic basically specialized in huge, mana-hungry spells that rivaled human artillery magic in power, but with none of the drawbacks that branch of magic usually had. Quatach-Ichl couldn't overpower Zorian's defenses by sheer number of spells, but a powerful piece of dragon magic could surely crack any kind of shield outside of dedicated building wards like the ones centered around Iasku Mansion.

Time seemed to slow down to Zorian as he watched Oganj finish his spell. The dragon's yellow, slitted eyes seemed to radiate pride and contempt as he thrust his scaly, clawed hand towards him, and a huge ball of incandescent flame came screaming down at Zorian.

Literally screaming. Zorian didn't know if the old dragon mage added that effect purely for the sake of surprise and intimidation, but the massive fireball created a sharp screaming sound as it flew through the air.

Zorian still didn't move to dodge. The eight little cubes stopped orbiting around him, causing the shield around him to collapse, and flew towards

the incoming fireball with great speed, quickly arranging themselves into a ring-shaped formation. Jornak and Silverlake tried to take advantage of Zorian's momentary defenseless position to kill him before the fireball hit, but Daimen and Mrva stopped that from working. As for the fireball, it flew undaunted towards the ring of cubes flying towards it, even though Zorian was sure Oganj could control its flight and try to get it to dodge. He supposed that the dragon mage was confident his spell would overpower whatever defensive effect the cube possessed.

He was bound to be disappointed. As the fireball got close to the ring of cubes, it seemed to enter a zone of *literal* slowed time. A temporal dilation bubble that made time pass slower on the inside than on the outside. Oganj's eyes widened as he tried to pull his spell out of the temporal mire, but the cubes would never allow that. The ring of cubes passed around the burning projectile and it simply... disappeared.

Then they immediately turned around and re-established the defensive field around Zorian.

It was as if the cubes pulled an invisible bag over the fireball and carried it off. Which... wasn't that far from the truth, really. Oganj's massive fireball was currently safely stored in the cube's special, time dilated pocket dimension. It wasn't quite frozen in time, but it was close. Very close.

Oganj gave him an angry, hateful look, but was in no position to do anything to him anymore. The moment Quatach-Ichl had given him had passed, and Zach was back in the fight and angrier than ever.

Besides... Zorian was almost done with his summoning. Even though he had started his spell later than Quatach-Ichl's simulacrum, he seemed to be working faster.

Quatach-Ichl realized it too.

"You are to manage this alone for a while. I need to speed things up," Quatach-Ichl yelled, and then flew off in the direction of his simulacrum. He soon took a place beside him, causing the demon summoning to speed up immensely.

Gritting his teeth, Zorian sent even more mana into the angel cube in his palm, causing it to suck in even more ambient mana from the environment and increasing the strain on his concentration and shaping skills to the edge of the breaking point. Even with the help of his simulacra, his awareness constantly shrank, until the golden cube above his head became his entire world.

Suddenly, the pressure completely disappeared. The air above him warped and twisted, and there was suddenly a huge shadow looming over him.

It was the same angel he and Zach had spoken to earlier in the month. Or at least it looked the same to Zorian. A mass of black branches with orange eyes instead of leaves, wreathed in fire and light. However, this incarnation of the angel was bigger.

Much, much bigger. The angel in front of him dwarfed virtually everything around it. Even Oganj and Mrva looked like children before it. Other than the sulrothum's flying sandworm, this was the largest creature Zorian had laid his eyes on in his life.

The angel wasn't alone. Flying around him were what Zorian could only describe as animated balls of white wings. There were at least 20 of them, and if there was a body hidden somewhere beneath all the feathers, Zorian couldn't see it. They looked tiny next to the titanic burning tree of eyes, but Zorian estimated they were twice as big as he was.

Another four angels, these ones twice as large as the wing things, silently floated next to the main angel. They looked bestial, reminiscent of lions with a very long, flexible body. They flew through the air without wings, their bodies undulating in a serpentine manner, and they had no head. Instead of a head, they had a ring of white masks, each with a different expression, circling above their neck.

The sudden appearance of the huge angel and its group put an immediate end to all the aerial fighting. Oganj immediately vacated the area, retreating towards Iasku Mansion and its defensive wards, while Zach, Alanic, and Xvim landed next to Zorian, grateful for a chance to take a breather and replenish their mana reserves.

When Zorian looked towards Iasku Mansion, however, he realized the angels weren't the only new arrivals. Quatach-Ichl had apparently finished his summoning at the same time he did, because there was an army of demons arrayed in front of them.

The demons were... a diverse bunch. There were hundreds of them huddling around Iasku Mansion, divided among 30 or so different 'species'. One group looked like man-sized black cats with blood red eyes and shark-like grins. Another consisted of large, hunched, pale-skinned humanoids with four arms, no eyes, a long tail, and quills on their back. Yet another looked like brown eggs scuttling around on long, thin, spider-like legs. A multitude of human faces danced on the surface of the 'eggs', most of them looking as if in pain. Isolated and given a wide berth even by the other demons, a large dark red rose towered over most of its demon brethren, supported by a multitude of thorny tentacles that probed all around it as if looking for targets. A regimen of humanoid demons stood at attention in one corner, carrying spears and covered from head to toe in black armor with way too many spikes and blade-like protrusions on it, mimicking some ancient human legion. A flock of disgusting, grub-like creatures floated from place to place, dripping saliva everywhere.

However, this multitude of demons didn't look too impressive in Zorian's eyes. There were a lot of them, but they were pretty small, at least compared to the angels. Zorian was leery about drawing too many conclusions from the size difference alone, but the way the demon horde subtly cowered every time they looked at the massive burning tree in the sky told Zorian it was not something to completely discount.

No, what really worried Zorian was the giant humanoid torso floating above the demon horde. This demon was big. Not as big as the burning tree above Zorian, but big enough to rival Oganj and Mrva. The torso was headless and armless, but there was a gigantic eye embedded into its torso, purple and glowing. An armor seemingly made out of various bones – some of them human, some from animals, and some from strange entities that Zorian couldn't recognize – covered the torso, leaving little except the eye visible to the world.

The lesser demons beneath it cowered before the group of angels, but the eye in the torso looked completely unafraid, studying the scene before it with detached curiosity.

For a moment it glanced at Zorian, and Zorian made the mistake of meeting its gaze. He immediately felt his soul shake and his vision began to blur.

A massive black branch extended from the tree above, stabbing into the earth in front of Zorian and breaking the eye contact between him and the purple eye on the horizon.

Zorian's mind immediately cleared and he quickly reinforced his soul defenses, directing a silent thanks towards the angel above. He didn't think that would have killed him, but he really didn't want to engage a powerful demon in a soul magic fight, no matter how minor it was.

For several seconds, the battlefield was silent, neither side wanting to make the first move.

Eventually, Jornak amplified his voice and spoke out to Zorian and the others.

"If we fight here, the city will get leveled," he said.

"If we don't fight here, you'll release Panaxeth and the city will still get leveled," Zach responded, his voice still amplified. "What's your point?"

"I'm just foolishly hoping you will see reason," Jornak said. "No matter what you do, the city is doomed. *You* are doomed. You were doomed the moment you accepted that poisonous contract with the angels. We both know they probably hoped something like this would happen and that you would end up dying at the end of the month, even if you achieve your goal. The primordial is stopped and the hero conveniently disappears at the end of the story, unable to use his godlike abilities to upset the status quo or enact any real change. You were never supposed to survive this."

Several seconds ticked by in silence. Zorian glanced at the looming angel above him, trying to see if it would speak up to contradict him. It did not.

He had no idea what that meant. Maybe Jornak was right. Maybe the angel thought his words were not even worth responding to.

"But I... I have a chance to live through this. To change things... to change *everything* for the better," Jornak continued. "Is the sacrifice of one city, a city that spit on your family's sacrifice and robbed you of your birthright, such a heavy sacrifice?"

"You're wasting your time," Zach told him. He turned his head skyward, towards the angel above them. "What are you waiting for? Every moment they stall for time, the cultists and their sacrifices get closer to the Hole. Let's finish this."

"**Not yet**," the angel said simply. Its voice rumbled all around them, deep and resonant.

"Fine," Jornak said, sounding a bit angry. Zorian didn't understand why... did he honestly think Zach would suddenly roll over and die if he asked nicely? They'd even summoned a huge angel and everything! "Since you're being like this, let's raise the stakes a little."

He snapped his fingers, the sound amplified along with his voice, and three different detonations occurred at different spots of the city. Instead of dust and gravel, however, what erupted out of these detonations was a geyser of smoky black shapes. They were difficult to make out from this distance, but Zorian could easily puzzle out what they were.

Wraiths. Lots and lots of wraiths.

Suddenly, Zorian imitated Jornak's actions and snapped his fingers as well. There was no explosion, but the swarms of wraiths released by the bombs suddenly all converged on several different locations of the city and disappeared. As if a hidden predator had drawn them in and swallowed them without a trace.

Jornak seemed confused at the sudden event.

"Surprised?" Zorian said out loud, amplifying his voice. "Well, you did give us plenty of forewarning about the wraith bombs. It's only natural that we prepared countermeasures."

"How...?" Jornak began, before suddenly stopping when he realized he was asking Zorian to explain how he countered his move. Of course he wasn't going to tell him something like that.

In truth, it was something that Zorian had Sudomir to thank for most of all. After all, the man had already figured out how to attract and trap bodiless souls over a wide area inside his mansion. Zorian couldn't really duplicate his grand feat, but he could make smaller versions of the soul well, adapted to trapping wraiths, and scatter them across the city.

Even then, trapping free-willed wraiths was significantly different from drawing in ordinary souls of the dead. Zorian had to draw upon his knowledge of the soulseizer chrysanthemum and its ability to suck in souls of living beings to make the device work well enough.

Fortunately, Zorian had gotten lots and lots of insight into the inner workings of the soulseizer chrysanthemum during the last six months of the time loop...

Before anyone could say something, everyone noticed a swarm of distant dots approaching the city in the distance.

Eagles. Giant eagles ridden by battlemages.

Apparently Eldemar's military had managed to organize a response and was about to get involved. Zorian couldn't help but feel a jolt of fear at the thought. This was entirely unplanned, and he had no idea how the soldiers riding on those eagles would react to their presence.

The burning tree floating above them, however, didn't seem surprised.

“Now, we fight,” the angel rumbled, before surging towards the demon horde.

The demon horde roared out a challenge and rushed forth to meet them.

103. Window of Opportunity

Chapter 103

Window of Opportunity

As Zorian watched the massive angel tree and demonic Cyclops torso barrel through the air towards one another, his thoughts inevitably took a depressing and fatalistic turn. He wasn't deluded enough to think they could solve this crisis without the city taking massive casualties, but as he watched the impending clash of titans in front of him, he couldn't help but conclude that Jornak was right.

The city was going to get leveled to the ground, one way or the other.

Thus far, the collateral damage from their battle had been fairly modest. They were fighting around Iasku Mansion, and a sizeable portion of the city around it had gotten replaced with a patch of forest. The trees had taken the brunt of the fighting. There was no way this would remain true for long, and it left Zorian feeling powerless and frustrated. His primary goal was admittedly rather straightforward and selfish – he wanted to ensure he and everyone he cared about survived this evening – but he had lived in this city for a literal decade, and had sunk countless hours and resources into making sure it survived this evening. He did not want to see it destroyed like this. What was their angel ally thinking? It seemed to Zorian that the angel had predicted many of the things that occurred, so why...

Almost as if they could hear his silent laments, the remaining angels sprang into action. The four lion-serpent things that were flanking the burning tree didn't try to join the battle. Instead, they swiftly flew away from the angel tree they had been circling, as if they intended to flee, scattering in all directions. No one was fooled by their maneuver, however, and they soon slowed down and positioned themselves on the edges of the forested area, equidistant from one another. A faint yellow force field immediately enclosed the area in a cubical prison.

Though it looked extremely pale and weak, Zorian didn't believe for a moment that it would be easily pierced.

Moments later, a barrage of spells from Jornak's side hit the walls of the cube, confirming his suspicions. The barrier was extraordinarily tough. Not even Oganj's spell made it weaken, and the dragon mage could basically fling artillery spells on demand.

Zorian relaxed a little, recovering his reserves more as he observed the situation and looked for an opening. Zach and the rest of the people on his side did the same, clustering close to him to take advantage of his powerful defenses. Jornak and Quatach-Ichl launched a few random spells to try to put pressure on them, but those were effortlessly stopped by his defense cube.

His precious creation was burning through its stored mana at a terrifying rate to maintain this level of power, but it was also stocked with a terrifying amount of crystalized mana so it would last for at least another four hours.

Long enough, in other words. They would either win or lose by then.

In any case, neither Jornak nor anyone else on the enemy side could devote much time to figuring out a way to get through their defenses. The angel tree and the cyclopean demon collided with terrifying force. A flood of orange flame and lightning-like bursts of purple energy erupted around them, intermingling with one another and sweeping across the entire battlefield, before being stopped by the cubical barrier.

For a while, everything was chaos. Those unfortunate enough to be close to the initial clash were either vaporized by the energies, or thrown away much like dandelion fluff picked up by the wind. Everyone else was frantically doing their best to vacate their area – a task made more complicated by the fact the two titans did not stay static, and instead moved around as they fought.

All of this was good news for Zorian and his allies, of course – there were only a handful of them, but they were all very powerful, and they had a very good defense that none of them had to spend mana to maintain. Unfortunately, the same thing was largely true for Jornak and his allies, too. They had Iasku Mansion, which had its own wards they could hide behind. Sudomir's work was less advanced than Zorian's, but he had an entire building to work with and literal years to slowly assemble his ward scheme. It would take more than this to break down the mansion's defenses.

To Zorian's joy, the stalemate between the two titans didn't last long at all. Although the demon torso never visibly lost its composure and kept fighting fiercely, it soon became obvious it was weaker than the angel tree. It could hold its own against the angel, but it was constantly on the defensive, constantly pushed back and retreating, and utterly unable to stop the angel tree from engaging additional opponents around them.

And the angel tree ruthlessly took advantage of it.

The angel tree's might was awe inspiring. Its branches were seemingly numberless and impossibly flexible, stretching to great distances at will and bending like rubber while losing none of their power and destructiveness. Its many eyes allowed it to take in everything around it, and it had incredible multitasking abilities. It was constantly engaging multiple targets simultaneously, slashing undead apart with casual swings of its branches, burning the war trolls to ashes with its eerie orange flames, and snatching the more resilient demons and drawing them deeper into its tangle of limbs where their ectoplasmic bodies would be ripped to pieces by attacks from all directions until they disappeared into puffs of smoke. The twenty angel wing balls that followed the angel tree helped with this task, herding enemies towards the celestial titan with powerful gusts of wind.

Even better, every once in a while the angel tree would maneuver the fight to get close to Iasku Mansion and then ruthlessly start pounding on the defensive wards of the building, causing them to visibly strain. The wing balls that followed it contributed to this in their own way, firing intensely bright, lightning-like blasts of energy at the ward scheme. Although the demon torso did everything it could to repulse them from the area, it wasn't doing a good enough job, and eventually Quatach-Ichl and Oganj had to abandon the protection of the mansion in order to help the demon torso

suppress the rampaging angels.

This was too good of an opportunity to pass up for Zorian and the others, and they decided to join the fray and help the angel tree prevail. After all, they didn't even have to overpower their enemies – if they could simply push Oganj or Quatach-Ichl into the angel's waiting embrace, its lethal branches would take care of the rest for them and they would have one less heavy-hitter on the enemy side to worry about.

Zorian mentally ordered the defensive barrier of his defense cube to become flatter and more tangible at the bottom, and to spread itself out over a larger area, and the cube automatically rearranged itself according to his wishes. Sigils inscribed on its surface glowed, mechanical pieces whirled and moved into alternative positions, and soon enough Zorian was standing on a large, heavily shielded, flying platform. He signaled to the others to jump on the platform, and when they did, the platform shot towards the scene of the battle with great speed.

Sadly, Mrva couldn't fit on the platform, so Zorian could only order his beloved creation to follow after them on foot. Not that it mattered much – Mrva was all but unstoppable. He had so much weight and speed that just about anything that tried to stop him was simply shoved aside without impeding him much. A regiment of black-armored demons made the most credible attempt, using their great numbers and military-like discipline to slow him down for a time, but even they were ultimately thwarted when Mrva jumped into the air to bypass most of them.

As they approached, they had a great view of the titanic battle in front of them. With the support of Oganj and Quatach-Ichl, the demon torso had been given a chance at a comeback. It was pouring a stream of dark purple lightning at the angel tree, forcing the celestial being on the defense for the first time in the fight. Jagged rays of red light rampaged through the angel's branches, temporarily unopposed, actually severing some of them and leaving deep gouges on its trunks. As for Oganj, he appeared to be busy fighting off the wing balls that accompanied the angel tree, which were frantically firing their blue lightning blasts at the dragon mage in an attempt to keep at least one opponent away from their leader.

Zorian would have ordered the platform to go faster if it wasn't already flying as fast as it possibly could.

Then, disaster struck. Some of the lesser demons noticed their advance and decided to stop them. Zorian didn't take them seriously at first, as it was just that flock of disgusting, grub-like creatures that he had noticed floating around the edges of the demon horde when it had first been summoned. He had taken them to be just one more group of minor demons brought in to fill out the numbers, but now that they were attacking him, it quickly became obvious they were one of the more dangerous demon varieties for him personally.

That stupid glowing saliva they were drooling all over the place was actually insanely damaging to force shields! The little wretches were capable of spitting globs of it over surprisingly great distances, and they were really quite fast and agile when they tried. And there were a lot of them.

As much as he didn't want to, Zorian had to slow down his advance in order to deal with these little pests...

Mrva was still continuing forward, of course, but the demon horde had a solution for him as well, it seemed. The ground in front of the charging Mrva suddenly erupted, and a multitude of thorny, ropy tentacles shot forwards and wrapped themselves around the golem's limbs and torso. Zorian ordered Mrva to simply charge through and use his great weight and momentum to break free, but to his surprise, this didn't work. The thorny tentacles refused to break or lose their grip on the golem, and managed to stop its charge.

Like an ominous figure, a large rose-shaped demon rose out of the earth, tall enough to tower even over Mrva. Zorian remembered seeing it near the epicenter of that initial clash between the angel tree and the demon torso, after which it disappeared. He had thought it died back then, but apparently it simply took shelter under the ground and waited for a convenient moment to reveal itself.

Considering it could stop a charging Mrva in his tracks, the demon rose was likely quite powerful.

They had only spent a few moments engaging the grub swarm and the demon rose when Zorian received a telepathic message from a familiar voice.

[What are you doing?] the angel tree thundered in his mind. The voice was calm and collected, but the mental volume of the communication was painfully high and the tone was accusatory. **[Stop wasting your time here and get out of this place. You need to stop Panaxeth from breaking free of his prison, or else all this will be irrelevant.]**

[What?] Zorian protested, feeling rather wronged at the implication he was willingly wasting time. He glanced at the yellow barrier boxing them in and, sure enough, it was still very much intact. **[But the barrier-]**

[It's for our enemies only,] the angel tree said. **[It will not stop you.]**

Ugh, and the damn tree only felt like mentioning this *now*? Why not at the very start of this thing, when it was first erected? This had to be deliberate. The angel had some kind of private plan that involved them staying inside this box for a while, the manipulative bastard.

[Fine,] Zorian told the angel. **[I just need to get myself and my golem out of this situation and then I'll-]**

He hadn't even finished the sentence when the air in front of the platform warped strangely, scaring everyone currently standing on it, and a massive black branch wreathed in orange flames suddenly appeared in front of them, striking down. The grubs harassing them were caught completely off guard by the sudden attack and promptly got speared, bisected, and burned. It was a total wipeout, with the handful of surviving grubs fleeing the scene immediately.

The branch continued downward without pause, aiming at the demon rose tangling with Mrva. The demon shook and swayed, impossibly agile and flexible, and managed to avoid being speared or cut by the twigs and sub-branches even once... but it could not avoid the flames. The strange

orange flames separated themselves from the branch at the last moment, forming into ghostly images of snakes, claws, and jaws, and engulfed the hapless demon rose. It let out an unearthly screech, writhing in pain as it caught on fire, and then retreated underground so fast Zorian thought for a moment it simply disappeared.

Apparently the angel tree could casually warp space to strike at opponents way outside its usual range. Just how powerful was this thing?

[Go,] the angel tree urged him, and then immediately severed its contact.

There was a roar of triumph, and then the dragon mage was holding a rather thick black branch in one of his claws, its fires sputtering and fading. The angel had paid a high price for this timely assistance, it seemed.

Zorian immediately ordered the flying platform they were standing on to change directions and proceed towards the nearest barrier wall at maximum speed.

“Wait, what are you doing?” Zach asked, alarmed. “Have you gone crazy!? You’re going to ram us straight into the barrier wall!”

“It’s not going to bar our way,” Zorian hurriedly explained. “The angel just told me.”

“The angel just told you? Why didn’t it tell *me*? I’m the one they made a contract with, you’d think I would be their contact,” Zach grumbled.

“You’re under mind blank,” Zorian reminded him. “And besides, I’m the one controlling the platform we’re flying on. Contacting me is only common sense.”

The others silently observed their whispered bickering, but said nothing, opting to instead stare at the luminous wall of light they were rapidly hurtling towards. Though Zorian noticed that Xvim was watching it with an expression more evocative of awe and appreciation than trepidation.

“It can even selectively let things through? What a miracle of spellcasting,” Xvim said in a low voice.

Zorian sniffed disdainfully. What was so amazing about that? His defense cube did the exact same thing!

But no, he wasn’t going to be petty and defensive about this. Not right now, anyway...

In any case, there was no time for further conversation, because mere moments later, they collided with the barrier wall. The light parted before them like an airy curtain, caressing their face and skin as it moved out of the way, and then they were out of the box. Everyone except Alanic flinched at the point of impact, unconsciously expecting to get splattered against the magical barrier that had weathered so many titanic impacts from the battle inside. The scarred battle-priest’s faith and composure was apparently sufficiently strong that he could weather the impact without so much as a twitch.

Zorian glanced behind him, only to see no trace of opening where they exited the barrier. The wall of light parted before them in an instant and then closed together just as quickly.

It was also not nearly as transparent from the outside as it was from the inside. It was instead completely opaque, effectively shrouding the shielded area from curious outsiders trying to peer in.

Zorian was ecstatic, but also a little worried. With them outside of the angel barrier and their enemies trapped inside, Zach and Zorian could crush the cultists trying to conduct the Panaxeth releasing ritual inside the Hole and essentially win by default. On the other hand, Zorian’s secret plan hinged on him hitting everyone all at once with his spell, something that was impossible while Jornak and the others were holed up in Iasku Mansion, and protected by the angel barrier. He would have to get them out of there eventually before he could initiate the plan, and that worried him a little.

Of course, he voiced none of these thoughts. He silently directed their flying platform towards the Hole and prepared himself for another fight. The others didn’t need any explanation to understand what he was planning – stopping the cultists was the obvious goal.

There was, however, another problem approaching. While they had been distracted by fighting inside the angel barrier, Eldemar’s giant eagles had been approaching the city as fast as they could. Now, they were just about to arrive... and Zorian could see they were aiming straight at Zorian and his flying platform. He supposed that the glowing cubical barrier the angels erected was very eye-catching, and the fact they had just flown out of it made them obvious targets.

Zorian had no idea what the eagle mages would do. He had assumed they would recognize the angels, but the angels were busy inside the barrier and couldn’t vouch for them. Which meant they would probably do whatever came naturally to them in a situation like this. That... was not encouraging. From the perspective of Eldemar’s authorities, it all probably looked like a bunch of rogue mages fighting in the city and wrecking stuff in the process. They may very well decide to just bring the hammer down on everyone and sort things out later. Zorian had heard that was a common reaction to whenever mage disputes escalate into open battles inside a populated settlement – one side may have been entirely in the right, but Eldemar’s forces only see two troublemakers endangering innocent civilians and treat everyone as an enemy.

Zorian could only hope that the sheer scope of the fighting would give the eagle riders pause and make them a little more cautious and discerning. The sheer amount of firepower both sides used against each other should hopefully convince the royal forces they need to take a side instead of behaving like the biggest bully.

Unfortunately, Zorian's hopes were in vain. With incredible speed, the eagle riders caught up to them and swooped in front of them, the giant eagles releasing ear-piercing screeches. It was a clear warning that they would attack if the platform did not stop.

"Halt, in the name of the Kingdom of Eldemar!" the lead mage said in a voice amplified and distorted by magic. "Power down your flying platform and land on the ground, now! This is your only warning!"

Zorian clacked his tongue in annoyance. He stopped the platform, but did not move to land. This was such an annoying issue. Although Zorian was sure all of them put together were more than enough to take out the eagle riders, it would take an unacceptable amount of time and mana. More importantly, Zorian wasn't sure his allies would even agree to attack Eldemar's forces who technically did nothing wrong. Zach doubtlessly would, but Zorian was all but certain that Alanic would refuse to help them, and he wasn't confident about Xvim and Daimen either.

If only the makeshift flying platform was faster than the eagles... but his defense cube was ultimately designed for defense and not flight speed, and giant eagles were famously fast flyers.

Thankfully, the eagle riders did not associate Mrva with them, or didn't think they could stop a heavily-warded giant golem, so Zorian simply ordered the massive golem to continue on towards the Hole and they let him go unimpeded. It was going to be difficult to control it effectively under these circumstances, but it was better than nothing.

"Captain," Zorian said, his voice similarly amplified and distorted, "look around the city. It's under attack and we're *helping*. We'll gladly explain things later, but—"

"It wasn't a request!" the man interrupted him impatiently. "I order you to land and explain yourselves or we will attack you immediately!"

The eagle riders circled around them threateningly, giving the appearance of a pack of wolves just waiting for a sign to attack.

Two things happened simultaneously, then. First, there was a commotion back at the angel barrier. Glancing in its direction, Zorian could see Oganj repeatedly impacting the barrier of light, front claws glowing with red light. Each time he slashed at the barrier he created large gashes in the wall that healed almost instantly.

Secondly, Zorian realized the eagle riders didn't have any serious mental defenses on them. They only had a basic mental shield that couldn't even provide a speed bump against his psychic powers. As for the eagles, they were even worse. Completely defenseless.

"This is your last—" started the eagle mage commander, but was interrupted by a draconic roar. Oganj had finally managed to tear a hole in the barrier large enough to squeeze himself through and immediately tore himself out of the containment barrier the angels erected around Iasku Mansion. The barrier quickly mended itself, but it was too late – the dragon mage was out of the box.

And riding on his back were Quatach-Ichl, Silverlake, and Jornak.

Well. So much for his worries about having to eventually lure their enemies out of the barrier.

In any case, the eagle riders were clearly surprised at the appearance of an adult dragon so close to them, and unsure what to do for a moment. In that moment, Zorian struck. He reached out into the minds of the giant eagles, every single one of them, and ordered them to attack Oganj while amplifying their anger until they were completely berserk. They let out frenzied screeches and made a beeline for the approaching dragon mage, ignoring their riders' panicked attempts to regain control.

He then reached towards the mind of the eagle rider commander, and forced him to make a loud proclamation in that amplified voice of his. The man had no choice but to obey.

"Oganj! It's the dragon mage!" the man shouted against his will. "Forget those small fries, we need to take him down!"

"Kill the dragon!" another eagle rider agreed, also forced to do so by Zorian.

Oganj reacted exactly as Zorian hoped he would. The dragon mage was proud and aggressive, and had clashed against Eldemar's forces numerous times in the past. He saw nothing suspicious about a bunch of Eldemar mages making him their priority target, and he had every intention of teaching them a lesson. He gave a roar of challenge and shifted his focus to killing the eagle riders, ignoring Jornak's loud complaints that he shouldn't get distracted.

Zorian quietly withdrew his telepathic influence from the minds of the eagle riders and ordered his platform to continue flying towards the Hole at maximum speed. Even if they wanted to continue bothering him, they had a more pressing problem on their hands now.

After a few seconds, he noticed that everyone except Zach was staring at him strangely.

"What?" he asked, frowning.

"You did that, didn't you?" Alanic asked.

"Hmm? Oh yeah, definitely," Zorian said, only understanding after a few seconds why they reacted that way to his casual display of mind control. Sometimes he forgot that these weren't the same people he had worked with for over a year to figure out how to leave the time loop. Those people had died forever, even their souls erased and denied afterlife.

“Are they going to be alright?” Alanic asked, frowning. He clearly didn’t like the idea that Zorian might have sent the eagle riders to fight and die against their enemies with no support.

Funnily enough, it didn’t even occur to Zorian to care for their wellbeing. He thought of them as an annoyance, and saw his actions as a form of poetic justice for impeding their mission and trying to push them around. They came looking for trouble, and they found it.

His original self, whom Zorian killed in order to be able to stand here today, would definitely be horrified at what he had become.

“They won’t all die,” Zorian eventually answered. “I fought with them a few times over the various iterations of this month. They eventually retreat if the enemy inflicts enough losses on them”

“They came here to fight for Eldemar,” Zach helpfully added. “They’re doing exactly that right now. If they knew what we know, they would have chosen to engage Oganj anyway, even if most of them died doing that.”

“Explaining my involvement in this is going to be hell, I can already see,” Alanic lamented.

“We did take basic precautions,” Zach said. “We’re all wearing disguises, and the battle will destroy most of the clues and prevent normal divinations from working. Plus, we have a master mind mage that can delete memories of people who get too close to the truth.”

“It doesn’t matter in my case,” Alanic said. “Do you know how hard it was to mobilize all these people I recruited to fight on our side? I had to use my name and connections to make all this happen. There is no hiding this, even if you start mind-wiping people.”

Well, if Zach was going to survive this evening, Zorian was definitely going to have to start mind-wiping people, and sooner than anyone in this group suspected. Thankfully, nobody was in the mood to continue this topic, both because they were now very close to the Hole, and because they were facing yet another threat.

Jornak, Silverlake, and Quatach-Ichl were rapidly approaching, using some kind of high-speed flight spell in an effort to catch up to them. They knew that everything was over if Zorian and the rest of the group could face-off against the cultists alone, and they weren’t going to let it happen.

Before Zorian and the others could really start disrupting the ritual, the battle against Jornak, Silverlake, and Quatach-Ichl began anew.

- break -

While his original body had been busy dealing with angels, demons, and eagle riders, his simulacrum bodies had not been idle. They roamed the city and processed information that Zorian constantly received from the multitude of remote sensors and recruited subordinates working with the group to repel the invasion. The primary (albeit secret) task they had was to make sure the network of glyphs he had scattered all across Cyoria remained reasonably intact. The unplanned substitution of an entire city section with Iasku Mansion and the surrounding forest had already blown a sizeable hole in his network, so he had to be extra vigilant, or parts of his remaining network would become disconnected from the network as a whole, making his entire plan useless.

While doing that, however, his simulacra also involved themselves in the fighting here and there. These interventions were by necessity minor, since he couldn’t afford to waste too much of his mana in peripheral areas of the city. The original body had a much more critical role to play, so the majority of their mana reserves were reserved for his use. Fortunately, he had a perfect tool for the situation. His mind magic, if used thoughtfully and strategically, was perfect for making large impacts in return for minimal mana expenditures.

All around the city, strange incidents began to occur. Many of them were so subtle they could be chalked up as coincidences. A panicked group of scattered defenders suddenly surged with newfound confidence and ‘remembered’ where they were all supposed to converge and regroup in event of emergency. A fleeing family received a strong hunch that the route they wanted to traverse wasn’t safe and that they should pick another way. A large, muscular man wielding an antique sword, clearly just a normal city worker without a hint of magic or military training, fended off an entire pack of winter wolves all on his lonesome, allowing a nearby military group to save both him and the people he was protecting; for some reason the winter wolves kept missing him, as if they couldn’t see him correctly. A local dog suddenly went berserk and began barking and biting at thin air, alerting a nearby mage to the presence of an invisible Ibasan battle group waiting in ambush.

Others were less mundane. All around the city, some people received sudden, supernatural visions that gave them critical information about the enemy. Enemies sometimes went crazy and started attacking their own allies for no reason, sowing chaos and discord in enemy ranks. Small animals like bats and bugs were inordinately fond of ramming themselves straight into enemy casters’ faces when they were in the middle of sensitive spellcasting. A young soldier suddenly fell into an obvious trance and started describing the enemy distribution of forces to his commander, hopefully allowing much better coordination of defending efforts in that city sector.

Meanwhile, up in the sky, iron beaks ceaselessly patrolled the city in both large and small groups. They were Zorian’s roving eyes and blades, the small groups checking out disturbances to see if anything interesting was happening, and the big ones converging on critical areas to give aerial support to whatever defenders were located in the area. Each flock carried one or more telepathic relays, allowing Zorian to both easily access their senses and occasionally take control of them to direct them to specific spots. They were smart birds, with already existing group discipline, so he only had to take control over the leaders in order to control the whole group... which was good, because there was no way he would have been able to control the iron beaks otherwise.

Convenient. No wonder Sudomir had decided to use these particular birds for the invasion.

The iron beaks were bloodthirsty and their feather volleys were extremely deadly. They were fast and agile flyers too, which allowed the flocks to

simply swoop in and let loose a feather volley at the surprised enemies, before simply flying away to engage someone else. With Zorian managing their attacks, their strikes were far more strategic and selective than the iron beaks themselves would have ever been on their own – they now almost exclusively targeted mages, instead of wasting their feathers on tough targets like war trolls and other dominated monsters, usually striking when the target was exhausted or busy dealing with something else.

Despite all of this, the scale of the invasion was vast, and Jornak had brought a large number of fresh troops into the city when he had brought Iasku Mansion into the city. Zorian's actions were just a drop in the bucket, and it was hard to judge how much difference his actions made in the grand scheme of things.

A lot of times he could do nothing but watch as the invaders killed and torched their way through the city. He could do a lot with relatively little when he spotted an opening, but not every situation had one. Or at least, not one that he could spot. Maybe someone smarter than him could have seen some obvious solution that he had missed, but he was still only human, and a lot of the time he saw no way to help without burning through his mana at an unacceptable rate.

A case of literary theft: this tale is not rightfully on Amazon; if you see it, report the violation.

So instead, he did nothing. He watched people fight and die over and over, across the entire city, withholding his help because it would cost too much.

He wanted to say the experience made him sick... but the truth was that he was already somewhat numb to it. He had seen things like this happen many times over the restarts, and had even experienced some of these things from the invaders' perspective due to his memory reading. Maybe later, when the situation was over and he had time to internalize that all of this was final and irreversible and not at all like the time loop, he would be horrified by the things he had seen and his own lack of reaction to it, but now wasn't the time for it.

It just wasn't the time.

He eventually turned his attention to the Hole, where a fierce fight was happening. While Zorian and Jornak's groups were trapped underneath the angel barrier, the cultists had been free to proceed towards the Hole... for a time.

There was an element that neither Zorian nor Jornak had expected. Before the cultists could even begin setting up the ritual and start sacrificing the children, they were ambushed by a large number of... small animals. Pigeons and cats, to be more precise. Instead of simply clawing or pecking at the cultists, however, these cats and pigeons employed magic spells and weapons.

As the cultists were escorting their wagon of sacrificial children near one of the bigger buildings, a handful of cats simply dropped from the roof and onto their heads. Their claws glowing white from the effects of some unknown spell, they swung towards their targets' necks and faces, slicing open arteries and permanently blinding others. One of the cultists noticed the incoming attack, but he made the mistake of meeting the eyes of a cat sitting on a nearby windowsill and was suddenly hit by a powerful bout of vertigo that sent him reeling. He never had a chance to recover, as another cat ripped his throat out a mere moment later.

Before the cultists could respond to this attack, a flock of pigeons swooped in, carrying a multitude of alchemical grenades in their claws, and all hell broke loose.

Shifters, Zorian quickly realized. Cat and pigeon shifters – the two varieties that were probably most proficient in classical spellcasting in addition to their natural shifting capabilities. And... yes, there was the police force joining the attack now.

Hmm. Apparently Raynie and Haslush had done more in this past month than Zorian thought they would. A surprise, but a welcome one.

Of course, while the cultists often seemed like the weakest part of the invasion from Zorian's perspective, they were really not so easy to dismiss for regular people. After the initial shock, the cultists began to fight back, and they did so extremely well. After all, the leaders of the Cult of the World Dragon were actually very powerful and capable mages. Usually they were too busy enacting Panaxeth's ritual to help their underlings, but at the moment this wasn't the case, so they quickly made their presence known. After some initial successes, the combined shifter-police forces began to die in droves and lose their courage.

There was no way Zorian could allow this, though, so he instructed his iron beaks to help out and started subtly and not-so-subtly directing city defenders to rush over towards the Hole and join the battle.

Interestingly, the pigeon shifters adapted really well to the iron beaks' assistance. Many of them appeared to be capable of casting certain spells purely reflexively, which meant that any of the seemingly innocuous pigeons could drop a fireball on an enemy group or summon a force barrier to defend both themselves and the iron beaks from enemy spells. Even though Zorian didn't attempt to communicate with any of them, the pigeon shifters soon naturally fell into the role of support, following iron beak flocks and shielding them against enemy fire so they could operate relatively unmolested in the sky.

As for the cat shifters, their animal forms were mostly useful for surprise purposes and not terribly impressive for these kind of battles, so Zorian feared they would be useless after that initial ambush... but he was wrong. The cat shifters simply switched back into their human forms and started contributing by casting spells normally. Amusingly, they were kind of similar to Zorian, in that their biggest talent seemed to lay in mind magic. Zorian supposed that, since so many of them already operated on the criminal side of things, they were less hesitant to practice mind magic than a regular mage.

Then Mrva barged into the scene, tanking enemy spell fire like it was inconsequential and crashing into the cultist ranks like a cannonball. The original may have been too busy elsewhere and couldn't come, but there was no stopping Mrva. His presence slowly but surely started to turn the tide in the favor of Cyorian forces. The leaders of the cult were powerful, but so was Mrva.

Idly, Zorian wondered if it wouldn't have been better for the original and his allies to simply teleport to the Hole the moment they escaped the angel barrier, and then kill the cultists as quickly as possible... but considering that the cultists still hadn't even begun the ritual as of yet, maybe it was for the best that they hadn't done that. Who knows how Jornak would have reacted if he knew for certain that releasing Panaxeth was impossible and that he was going to die soon. Although it may have seemed like Zorian had neatly eliminated the threat of wraith bombs with his counter-traps, the truth was he only had enough time and funds to make those for Cyoria. There were wraith bombs scattered all over Eldemar and possibly beyond, and Zorian could only thank the gods that Jornak didn't see fit to activate them as well out of sheer spite.

And that was just the wraith bombs. Although Zorian was sure that some of Jornak's threats were pure bluffs, he had no doubt that the man had plenty of contingencies that would make them all suffer if he lost. Even Zach and Zorian had made a few contingencies that would go off if they didn't survive this battle, so there was no way Jornak hadn't done the same.

It still wasn't the right time. All Zorian could do was wait and look for an opening.

- break -

Zorian stared at the three creatures in front of him. One was some kind of tiger-sized reptilian creature that Zorian did not recognize, another was a floating orb surrounded by long whip-like tentacles, and the third one was a gigantic green ooze the size of a small building. His defense cube spun around him, sigils on it brightening and fading like the beat of his own heart and mechanical parts softly shifting into various combinations. For a second, everything was still, before both sprang into motion and the battle began anew.

The tentacle orb was the first, being the fastest. It hurled itself at Zorian with incredible speed, its milky white body crackling with powerful electrical magic. Zorian didn't panic, simply jumping to the side while telekinetically enhancing his jump a little. He easily dodged out of the way of the living cannonball, and another sidestep dodged the electrified whip the creature tried to hit him with next.

The other two creatures weren't that far behind, though. The blue tiger-lizard thing used the distraction created by the whip-orb to charge at him, preparing for a jump. Zorian flicked a spell marble at the thing, creating a large detonation right in its face and blowing it back with ease. The creature slammed into the already damaged road and promptly burst into liquid.

A mere moment later, the blue puddle of slime started to come together again, and a few seconds later the tiger-lizard thing was intact and once again gunning for him.

As for Zorian himself, he was too busy trying to avoid being engulfed by the house-sized blob of acid to worry about finishing the tiger-lizard thing off for good. The giant ooze was completely unlike most oozes, and moved with speed and dexterity that no natural ooze should possess, let alone one that size. It constantly sprouted pseudopods that lashed out at Zorian, leaving corroded cobblestones whenever it hit, and its great weight and power allowed it to simply smash apart buildings if they were in its way or it thought the rubble might inconvenience Zorian.

All three were working seamlessly together with one another, and showed both signs of human-level intelligence and detailed knowledge of human spellcasting. Though one might mistake them for some kind of exotic magical creature at first, Zorian knew he wasn't looking at a natural creation. If Zorian had to guess, he would say these beings were something akin to living potions – an alchemical liquid animated by either captured souls or elemental spirits. Possibly both – a multitude of captured souls for providing abundant mana, and water elementals for actually controlling the liquid.

A grating, cackling laugh rose into the air behind the giant ooze. Silverlake seemed to be mighty pleased at how her minions were faring against Zorian.

"You shouldn't have sent your metal toy away," she crowed. "Maybe you'd actually have a chance against me and my lovelies if you had this 'Mrva' at your side."

Zorian said nothing, simply scanning his surroundings for a way he could bypass the potion elementals and strike at Silverlake. It didn't look like he did, but that was because he was primarily looking through the eyes of a small flock of iron beaks circling the skies above the battlefield rather than trying to use divinations in the middle of a battle.

The whip-orb tried to rush at him again, but Zorian fired a thin line of force at it that speared it right through. It immediately burst into a cloud of electrified potion droplets, causing Zorian to wince. This wasn't a good way to hold the orb at bay, it seemed.

"This is so frustrating," Zorian lamented in his head. "I spent a decade inside a time loop. You'd think I would have encountered every type of enemy there is!"

"I hope you realize we found out where you stashed your little sister and her cat shifter friend to keep them safe. Our forces are attacking them even as we speak," Silverlake said, punctuating her threat with her usual annoying cackle.

Zorian narrowed his eyes at her, but did not let her distract him. This was a blatant attempt to demoralize him, and he wouldn't fall for it.

Not that he thought she was lying. He had known for a while now that Kirielle and Nochka were being besieged in their hideouts, but there was little he could do. He could only hope that the Taramatula guards and mercenaries Daimen hired would be able to protect them, or that the miniature bodyguard golems he made for them would step up if they couldn't.

"I hope you realize the Cult of the World Dragon hasn't even *begun* their ritual," Zorian fired back. He knew he shouldn't talk in the middle of the battle, but her mentioning the attack on Kirielle and how he was essentially forced to ignore it struck a nerve and he couldn't help it. "Look around us. You clearly can't deal with me and neither can your allies deal with my allies. You won't win anything by keeping us busy."

As if by some cosmic joke, his statement was punctuated by a loud detonation as an ominous purple sun exploded in the sky nearby, casting the entire city in a deep purple glow for a moment. An aftershock of Quatach-Ichl's battle against Daimen, Xvim, and Alanic.

Jornak and Zach were also having their own fight nearby, though Zorian could not see it. Jornak had used some kind of strange ability granted to him by Panaxeth to shroud an entire section of the city in thick white mist that no spell could penetrate into. Offensive spells simply sank into the mist and disappeared without a trace, and divination spells went awry when directed at the area.

Zorian wasn't terribly worried about Zach, though. Zach had shown himself to be noticeably stronger than Jornak in their past clashes, so he doubted this move was enough to tip the scales. More likely than not, this was just Jornak stalling until Quatach-Ichl and Oganj could finish off their opponents so they can gang up on them three-on-one.

"You are such a fool, Zorian," Silverlake said. A bunch of fire spells on parabolic trajectories came flying over the giant ooze and straight at Zorian, but he dispelled them with ease. "We could have both profited off this if you had agreed to work with me. We could have opened a small crack in Panaxeth's prison and then immediately mended it. My oath to the primordial would have been technically fulfilled, and the city would be left standing. Hell, we could have sabotaged the whole invasion from within. Imagine how many lives *that* would save. Instead you insist on staying with a dead man compromised beyond all belief. Are you gay? Is this what's going on?"

"There is no way to fix Panaxeth's prison once it cracks," Zorian told her, not rising to her bait. He telekinetically seized a large piece of a nearby ruined wall and hurled it at the giant ooze. It failed to punch through and instead got stuck inside the green slime that made up its body. "You're just comforting yourself with nonsense. You took Panaxeth's offer because you thought it was a sure thing, as opposed to our own escape plan, which would have required you to trust another human being for once in your life. Now that this 'sure thing' is screwing you over, you're grasping at straws."

"It's still a sure thing! You think we need those shifter children for the ritual?" Silverlake cackled. "Have you forgotten these bodies me and Red Robe have are made by Panaxeth? Both of us contain enough of Panaxeth's essence to form a link to him and crack this prison open. We kept the child sacrifice just to distract you."

Zorian scowled. That... made a disturbing amount of sense. The shifter children collectively had only a tiny amount of primordial essence in them, so a mass sacrifice was needed to get enough material to form a key, but Jornak and Silverlake were specifically incarnated into the real world by Panaxeth to help his release. He probably had no shortage of his own essence and it was of no use to him in his prison.

Any response he might have given was postponed as a veritable rain of alchemical bombs rained down from the sky around him, forcing him to dodge and shield himself from their effects. Worse, some of the alchemical mixtures reformed themselves into tiny liquid animals soon after detonation and started attacking him. Smaller versions of the three creatures he was already dealing with, obviously. So annoying.

"You're the one controlling the birds above us, right?" Silverlake continued. "You can see through their eyes, so I'm sure you can tell how Oganj's battle is progressing."

Zorian 'glanced' at the battle in question and sighed internally. The performance of Eldemar's eagle mages was praiseworthy. Any compulsion Zorian might have placed on them had long since worn off, but they kept fighting Oganj regardless and they held their own admirably.

But Oganj was still a dragon mage, and one famous even among his own kind. Even as Zorian watched, Oganj pointed his claw at one of the eagle riders and an expanding ball of razor-sharp threads exploded around him. If this was the start of the battle, the eagle rider in question would have evaded or shielded himself against the attack, but by now he was too exhausted and wounded to resist effectively. The tangled mass of severing threads instantly turned both him and his giant eagle into a bloody mess. Blood and chunks of flesh began to slowly fall to the ground.

The eagle riders weren't going to last much longer, and when they decided to cut their losses and flee, Oganj was going to come here to turn the tides of battle.

He glanced further into the distance, where the angel cube was located, but the cube was opaque from the outside and he couldn't see anything. He had no idea what was happening inside.

"What's your point?" Zorian asked, a spark of light entering his eyes as he finally spotted an opportunity. "You aren't still trying to turn me to your side, are you?"

"Heavens, no," Silverlake said. "Tell you what, though... if you give me the imperial orb, I'll let you flee the city and pretend I couldn't stop you."

The old witch really had a talent for getting under people's skin, Zorian had to give her that.

He made his move. The whip-orb and the tiger-lizard had just tried to attack him together and landed very close to each other. He exploited this ruthlessly by casting a rather obscure spell on the section of the road they were standing on, ripping it straight out of the ground and catapulting it straight into the sky and away from his current position.

Before Silverlake could react to this, he mentally activated the explosives he snuck into the chunk of the ruined wall he had flung at the giant ooze. The wall section, still floating inside the ooze, blew up in a spectacular explosion that burst the gigantic potion elemental like an overripe melon.

It didn't actually kill it, but it didn't have to. It was temporarily incapacitated until it could reform, and that was all that mattered.

The path was open.

He teleported in front of the surprised Silverlake. She had hurriedly shielded herself to protect herself from the chunks of her own potion elemental flying everywhere, and was currently ill suited to protect herself.

The moment Zorian blinked into existence in front of her she sneered at him with an expression of smug triumph and he detected the trap ward she placed on the area activating. She knew he was coming.

Zorian's mind went into overdrive. Time seemed to slow down. Elsewhere, his simulacra stopped what they were doing as the information about the ward was dissected and analyzed by multiple minds bouncing ideas and theories between each other. Before the ward had time to fully activate, Zorian had figured out what it did and where its flaws were.

Wordlessly, he stomped his foot and sent streams of non-structured magic all around him, poking and disrupting the rapidly-forming structure of the ward. Simultaneously, he fired off a simple magic missile spell at a seemingly innocuous glyph faintly carved into the nearby cobblestones, destroying it utterly.

The entire ward suddenly imploded upon itself, carved sigils burning out in a flash of blue light. Silverlake stumbled back, her mind hit by the backlash of the ward control function suddenly sending a bunch of gibberish at her. Before she could recover, Zorian was already casting spell after spell at her. Force projectiles powerful enough to turn stone to powder, fire spells hot enough to melt steel, potent disintegration beams... the attack kept coming and coming, giving Silverlake no chance to take a breath and center herself. She tried to activate some kind of recall object to teleport away but Zorian blocked it from working. Finally, her inexperience with these kinds of battles began to show, and her shields broke.

A force projectile hit her straight in the head, and half of her face instantly became a blood mist. Instead of stopping, Zorian blew up the rest of her head as well, and blew a bunch of holes in her torso for good measure as well.

For a second, the scene was quiet.

But something was wrong. Her headless, mutilated body staggered back but didn't fall. Instead, flesh grew out of her wounds at a terrifying rate, quickly reforming her head and healing the rest of her wounds.

Zorian couldn't help but be disturbed. Even if she had drunk a portion of troll regeneration or something, a destroyed head was still a killing strike. He tried to incinerate her just in case, engulfing her rapidly regenerating form in an intense cone of flame. Unfortunately, by now the giant ooze had managed to reform itself and launched another attack at Zorian, forcing him to break off the attack before he could fully reduce her to ash.

The moment he stopped, the charred, skeletal corpse of Silverlake again started to regenerate at a terrifying rate, regrowing muscles and skin at a speed that even trolls and hydras would find amazing. Especially considering the damage was inflicted by fire.

The half-healed body of Silverlake started to shake and gurgle, before breaking into painful coughing and spewing out blood everywhere. After a few seconds, Zorian realized this was Silverlake trying to cackle.

"See? You can't kill me," Silverlake said, almost completely recovered now. "It was a sure thing, and you are the fool here. This was so very worth it."

"No one is unkillable," Zorian said, launching a few more attack spells at her. She started defending herself again, though, so none of them actually landed on her this time. Hmm. She wouldn't be defending herself if being hurt was inconsequential. She had a limit, somewhere. "I bet if I keep hurting you, you will eventually die for good."

"Eventually," she agreed, firing some spells back at him half-heartedly. The giant ooze tried to interpose itself between him and Silverlake again, but Zorian refused to let her out of his line of fire again. "But I bet it will take longer to exhaust my regeneration than it will to exhaust your mana reserves. Even with that cube acting as free defense, you still have to burn through your reserves to hurt me. And besides, Oganj will soon—"

A sound reminiscent of a ceramic plate breaking into pieces resonated somewhere in the distance. The angel cube, long silent, shattered and faded away, revealing the result of the angel-demon battle.

The angel tree was triumphant. Neither the massive demon torso nor its accompanying demon horde could be seen anywhere.

The angel had paid a heavy price for its victory. One of its main trunks was merely a stump now, and two of the others had the majority of its branches ripped and sliced off. Many of its eyes were missing, and the strange orange fires were no longer covering the whole tree, but were instead thin and faded. All but three of its accompanying wing balls were gone, and one of the surviving wing balls was clearly missing a lot of its wings and zigzagging across the sky as if drunk. Of the sinuous lion-serpent things that created the barrier, there was no trace. Maybe they used up all of their power to maintain that thing?

Regardless, the angel tree did not rest or waste time. It shook itself slightly, flexing its branches like a fighter warming himself up before the fight, and then immediately accelerated like a cannonball toward Oganj.

The dragon mage let loose a roar of frustration at all these distractions, but made no attempt to flee. He clearly had every intention of fighting the wounded angel.

Although she did not have flocks of iron beaks acting as her eyes all over the city, Silverlake must have seen the event in some way, because she immediately scowled in response.

“Don’t think you-” she began.

But Zorian wasn’t listening. Now that he knew Oganj was taken care of, there was no reason to keep this in reserve anymore. He reached into his pocket and threw a palm-sized metal ball on the ground in front of himself and Silverlake.

He then immediately withdrew to a safe distance. The contents of the pocket dimension prison inside that ball were less a controlled weapon, and more a bloodthirsty maniac you pointed at the enemy and hoped for the best.

Silverlake’s eyes widened in fear and shock when the grey hunter materialized in front of her, and all confidence seemed to drain out of her posture. She started screaming a long string of curses as she desperately fought to keep the killer spider away from her.

Zorian kept himself well back from the two combatants, somewhat unsure if he wanted to involve himself. Although he had managed to capture the grey hunter and stuff it into a pocket dimension, he did not actually control it by any measure. It was a feral magical beast released off its chain, and if he wasn’t careful, it could easily shift its attention to him instead. Thus, he mostly stayed on the sidelines and watched the battle.

Eventually, though, Silverlake started to use the giant ooze she had at her disposal to take control of the grey hunter’s movements and Zorian decided he had to intervene. As amazing as the grey spider was, the giant ooze was huge and could keep the spider away from Silverlake through sheer mass alone.

He never got the chance to involve himself, though. Before he made his move, the giant ooze suddenly froze, shuddered slightly, and then collapsed into an inert puddle of acidic slime. Well, more like a small lake, but still. It was dead.

“What!? Who are you? How do you know how to do this?” Silverlake said, looking left and right for the perpetrator while running from the grey hunter, who now had an open path forwards and wasted no time in going after her again.

The other person did not answer at first. Instead, a crude but effective warding circle suddenly sprang up around the area where Silverlake and the grey hunter were fighting, trapping her with the murder-spider.

Zorian suddenly realized what was happening. He could recognize this ward easily enough, and there was only one person he ever saw using it. He had to say, he didn’t expect this...

Soon, Zorian’s unlikely ally stepped out from the shadow of a nearby building, dropping her stealth spell in the process.

It was Silverlake. *Old* Silverlake. The same annoying witch that Zorian remembered from the time loop, her body slightly hunched and ravaged by old age and her face was covered in wrinkles.

“You!? What the hell do you think you’re doing!?” Young Silverlake yelled, outraged.

The old Silverlake did not answer her. She slowly began to walk around the warding circle in which she trapped her copy, tapping the borders with her staff and methodically reinforcing the ward so it was harder to break. Her expression was grave and serious. There was no cackling this time, no stupid jokes or attempt to throw her opponent out of balance with words. It was actually kind of eerie to see Silverlake behaving like this.

“Don’t you know who I am?” Young Silverlake protested. “I’m you! I’m you from the future! I know that brat over there already told you this, so why-”

“If you’re really my copy, then you know what happened the last time we made a copy of ourselves, and let it do as it pleased,” old Silverlake said calmly, not stopping her work or even glancing at her younger self.

The young Silverlake seemed to be momentarily at a loss for words and remained silent.

“Exactly,” old Silverlake concluded. “It’s only a matter of time before you come for me. My home, my connections, my *life*... you want it all, and you clearly outstrip me in power. This is my best opportunity to remove you as a threat. I must take it.”

“You ungrateful withered bitch!” young Silverlake screamed angrily. The grey hunter took advantage of her emotional instability and managed to sink its fangs into her forearm, pumping it full of shaping-disrupting poison... unfortunately, Silverlake reacted quickly and immediately sliced her own arm off at the shoulder with a severing spell. Her regeneration immediately started growing it back. “I should have killed you immediately after coming here!”

“Probably,” old Silverlake said, shrugging her shoulders.

Zorian took one more look at the situation, thought about it for a moment, and then decided to let the two Silverlakes deal with each other and move on to other targets. He could see that Jornak’s mist was starting to thin out and evaporate, which probably meant his battle with Zach was close to ending.

It was time.

He jumped into the air, his defense cube dutifully following after him, and used a fast flying spell to quickly reach the Hole. The cultists were still

holding their own against the combined forces assaulting them, but they were exhausted and unprepared for Zorian's arrival. He immediately started scything them down, butchering the whole group of them with a severing whip while trusting his cube to protect him from retaliation.

Simultaneously, he took closer control over Mrva again, and the golem's attacks suddenly became a lot more accurate and strategic.

After only a handful of seconds, most of the cultists realized they stood absolutely no chance against Zorian and his golem, and their discipline fell apart. They started to panic and run, ignoring the threats their leaders spouted at them.

As Zorian suspected, his actions provoked an immediate reaction. In the distance, Oganj shouted a bunch of expletives and then separated himself from the angel he was fighting in order to rush towards the Hole. He received a deep gash in his flank for turning his back to his opponent like that, but he bore it with barely a grimace. Then, not far from where Zorian was cutting down the hapless cultists, a huge blast of magical force leveled an entire section of the city and a pitch-black skeleton suddenly flew out of it, flying at Zorian at maximum speed. Zorian quickly scanned the area Quatach-Ichl left and breathed a sigh of relief. Xvim, Alanic, and Daimen were in extremely poor shape, but they were still alive. Xvim was unconscious and Daimen was severely wounded and bleeding, but Alanic was quick to administer aid so they should both survive.

They should...

But no, he couldn't get distracted. Oganj and Quatach-Ichl were both coming here, but the lich was closer and would be here sooner.

Although he was just a mindless golem, he couldn't help but glance at Mrva looming above him a little sadly.

'It was nice knowing you, Mrva...'

Being a mindless construct, Mrva did not answer him. He simply turned towards the rapidly approaching Quatach-Ichl and spread his giant arms as if offering the incoming lich a hug.

To his credit, Quatach-Ichl immediately understood that something was wrong and tried to swerve out of the way. It didn't help him. There was no dodging this. Mrva's chest opened up like a metal flower, exposing a complicated magical device with a glass tank acting as a centerpiece. Trapped within the glass tank was a large soulseizer chrysanthemum, which immediately woke up from its stupor and focused on the only target his current prison allowed him to perceive – Quatach-Ichl.

Normally, the flower wouldn't have been powerful enough to threaten the ancient lich, especially from this distance, but its current housing wasn't just a prison. It was an amplifier and a focus device, vastly increasing the flower's range and power.

Without reservations, Mrva immediately started burning through his entire internal supplies of mana, amplifying the flower's attack more and more. It still wasn't enough to actually seize Quatach-Ichl's soul and draw it into the flower, but that was okay – Zorian did not actually expect it to be able to do that. All he needed it to do was incapacitate Quatach-Ichl for a little while, just like the chrysanthemum had done to Zach and Zorian the first time they had encountered it.

The amplified soulseizer chrysanthemum did just that. Hit by the flower's attack, Quatach-Ichl lost control over his flight spell and plowed straight into the building in front of him before unceremoniously dropping to the ground. Being an undying lich made out of magically-reinforced bones, this high-speed impact and subsequent fall did not really hurt him much. But it did make him stationary.

The defense cube behind Zorian suddenly restructured itself into a ring-shaped construct. The time-frozen spell Zorian had previously captured from Oganj was suddenly released and immediately continued its attack, this time targeting Quatach-Ichl.

The lich shakily picked himself up from the ground, fighting off the still ongoing effects of the soulseizer chrysanthemum through sheer willpower, and lifted his head just in time to see the giant incandescent projectile, equivalent in power to an artillery magic spell, hurling towards him. If he'd had only a few more seconds, he would have shrugged off the attack and dodged, shielded, or teleported away... but he didn't have a few more seconds.

Before the projectile even reached him, the light suddenly died in his dead eye sockets and his bones started to fall back to the ground. He chose to retreat back to his phylactery on his own rather than be beaten.

Moments later, the dragon magic spell hit his remains dead-center, and the entire area was consumed by a blinding fireball that vaporized everything around it.

As for Mrva, his role in this was finished. His chest folded up again to prevent the chrysanthemum from targeting anyone else, and then he simply went limp. His internal mana reserves were gone and he could no longer move or fight.

"Contemptible thief!" Oganj shouted in outrage, getting increasingly close. The angel tree was hot on his tail. "Is your kind capable of doing anything on your own!?"

What was he talking about? Dragons were infamous for bullying everything and everyone around them for things they wanted. Besides, you would never see a dragon build a gun or a train, so there were at least a couple of things humans invented on their own.

He didn't bother saying any of this, though. He simply teleported close to the blasted site and fired a gust of wind at it, getting rid of the smoke and dust. He was met with the sight of molten ground, still visibly burning hot, with a small crater in the middle. Only one thing survived the magical conflagration – the imperial crown that once stood on Quatach-Ichl's head, still completely untouched.

Divine artifacts were not easy to destroy, especially ones of this caliber.

Zorian quickly produced a force whip and used it to yank the crown towards him. He was careful not to touch it at first, but it turned out to be completely cool to the touch.

He glanced to the side, where Zach and Jornak were facing off against each other. He got a little distracted while fighting Quatach-Ichl, but at some point the mist Jornak had created completely disappeared, and the two combatants reappeared. Thankfully, Zach managed to keep Jornak from interfering, so their fellow time traveler was unable to save the lich.

They both looked pretty terrible. Zach was bleeding from his forehead and limping. Whatever Jornak had done with that mist apparently did much to even the odds between them, since Zorian did not think Jornak could hurt Zach that much in a fair fight. As for Jornak, his fancy red robe was almost entirely shredded and he was gasping for breath as if he had been running for hours, but his skin was suspiciously free of any scrapes and bruises. Zorian suspected he was similar to Silverlake, and that any wound inflicted on him would heal quickly. Maybe not on the level of Silverlake, since her powers seemed to focus entirely on indestructibility, while Jornak had this weird mist thing in his arsenal, but still.

Zorian twirled Quatach-Ichl's crown with his finger, giving Jornak a cheeky smile.

"Like that means anything," Jornak spat angrily. He hadn't taken his eyes off Zach for even a moment, but he had clearly seen Zorian's gesture. Despite what he said, the emotion in his voice told Zorian that he was very much bothered by the way things were going. "This isn't over! The crown is useless to you in the short term, anyway!"

Before Zorian could answer, he was forced to dodge a spell from Oganj, who had finally arrived to the scene. Thankfully, the shifters and police forces had already rescued the shifter children by this point, and hurriedly left the area, so he didn't have to worry about them becoming collateral damage.

"Out of everyone here, I like you the least!" Oganj said, slicing a nearby building in half with a blue beam of force and nearly taking Zorian's head off. "You're a sleazy weakling who fights with tricks and schemes!"

"You're allied with Silverlake," Zorian countered. "You have no room to talk!"

Oganj's response was a palm thrust that flattened the entire area he was standing on. Thankfully, by that point he had already teleported away to a nearby rooftop.

He clacked his tongue. Though he could keep the dragon mage at bay for a while, he had to say this wasn't a good position to be in. He wasn't a heavy hitter. He couldn't tangle with Oganj for long.

He mentally calculated things in his head. Should he do it now? Having Oganj around was very suboptimal, but if he *had* to do it now... he might be able to pull it off. The dragon was busy fighting off the angel tree at the same time as fighting Zorian, so maybe...

[Angel,] Zorian told the celestial telepathically, [what are the chances of you winning against the dragon and driving him off?]

[On my own?] the angel guessed, correctly. [A coin toss.]

[How about keeping him completely busy for an hour?] Zorian tried.

[A coin toss,] the angel replied.

"Okay," Zorian mumbled quietly.

He didn't like those odds. He glanced at the imperial crown in his hand and suddenly remembered his conversation with Silverlake.

Why was Oganj fighting them, anyway? The Kingdom of Eldemar was his sworn enemy, yes, and he would no doubt love to see Cyoria burned to the ground, but there was no way he just teamed up with Jornak just to see the city burn. He was promised something, and it had to be big in order to move a dragon mage of his caliber to do this.

Was it bigger than a divine artifact?

Let's find out.

[Angel, catch,] Zorian sent the celestial telepathically, before throwing the crown in the sky towards the angel and accelerating it telekinetically so it could reach the celestial high in the sky.

[This is useless to me,] the angel pointed out disapprovingly, but it humored him anyway, and quickly snatched the crown with one of its branches.

[I have an idea. Please play along,] Zorian told it, before turning towards the dragon mage that was currently busy defending himself against the angel tree.

"Dragon!" he shouted, "I have given the angel the imperial crown!"

“Why the hell would I care?” Oganj shouted back. “It can’t use it!”

“But you can!” Zorian shouted back. “If you agree to stop fighting us and leave the city, the angel will promise to give you the imperial crown at the end of the day! A genuine divine artifact that can increase your mana reserves! There is no other like this anywhere in the world!”

Oganj suddenly stopped and put some distance between himself and the angel, eyeing it speculatively. The angel hovered in place, not pursuing hostilities for the moment.

“Oganj, don’t you dare!” Jornak shouted angrily. There was a trace of panic in his voice. “You know what’s going to happen if you do this! Quatach-Ichl is going to come after you! I will come after you! And you will not receive a single god damned thing I promised you!”

But Oganj wasn’t listening. There was a shine of greed in his eyes now, and he studied Zorian with increased focus now.

“You are the one who has the imperial orb, right? The one with the portable palace inside?” Oganj suddenly asked. He didn’t wait for Zorian’s answer. “Throw that in as well and I’ll leave the city and trouble you no more.”

“Oganj, you son of a bitch!” Jornak raged.

“Done,” Zorian said. He didn’t even think twice about giving up the imperial orb. Losing it was painful, but his need of making the dragon mage go away was greater.

He could always try to recover it later.

He withdrew the imperial orb out of his pocket and threw it at the angel, accelerating it telekinetically like he did the crown. The angel caught it easily, sequestering it safely within its branches.

“I hereby make a promise, backed by the high heavens, that if you leave the city now and stay away from it for 24 hours, I will give you these two artifacts that have been entrusted to me just now,” the angel told the dragon mage. **“May the high heavens strip me of my rank and strike me down should I break it.”**

“Hmm,” Oganj hummed appreciatively. “I wouldn’t trust most creatures, but an angel wouldn’t lie. I accept.”

And then Oganj turned towards the northern forest in the distance and simply flew away from the city. The angel seemed to hesitate for a moment, as if it wanted to tell Zorian something, before it simply followed after the dragon mage.

Jornak was clearly fuming with anger right now, but he still wasn’t willing to quit. If anything, his attacks on Zach started getting more frenzied and reckless, his breathing harder and harder.

Zorian took a deep breath. It was time. There would never be any better time than this.

His mind blended with that of his simulacrum. The network of sigils he had scattered across the city sprang into life, giving him reach across the entire city. The multitude of aranea he had brought into the city, mostly quiet until now, established contact with his mind.

He used a short-range teleportation spell to transport himself as close as possible to the two fighters.

And then he lunged at both of them.

104. I Win (I)

Chapter 104

I Win (I)

He was Zach Noveda, the last surviving member of Noble House Noveda, the chosen of the angels...

...and he had won.

He honestly never thought he would win. He *wanted* to win, of course. He wanted to know what kind of wonders the world beyond this month had in store for him. He wanted to rebuild his house and make his caretaker pay for what he had done to him. He wanted to have friends and lovers that would never forget him. But this wish... it was merely a wistful dream, flickering in the back of his mind and refusing to die. He didn't seriously consider it, and not *just* because of the stupid angel contract and its impossible conditions. The truth was, he'd kind of given up a long time ago.

He had tried to beat the invasion so many times, attempt after attempt, idea after idea, until eventually, he became convinced this was his fate. To stay there forever, in an endlessly looping world. All this power and knowledge, all the revelations about his past life, all the insights into people around him... the time loop dangled these things over his head, but it was all meaningless because he couldn't get out.

Stopping the invasion of Cyoria was the key. He knew this. Somehow, deep down in his soul, he knew this. But he couldn't do it, no matter how many times he tried. It was fine while he was still learning things, becoming a better mage, and brimming with ideas... but slowly, he started to slow down. He had learned everything he possibly could about the invaders themselves. Advancing his magic became harder and harder, each new spell or training method giving ever smaller improvements. His inspiration began to dry out.

And yet he still couldn't get out. He was as good as he realistically would ever be, and yet it wasn't enough to stop the invasion. His best wasn't enough. That's when he realized he wouldn't be getting out.

He wouldn't ever be getting out.

And then he met Zorian. His friend was... alright. He scared him with his behavior from time to time, and he wished he was easier to talk to and more fun to hang out with, but hey. You can't have everything. More importantly, he was *driven*. He had that spark to keep going that had mostly died in Zach a long time ago. He had ideas that would have never even occurred to Zach, and methods that were alien to Zach's way of thinking. It was new and refreshing, and it reignited that spark of hope in him that refused to fully die.

A long time ago, when Zach had only begun figuring out the time loop and his skills were still growing, his pride would have bristled at the idea of just letting his new friend take the lead in how they should proceed with their escape plan or go about honing their skills. Alas, that was a long time ago. By the time Zach met Zorian, the time loop had already grounded him, and he was entirely content to simply act as support. He stepped aside and let Zorian plan their escape and set their short-term goals, trusting his new friend to get them out of their looping nightmare and simply steering him away from his more... dubious choices.

In the end, that path had led him here: locked in a deadly battle against his other time travelling companion – Red Robe. Or Jornak. Whatever. He would always be Red Robe to Zach, in all honesty. Even now he was wearing that stupid red robe of his to hide his appearance.

He had trapped Zach in some kind of strange dimensional labyrinth, at first – a mirror image of the city covered in thick mist that severely limited Zach's vision while allowing Red Robe to move around in some strange manner that Zach found hard to understand at first. Red Robe clearly thought of him as some kind of dumb brute that wouldn't be able to deal with this kind of environment, but Zach hadn't spent all those years in the time loop for nothing, and his knowledge of dimensionalism had reached incredible heights while he had been working with Zorian and others to create a viable escape route into the real world.

Red Robe bragged a lot about this misty labyrinth world while he and Zach fought. An attempt to demoralize him, maybe? Maybe he couldn't see all that well in there either, and wanted Zach to verbally respond so he could lock onto his position more securely? In any case, Red Robe said this misty world was primordial magic granted to him by Panaxeth. A place isolated from the real world, impossible to escape.

Place largely removed from the real world... impossible to escape... ha. Wasn't that almost exactly the description of the time loop? Hadn't Zach helped Zorian learn how to punch a hole through it so he could escape?

Red Robe thought Zach was a dumb brute, but Zach had figured his little trick out within a minute of arriving there. Just like the time loop was centered on Panaxeth, this world of mists was centered around Red Robe. There was no point looking for an exit in the environment around them. The exit was Red Robe.

The fight between them lasted a while, but eventually Zach managed to maneuver things in the right direction. He had to let one of Red Robe's kinetic spells clip him in the leg, leaving him limping, but it was of no importance. It was a relatively light wound, and he had drunk a potion of regeneration before the battle. His leg would be fine soon enough. What was important was that he used the opportunity to hit Red Robe with a dimensional spell designed specifically to punch holes in these kind of prisons. It was literally one-of-a-kind, a product of their intense research near the end of the time loop, and Red Robe clearly had no idea how to deal with it.

Zach had expected to punch a literal hole in the misty world, but it turned out that Red Robe's little creation was incomparable to that of Panaxeth,

even if they had the same origin. The moment it was forcibly punctured, the mist started to thin and fade, until the entire world quietly disappeared at some point, shunting them back to the real world.

They came back just in time to see Zorian take out Quatach-Ichl. It filled Zach with complex feelings to see Zorian best his oldest enemy so seemingly easily. He knew that a lot of work and preparation went into this victory, and that it was not nearly as easy as it looked, but... it still made him a little jealous. Just a little bit.

Red Robe, on the other hand, was just mad. He attacked Zach with increased ferocity to vent his frustration, and Zach matched it without any reservations. Black swords made out of dimensional forces slashed at Jornak, cutting deep gouges as he dodged out of the way. Tiny incandescent suns zipped around with the speed and agility of a swallow, the ground exploded into stone spears that then exploded into thousands of needle-like shards, rays of electrified light surged forward while evading obstacles like immaterial snakes, and the air itself was whipped into a miniature tornado centered on Zach. He may have failed in a lot of areas of his life, but if there was one thing Zach Noveda felt supremely confident in, that was his combat skills. He was good at fighting, and he loved doing it. It rejuvenated him to fight worthy opponents, made him feel alive.

He looked at his opponent, his red robe long since tattered, and met the man's eyes, trying to jog his memory. To remember the time they apparently met and became friends. Alas, nothing came to his mind. There was no memory, no instinctive knowledge, not even a feeling of *déjà vu*. The man was a complete stranger.

Red Robe. Jornak. The man who apparently betrayed him and tampered with his mind, leaving him even more lost inside the time loop than he already was. Zach was angry at the man for what he had done... but if he was honest with himself, not *that* angry. He didn't actually remember the betrayal, and he was always a relatively easygoing guy. Even so, tracking the man down and making him pay for what he had done had been the driving force of his life for a while now. He didn't think it was the effect of any magical compulsion or anything... he just found hating the man to be convenient. Invigorating. Focusing on Red Robe and how he messed him up gave Zach a goal in life that he had lacked for so long, so how he could not go after him?

Plus, the man was clearly a total nutcase. He wasn't an empath like Zorian, but he didn't need to be one to get a read on the guy. Even more than Zach himself, he was dead inside. The next round of continental wars was going to be bad enough without a guy like this throwing oil into the fire. He had to go.

Then Zorian made Oganj go away. He did it in such a hilarious way, too! Except for the part where he gave up the imperial orb to make it happen, that part was honestly awful. Hadn't they agreed the orb would go to him after the month was over, since he got Princess? The asshole had no right to give it away! Hell, he didn't even try to negotiate with the stupid lizard...

The tale has been taken without authorization; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

Oh well. Truthfully, the idea he would get to enjoy the imperial orb, or anything else for that matter, was just... a wistful dream. The angel contract hung like a sword above his head, ready to strike. Its terms were impossible to fulfill. No matter what happened, Zach only had a little time left.

Or so he thought at the time, anyway.

Without warning, Zorian teleported near the site of Zach's battle with Red Robe. Zach remembered feeling a flash of anger in response, even if he stayed quiet. It made sense for Zorian to help bring down Red Robe as quickly as possible, but this was the final stretch of the battle and Zach was enjoying himself. This was the last fun thing he was ever going to do in his life, did Zorian really have to take it away from him?

What happened next shocked him completely. Without saying anything, Zorian simply lunged at Red Robe, rapidly entering melee range with the man while charging some kind of spell Zach didn't recognize.

Though angry, exhausted, and focused on Zach, Red Robe reacted quickly. He instantly spun to the side to face this new opponent, drawing a knife from his belt in a smooth, practiced motion.

No, it was not just a knife, Zach realized. It was the imperial dagger. Red Robe must have quietly stolen it from the Royal Vaults at some point. It wasn't that surprising – the man must have gotten quite proficient at it over the restarts – but he thought the dagger wasn't that useful?

Red Robe's expression alone told Zach that he had thought wrong. An expression of pure glee and hate shone on the man's face, as if he hoped this very thing would happen and couldn't believe Zorian was stupid enough to grant him this opportunity.

Zach hastily launched a fast-moving spell at the two, trying to blast them apart from each other, but he wasn't fast enough. The dagger shone with a faint purple light as Red Robe thrust it forward towards Zorian's face. Zorian did nothing to dodge or shield himself with magic, but that protective cube he made quietly interposed itself in the path of the knife.

Zorian's faith in his grand creation proved to be severely misplaced, however. As great as his skills at artificing were, the dagger was a genuine divine artifact. It sliced straight through the cube like it was made of paper and stabbed forward, impaling Zorian straight through the neck.

Simultaneously, Zorian's glowing hand slammed straight into Red Robe's chest, blowing a massive hole straight through his chest and causing some kind of faint blue waves to resonate across the man's entire body.

And then Zorian's damaged defense cube detonated in a massive explosion that not only blew Zorian and Red Robe away from each other like rag dolls, but also flung Zach back into the nearby building.

Zach wasn't really hurt. It wasn't the first time he was flung back into a wall. He cushioned his impact with the wall with a quick magic, expertly landing on his feet. He quickly scanned the area and found Zorian lying on his back some distance away.

He rushed towards the boy to provide aid but stopped when he got close enough to really see him.

He wasn't moving. His eyes, blank and glassy, remained open. His chest didn't move. And the imperial dagger was still stuck up to the hilt in his neck, and his whole body was full of serrated metal bits sticking out his skin – the remains of his defense device driven deep into his flesh by the force of the explosion.

He stared at his friend for a few seconds, overcome in disbelief, before walking forwards. He cast a quick diagnostic spell and slowly, hesitantly placed his hand on him. He wasn't that great with healing magic, but this was one of the simplest spells in that field and he had an excellent grasp on it. The spell told him what he already knew, but didn't want to accept.

Zorian was dead.

"No," he whispered despondently. "No! Zorian you stupid, stupid, stupid- Why!? Why would you do something so-"

'Because this was deliberate. What don't you understand? He chose to die so you could live.'

The thought bubbled up to his mind suddenly, unpleasant and uninvited. It hit him like a punch in the face.

"H-He wouldn't..." Zach mumbled to himself. "He's too selfish... he said so himself! He has friends, a family, a little sister that needs him, a whole bunch of girls that want to get in his pants. I..."

He took a deep breath and forcefully calmed himself. He... had to check something.

He got up to his feet and ran up to where Red Robe was also laying on the ground, motionless. The man was also dead, unsurprisingly. Not only did Zorian's last attack completely destroy his heart and chest, the blue wave that accompanied the attack also did something. Ripped his soul out of his body, maybe? His medical magic was too rudimentary to figure it out, but the man was definitely dead.

He swallowed heavily and then got up again. He started to search for other people.

Everyone seemed to be unconscious, Zach soon realized. They were lying all over the place – on the streets, in public buildings, in alleyways, everywhere.

It wasn't that they got knocked out during a fight, either. His diagnostic spells confirmed most of them were completely healthy, barring some minor scrapes and bruises that were normal for the current conditions of the city. They seemed to have just suddenly dropped unconscious all of a sudden.

He eventually found Alanic, Xvim, and... Zorian's brother Daimen. Gods above, how was he going to explain to the man that he just let his little brother...

He shook his head and carefully approached. They were still unconscious, just like everyone he encountered so far. After a second of hesitation, he cast a memory reading spell and placed his hand on Xvim's head.

The spell encountered no resistance. He was sure that Xvim had placed a mind blank spell on him during the battle, but there was no trace of it now. He immediately dove into the man's memories, searching for any information regarding the time loop.

His hand soon began to tremble. The man had no idea about any time loop. More than that, however, he didn't possess any memories of this entire month. Someone had quite literally memory wiped his entire recollection of said time period.

He repeated his check on nearby Alanic and Daimen, with the same results. They were free of any knowledge of the time loop... because they had no memory of anything that had transpired during this whole month.

He breathed out heavily.

"Zorian, you scary bastard... how did you even do this?" he said out loud.

Wait. If he could do that to others... could he do it to him as well?

Was any of this real?

The moment the thought bubbled up to his mind, it refused to leave. He could feel something inside his soul wake up and *demand* a check. He had to know. He had to know as badly as a starving man needed food, a compulsion so strong it was essentially irresistible.

He started casting a plethora of diagnostic divinations on himself, his surroundings, and the three unconscious people in front of him. He performed a multitude of little experiments he learned over the years to detect when illusionists messed with his surroundings.

Nothing. His mind blank was still working. His mind was not being tampered with. The environment was behaving as it should and the people in front of him were as complex as real people should be.

He started to wander the city, casting memory spells on random people he found lying in the streets. By this time some people had started to wake up, but Zach simply walked past them, ignoring them as he went about his task.

He wasn't really searching for any specific information. He was reading people's memories in order to find out trivial things like their favorite meals, what their mother looked like, or what the last story they'd heard was about. In other words, he was checking if they were real people.

A mind mage, no matter how good, couldn't create a mind from scratch. Not a convincing one, in any case. A fake man would be a paper thin disguise, capable of tricking only the most inexperienced of mind mages. However, Zach had gotten to know Zorian long enough that he couldn't discount anything. He could totally accept that Zorian could produce a convincing fake mind. The guy was just that scary.

Maybe even a pair of fake minds. Maybe a *dozen*.

By now he had read the memories of more than a hundred people, though. All of them felt real. All of them were complex individuals with lots of little details about their lives and tangled histories that Zach could easily lose himself in for weeks at a time if he really wanted to figure them out. He refused to believe that anyone could create so many lives out of thin air. Even someone like Zorian.

He lost track of time. He wandered around the city, checking on people. Anyone that was even slightly familiar with the time loop had lost their memories of the whole month. No exceptions. Even the aranea beneath Cyoria were missing any memory of this month. An entire colony of skilled telepaths, but Zorian had somehow managed to convince them to willingly delete their own memories.

Eventually, he accepted the truth. It was real. It was all real. Jornak was dead. Silverlake too – she was done in by her old, real world self, who lost her memories of the past month, but was otherwise unharmed.

Nobody knew anything about the time loop except for him.

He left the city. He couldn't look at it any longer. He found a small hill just outside the city walls that he and Zorian used to sit on sometimes, discussing their plans or just wasting time, and watched the fields around him in silence.

He had no idea how long he stood there. He thought someone approached him at one point and asked him if he was alright, but he ignored them and they eventually went away. All he knew was that at some point he realized that someone was shooting fireworks into the sky.

It was the night of the summer festival. The city may have just suffered a brutal invasion, but that was no reason to halt the celebrations. Hell, if anything this just made the importance of a celebration that much greater!

And Zach... felt happy. He felt disgusted with himself for it, but he really did. Panaxeth was still sealed and the conditions of his contract had been fulfilled. He was going to live past this month.

He... had won.

He was Zach Noveda, the last surviving member of Noble House Noveda and the last surviving time looper...

...and he had won.

He fell to his knees and began to cry. Somewhere deep inside his soul, he could feel the angel contract harmlessly dissolve, finally fulfilled.

He was free, and all it cost him was the life of his best friend.

105. I Win (II)

Chapter 105 I Win (II)

He was Jornak Dokochin, a humble lawyer from Cyoria, the *true* heir of House Denen, and the last surviving time looper...

...and he had won.

The path had been long and difficult. He still remembered that fateful day he had realized Zach was a time traveler. The boy had been making scene after scene around the city, making ‘nonsensical’ statements to the newspapers and everyone else who would listen, never once outright stating what he was, but very much hinting at it. Very few people had taken him seriously. Jornak hadn’t either, in all honesty – not until the boy had come to him one day and asked him to help him figure out some legal documents he ‘found lying around the living room’.

The documents blew Jornak’s mind away. Not because the contents were so shocking, but because of what they implied. The people they implicated in crimes were so influential and highly placed, and the evidence so damning, that Jornak simply knew that Zach must have stolen them from the very people mentioned in the documents.

Jornak knew *exactly* how hard that feat was. After the corrupt Eldemarian courts had taken the inheritance of House Denen away from him, he had come to understand that truth and the letter of the law were almost entirely inconsequential in the face of money, connections, and social status. He became a covert member of the Cult of the World Dragon and rubbed shoulders with many powerful people. He came to know the darker undercurrents of Eldemar society, and knew what it would take to acquire this kind of dirt on someone.

No amount of money could buy something like this, so how could Zach have possibly acquired these documents? Jornak had agonized over this question for days, dissecting every statement Zach had made, no matter how minor or nonsensical, and eventually came up with a crazy idea. The craziest idea, possibly. He confronted Zach with it, and... the boy just laughed and admitted to it easily.

Yes, he was a time traveler. In fact, he had lived through this month many, many times, and they had talked before.

Jornak believed him. He *wanted* to believe him. His life had been rather dreary and frustrating for several years by that point. His career wasn’t going anywhere, despite his attempts to build connections and increase his social standing. He had no success in love. His family was long dead. The inheritance of House Denen, his best chance at achieving greatness, was stolen from him. His youth was all but spent, and he felt he wasn’t going anywhere. This looping time travel thing may have been completely insane, but Jornak was willing to take a chance on it.

The two became fast friends. Zach explained that he had originally found Jornak because he’d befriended Veyers in one of the restarts, and the boy had introduced him to his lawyer friend. Zach’s story about his caretaker selling Noveda property for pocket change to his friends and then siphoning most of the money into his pockets fascinated Jornak almost as much as the time travel story itself.

He wasn’t that unique in his realization that Zach was a time traveler. Zach had been making a lot of noise during that particular restart, handing out clues to various people he was fond of, and a number of them had reached the same conclusion he had. Zach was also dating no less than two women at the time – both of them aware of the other and fine with it – and he’d outright told them the truth long before Jornak had met him. It was... a fascinating group. He’d made a lot of new friends that month.

There was a looming shadow over the whole thing, however, and it grew colder and more obvious with every passing day. Zach Noveda wasn’t a mage who invented time travel, merely a leaf caught in the storm. The mechanics of the time loop were merciless, and they would soon strike.

As the end of the month approached, some people in the group got increasingly concerned. Jornak was one of them. During one evening when they were alone, and Zach had a little too much to drink, he admitted to Jornak that he would eventually stop interacting with him altogether. It had happened repeatedly in the past: Zach would get to know someone, interact with them over and over again, get emotionally attached to them, and then decide it was too painful to be around them in the future.

The admission shook Jornak to his core. He wasn’t sure why. He wouldn’t really remember anything soon, so why did it matter that Zach would replace him with someone else in one of the future restarts? It shouldn’t have mattered, but it did. He grew increasingly desperate, constantly probing Zach for any ideas about how he can keep existing after the month was over. He recruited the other members of Zach’s group into his efforts, and eventually they managed to force an admission out of him.

There was a way. A divine artifact, held by a lich, that could confer the status of a temporary looper upon a person. It would only be for six restarts, and Zach explained again and again why he didn’t want to do it, why it was a bad idea, and so forth. It didn’t matter – not to Jornak, and not to the other people. Six months was better than nothing.

It was probably the two lovers that did most of the job of convincing Zach to play along with their request, Jornak suspected. Still, he was the one who organized the whole effort and he was very proud of it. The next six months were a great time, possibly the happiest in Jornak’s life. He did not intend to betray Zach at that time, not at all – the boy was his best friend, and Jornak had every intention of helping him out in any way he could.

But alas... six restarts had eventually passed. The second deadline started to approach. Tempers ran high. People started asking Zach for a way to prolong their time looping status, horrified that they were about to lose everything they had achieved during these past six months. Zach’s mood

continually worsened, both from him being heartbroken that the people he spent the past six months with were about to become lost to him, and the fact they were constantly badgering him about a solution that didn't exist. That he couldn't provide.

Jornak's friendship with Zach also started to gradually deteriorate as the end approached. Jornak was far more interested in politics of the state and in what was happening behind closed doors of their nation's elite. He had come to know much, and he grew more disgusted with them than he ever had been. He talked to Zach often about these issues, but the boy was just a teenager at heart, and his perspective was narrow and naïve. He simply wanted to get back at his caretaker, start rebuilding his House, and have fun. He did not appreciate the knowledge Jornak had painstakingly gathered, and found his methods to be immoral and disturbing. As the end of their temporary looper status approached, they clashed more and more frequently, and Jornak made the mistake of telling Zach exactly what he would do if he were in his place. The look Zach had given him when he stopped talking... Jornak would always remember that...

Eventually Zach called for a group meeting. He swore again and again that he wasn't hiding any methods of prolonging their looping, and that there was nothing he could do. He promised them he would make them all temporary loopers again as soon as he could.

He also privately promised Jornak he would supply his future looper with all the work he had done in those six restarts, but Jornak didn't believe him. The boy hadn't even read the last two reports Jornak gave him, much less memorized them. Even if he *wanted* to hand future Jornak the fruits of his work, how would he do it? Not to mention that he probably didn't even want to do it. He doubted Zach would even make him a temporary looper in the future. He remembered Zach's admission that he eventually dropped people from his social circle after interacting with them for a few restarts. He remembered the look Zach had given him not too long ago. And he decided he had to do something.

He had never planned to betray Zach. He'd wanted to work with him. To *help* him. When one really thought about it, Zach was the one who betrayed him.

Jornak himself was not a powerful man. His magical aptitude was entirely average, and not even the time loop could change that. But some of the people in the looper group were magically powerful, and their skills had only gotten better due to Zach's willingness to help them grow. Getting them to side with him was tricky, but not too difficult. Desperation made people do previously unthinkable things. Contacting Quatach-Ichl and arranging a meeting with him without being immediately killed had been hard, but not nearly as hard as he had feared it would be. From that point on, everything kind of slid into place.

In the end, that path had led him here: locked in a deadly battle against his one-time best friend and fellow time travelling companion – Zach.

He had to admit, he had been pretty worried for a while. The ability he'd gotten from Panaxeth was not nearly as effective as he thought it would be. Weren't primordials supposed to be on the level of gods? He expected more out of primordial magic, to be honest. That prison should have taken some kind of advanced, specialized magic to get out of, but Zach had an appropriate spell for breaking it already in his arsenal.

Then, when they were pulled back into Cyoria proper, it was just in time to see Zorian banish Quatach-Ichl back to his phylactery with the help of a... flower? He dimly recognized it as a soulseizer chrysanthemum. What an obscure magical creature. In any case, he was of two minds about this. On one hand, he needed the ancient lich to win this. On the other hand, it was satisfying to see the black-hearted bastard finally get knocked down a peg or two. And besides, he still had the dragon m-

Oganj left. He took the crown and the orb, and he just *left!* Unbelievable. Jornak had given him so much for his assistance as forward payment – materials, maps, records of draconic magic that humans had taken from other dragon mages, everything – but Oganj still chose to switch sides in exchange for two thrice-damned divine artifacts.

A familiar bitterness welled up from the back of his mind. Everyone always betrayed him. He was so fed up with everything.

He still didn't think the situation was hopeless. He started the invasion a day before the actual deadline for releasing Panaxeth, so he had some time for another attempt. He would activate all of his contingencies and plunge the country into chaos. He would activate all of the remaining wraith bombs in other cities – he refused to believe his enemies had enough countermeasures to disable them all, or that they had even managed to track down every single one of them. He would assassinate people and mind control critical individuals into starting hostilities with every nearby country. He would sic the police and Eldemar's military on them, their allies, friends, and family. He would descend straight into the Hole and lure the monsters lurking in the deepest layer of the dungeon back to the surface to wreak havoc on it until the city was nothing but ruins...

It was suboptimal. He wanted to rule this country, and make it better, not bring it to its knees. However, he had to be alive in order to improve things, and his opponents had forced his hand. If this was the only path they had left for him, he would not hesitate. He was-

Suddenly, that other looper, Zorian Kazinski, teleported next to them and immediately rushed towards them.

Zorian... Jornak had so many regrets in regards to the boy. He shouldn't have panicked and fled the time loop when he realized there were other time loopers aside from him and Zach, but it made perfect sense at the time. The information he had gotten from the aranea said there was a small legion of them, which... was entirely possible. If Zach wanted to and had the crown, he could have made the entire city into temporary loopers. What if Panaxeth decided some of them would make for a better champion than him? And if Zach was creating so many loopers, he probably knew about the Sovereign Gate and how to leave the time loop. He couldn't play around and risk things. The safest thing to do was to leave as soon as possible.

As it turned out, there was just one additional looper, and he hadn't gotten in through Zach's actions. He got in through some weird mistake in the time loop system. Jornak couldn't even begin to describe how jealous he was of the boy when he heard that. *He* had to go through so much trouble to keep existing, and then this boy got all of that and more through a simple stroke of luck? The world was sometimes so unfair.

But no matter, this was perfect. He didn't know what had possessed the boy to get this close to him all of a sudden, but he wasn't going to waste a golden opportunity like this. He drew the imperial dagger out of his belt with a smooth, practiced motion, its weight and shape familiar and comforting in his hand. The dagger had long been his oldest and most reliable companion, and if he could, he always recovered it from the royal vaults, where it was just uselessly gathering dust. He had spent many years tinkering with it and learning everything it could do.

The dagger lit up with a faint purple glow as he thrust it towards Zorian. The imperial dagger was mostly known for its ability to hurt spirits easily, but it had several alternate modes, and this was one of them. The third looper arrogantly refused to dodge his strike, instead placing his defense device in front of him to ward off the blow. Jornak would be first to admit that the cube was an incredible achievement that left him in awe of Zorian's ingenuity and skill, but it was ultimately just a mortal item. The dagger pierced through the complex, multi-layer shield projected by the cube like it didn't exist and then stabbed right through the alchemically-reinforced metal like it was paper.

To his credit, this wasn't enough to take the boy down. Zorian reacted quickly, telekinetically moving his body out of the way of the knife while simultaneously hurling the ruined cube into the sky. Having suffered catastrophic damage, the cube exploded above their heads moments later, showering the area with serrated metal fragments and exotic magical energies.

Jornak locked eyes with Zorian, unsurprised by the boy's quick reactions. Though he was standing here partially due to luck, Zorian Kazinski was someone that had repeatedly shown himself to be a shrewd and decisive person. When Jornak was about to capture and interrogate him back in the time loop, he killed himself without hesitation to deny him useful information. What's more, the action was clearly a pre-planned contingency and he had enough presence of mind as he ran to make sure Jornak would be unable to recover his body. He did not expect him to die so easily.

Still, with his best defensive tool destroyed, and with him momentarily unbalanced, Jornak decided to bet it all on one last push. This was extremely dangerous and may very well end with him killed, but it wasn't the first time he risked his life for a chance to live, and it probably wouldn't be the last. He wrapped his hand around a small black bottle hanging from his neck and squeezed, shattering it with ease with his supernatural strength.

Hundreds of black shapes suddenly slipped from between his fingers, expanding in size as they filled the skies above them. Vaguely humanoid, the entities looked like legless incorporeal humans in tattered pitch black cloaks.

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Wraiths. The whole area immediately began to feel uncomfortably chilly as the mere presence of so many of them began to leech minute amounts of life force from the three combatants, and resonant whispers filled the air as wraiths began to babble in that usual incomprehensible nonsense they constantly spouted.

Wraiths were mysterious creatures, with unclear origins and very few methods of effectively fighting them. In many ways, they almost resembled spirits, but they were usually classified as undead due to their ability to convert human souls into more of themselves. They were difficult to control. Jornak did not actually have any ability to direct the wraith horde he had just released from his miniature wraith bomb, and he had no doubt the wraiths would see him as just as big of a target as the other two people present. However, Jornak was betting he would have a definite advantage anyway, because he had something he didn't think either of the other two had: sophisticated, well-honed soul magic skills.

Soul magic was a sinister branch of magic, requiring a lot of cruel and unpleasant experimentation and willingness to deal and negotiate with some very loathsome people. Jornak had long accepted this, and he did not let it bother him. He had tortured entire villages of people, over and over again, to see how different soul magic methods affected the same soul over various restarts. He sold kidnapped babies and small orphans to some of the more unscrupulous witches that were willing to teach him their skills in exchange for 'suitable material'. He spoke with demon summoners, participating in their disgusting rituals in order to prove his 'sincerity'. His magical talents may be average, but he was confident that there were few people who could boast about having a similar level of skill when it came to soul magic. Zach certainly wasn't one of them, and Silverlake was adamant that Zorian wasn't that much better.

His opponents knew it too. When they saw the wraiths flood the area, the two of them tried to retreat and regroup elsewhere, but how could Jornak allow that? He stopped them. He foiled their teleportation, he wrenched them back when they tried to fly away, and when the two attacked him together and he was forced to choose between being wounded and letting them flee, he chose to get wounded. His regeneration ability was not nearly as potent as that of Silverlake, but his body was far more resilient than that of a regular person, and healed quickly. So long as he didn't black out and could cast magic, it was fine. He would bear it. He would outlast them, outlast everyone, and win.

He had to win. All of the sacrifices, all the things he'd done... it couldn't have been all in vain. He was close, so very close to the end...

In the end, he triumphed. His soul defenses were honed to perfection, yet even he strained to deal with so many wraiths relentlessly assaulting him. Zach and Zorian? They couldn't compare. Maybe if they hadn't expended so many of their resources before they decided to tackle him, they could have got themselves out of this situation, but alas. For all their power and skill, in the end, all it took was one mistake for them to fall and be devoured by wraiths. Jornak quietly thanked Zorian for deciding to join the battle when he had – if Jornak had been unable to catch both of his enemies at once in his wraith trap, this wouldn't have worked.

The moment the two loopers fell, Jornak fled the site and waited for the wraiths to scatter before returning to check up on them. Always check the bodies to make sure your enemies were really dead, after all. This was especially true when dealing with enemies on the level of Zach and Zorian.

A minute later, he breathed a sigh of release. They were really dead. It was over.

He started to laugh. Yes. Yes! He... he knew he could do it!

Now was not the time for gloating, however. That would come later. For now, he started searching the city for his 'partner', Silverlake.

He eventually found her not far from where he fought Zach and Zorian. Or what was left of her, anyway. She was really just an empty bag of skin now. After cautiously kneeling down and inspecting the skin, he found two large puncture wounds in her chest and no other notable damage. Something, probably some kind of magical creature, had liquefied her insides and slurped it all out, leaving this preserved husk behind.

Jornak frowned. Silverlake was probably the weakest one from among the four of them that had managed to escape from the time loop, but she shouldn't have been this easy to kill. In fact, despite being the weakest, Jornak suspected she was the hardest of them to kill, both because her primordial abilities were all defensive in nature and because she herself was a cowardly wretch that would no doubt flee at the first hint of actual danger. The creature that had killed her... some kind of spider, maybe? In any case, it had to be very powerful. On the level of a dragon, really. How did a creature like that get here, and where was it now? And why hadn't Silverlake simply retreated if she had encountered something like that? Magical creatures generally had little ability to stop high-level mages from fleeing if outmatched, unless they were sapient spellcasters in their own right.

Concerning,

Still. Maybe it was better this way. Jornak hadn't actually liked Silverlake that much. She had brought him some very useful knowledge, and for that, he would always be grateful to her, but she was also clearly playing her own game and knew too much about Jornak's true nature for him to be comfortable with it. This way there was one less person potentially messing up his plans.

With Silverlake dead, it fell to him to fulfill their bargain with Panaxeth and set him loose upon the world. He threw himself into the task without hesitation, rallying the invader forces under his banner and gathering the surviving cultists that had scattered around the city after their defeat near the Hole. While most of the cultists had perished, their leaders and high-level members were powerful and resourceful enough to survive for the most part, and they were the most important part anyway. Jornak had them set up the ritual while the Ibasan army protected them, and used his own primordial essence in place of the shifter children that the defenders had managed to rescue and evacuate out of the city. He had thought about trying to recover them, but eventually decided that would take too long. Eldemar was already mobilizing their whole army to crush this invasion, and he had no time to lose. Using his own primordial essence was going to weaken him for a long time, and disable most of his primordial magic, but he would rather pay this price than risk dying at the end of the month because he had wasted too much time.

Imagine if that happened – he, the ultimate victor of the time loop war, ended up dying because he had failed to release Panaxeth before the Eldemar army rolled into the city and killed all his underlings. He would die wallowing in shame and embarrassment! No, he would pay the price with his own flesh and blood and do things properly. No gains without sacrifice.

The ritual went off without issue. Space cracked, the prison broke, and then Panaxeth burst into existence above the city, his fleshy limbs reaching out of his prison and burying themselves into the roads and buildings. Then, he slowly started to drag his entire bulk out of the pocket dimension that had contained him all these millennia...

Jornak immediately fled. He may have been Panaxeth's champion, but he did not trust the primordial at all. His part of the contract was finished, in any case. Funny, he thought he would be able to *feel* it when the restriction lifted, but there was nothing. The death pact Panaxeth placed on him simply disappeared from his perception – one moment it was there, the next it was gone. Well... it was primordial magic, after all. Who knows how that worked. He was finally free, that was all that mattered.

The cultists, arrogant idiots that they were, stayed behind. Jornak knew that they had some kind of crazy plan that involved binding the primordial to their will and becoming gods in the process, but it was lunacy. They were like ants trying to enslave a tiger. Even weakened, Panaxeth was not something they could handle. Even a fragment of him could probably annihilate them.

The primordial let loose a deep, resonant rumble that made the whole city visibly vibrate. Some of the weaker buildings, weakened by the fires and the fighting, immediately collapsed from it. Then the rampage began. Ibasan forces were retreating now as fast as they could, but Jornak knew most of them would never make it.

He took one last look at the unraveling city and then teleported away. He wanted to be as far as possible from the area.

- break -

Eventually, Jornak made his way to Iasku Mansion. The place was thoroughly trashed, its wards broken and most of the souls that powered it set free when their prison cracked and crumbled, but the structure itself was still standing when the angel was done venting its ire on it. Probably because Sudomir placed and set smaller, but far stronger defensive wards around the ward core that housed his wife's soul, and the angel didn't want to spend time breaking it down when there were more important battles happening elsewhere.

The angel then dropped the barrier that had kept Iasku Mansion contained, and Sudomir enacted another long-distance teleport ritual to translocate the mansion out of the city, and then all the way to Ulquaan Ibasa. This was something that Sudomir had long since arranged with Quatach-Ichl in case things went wrong with their plan.

Sitting in one of the few intact rooms inside the mansion, Jornak had been feeling quite pleased with himself, basking in the glow of his own success, when another person entered the room.

Quatach-Ichl. The lich was in his human guise now (though Quatach-Ichl insisted this form was just as true as his 'battle form'), and he looked as relaxed and confident as ever. Jornak wanted to make some snide comments about him getting taken out by a flower, but he refrained. More than

Zach, Zorian, or anyone else, the ancient lich was the one that really terrified Jornak. He didn't think even his fellow loopers really understood the force they were dealing with when they tangled with him.

Without Quatach-Ichl, Jornak would never have been able to make himself a permanent looper. Oh sure, Panaxeth was the one who supplied him with a method of transforming his temporary marker into a permanent one, but never in a million years would Jornak have been able to actually use the method himself. No, he had to beg Quatach-Ichl for assistance to help him perform the task. And the price for the lich's help... even now Jornak couldn't help but feel uneasy about it.

He had heard from Silverlake that the other looper already suspected that Quatach-Ichl had been integral in turning his temporary marker into a permanent one, but they couldn't figure out why the lich hadn't also made himself into a looper as well, then. The answer was simple: the method required one to make a deal with Panaxeth in order to work, and the lich wasn't willing to make a death pact with a primordial under *any* circumstances. However, that didn't mean he was willing to help Jornak without any assurances. He forced Jornak to accept something called a 'soul seed' – a small fragment of Quatach-Ichl's soul, somehow processed to prevent degradation and imbued with some measure of self-awareness and memory – and bound said soul fragment to Jornak's soul, with instructions to return to the original Quatach-Ichl when Jornak successfully came back to the real world.

The soul fragment had been with Jornak for the entire duration of his stay in the time loop, and even Jornak wasn't sure what it was up to during that time. Was it merely patiently waiting to return to its master, containing only the memories of that one Quatach-Ichl Jornak made the deal with? Or was it watching and learning the whole time, riding him like a spying parasite? He didn't know. All he knew was that once he left the time loop and was incarnated in the real world, the soul fragment immediately left him and rejoined Quatach-Ichl.

Jornak had no need to convince the lich he was a time traveler. Quatach-Ichl already knew, and was waiting for him when Jornak came knocking. He had no idea how much the ancient lich knew about what happened in the time loop, and it scared him.

"So," Quatach-Ichl said, sitting down in one of the nearby chairs. "I think we can safely describe this operation as a success, yes?"

"Yes, absolutely," Jornak agreed. "Though, if I may make an observation... the damage made by the primordial seemed to be somewhat underwhelming. Cyoria will be no more after today, that is true, but the country as a whole will survive. Aren't you worried they will launch a punitive expedition against your homeland for this? Your involvement in this will be impossible to hide."

"Oh no, I fully expect them to retaliate in some manner," Quatach-Ichl said. "I welcome it. Our leaders have been very foolish lately, trying to set up trade treaties with the mainland and other such nonsense. A nice war or two will be good for us."

Jornak nodded. This kind of attitude meshed pretty well with the lich's attitude in their past conversations.

"What about you?" the lich asked. "Aren't you worried?"

"Why would I be?" Jornak asked curiously. "I won."

"It was a close thing," Quatach-Ichl remarked.

"A win is a win," Jornak insisted. He glared slightly at the lich. "Besides, it wouldn't have been that close if you hadn't stupidly got yourself killed. And by a flower, no less."

"Soulseizers are curious creatures," Quatach-Ichl said lightly, clearly not bothered by the swipe. Or at least not giving any visible indication that he was. The ancient lich's poker face was too good. "I'll have to look into them when I find the time. Alas, I suspect the next few years are going to be very busy for me indeed."

Well, he was certainly right about *that*. For one thing, Jornak fully intended to start executing his plans the moment he left from here. He and the lich had completely incompatible plans for the future, and were pretty much guaranteed to start sabotaging each other's efforts soon.

Really, Jornak wouldn't be surprised if Quatach-Ichl tried to kill him here today. Unfortunately for him, Jornak was well aware of this possibility and had taken every possible precaution before coming here. He won't die here. He won't die ever.

He was only just starting, really.

"What would you have done if the invasion failed?" Quatach-Ichl asked, sounding genuinely curious.

A multitude of contingencies floated in Jornak's mind in response to the lich's question – explosive traps in numerous cities and buildings meant to cause mass casualties, assassination contracts that would be executed unless he called them off, documents unmasking Zach and Zorian just waiting to be discovered by the authorities... he had many ways to make his enemies regret their victory if he ever lost. Still he told none of them to Quatach-Ichl. Although he planned to dismantle all of them now, there was no reason to reveal his methods and reasoning to someone who would soon become his bitter enemy.

He quickly checked his mental defenses and found that his mind blank was still on and in perfect condition. Good. For a moment he was afraid Quatach-Ichl was trying to pick up answers straight from his surface thoughts.

Still, he felt an urge to brag a little. He started to ramble about one of his less important contingencies – a bundle of documents implicating Zorian in

the events of the invasion, deliberately placed in one of the cabinets of the police building in Korsa. The cabinet was rarely used, but its owner was very dutiful and meticulous. It would take weeks for the documents to be discovered, and by that time Zach and Zorian will have likely stopped being on high alert for such things and should hopefully be caught completely by surprise. Then there was that letter he sent straight to the royal residence. It should be arriving-

He suddenly stopped talking. Why... why was he telling the lich this? Didn't he *just* conclude they were going to become enemies soon and that it would be best to stay quiet? And the expression on Quatach-Ichl's face... he was leaning forward and listening with bated breath, like this was the most interesting thing ever. What...?

"Who... who are you!?" Jornak suddenly snapped, jumping from his chair and going on full combat alert. He had spent enough time around the lich to learn some of his mannerisms and this didn't look like him. In fact, when he really thought about it, his entire demeanor this whole time was slightly off. "You're not Quatach-Ichl?"

"Why do you say that?" the imposter asked, feigning calm curiosity.

Jornak fired a blistering beam of red light at the imposter, who didn't even try to dodge.

The beam went straight through his forehead without any resistance.

The man wearing Quatach-Ichl's face sighed.

"So impersonating the lich is a lost cause," he lamented to himself. "No matter how many times I try, I just can't seem to portray him convincingly. It's a shame, since he's the one you're most likely to really talk with about all the details. Maybe I should try Silverlake?"

W-What?

Wait...

No.

No!

"You can't be! You can't be him!" Jornak protested, his voice getting more and more panicked. "I killed you! I know I did! Your soul got devoured by wraiths! I... I have a mind blank on, that spell is total protection against-"

He checked his mind. He checked it again, and then a third time. Always the same result. His mind blank was still one. His mind was protected.

Except it wasn't.

'None of this is real...' Jornak realized.

"Well then," the imposter in the guise of Quatach-Ichl said. "Let's try this again, shall we?"

Jornak's heart went cold. How many times had he done this? How many times had he lived through this day, enjoying his triumph, making grand plans about what would come next, only to forget all about it again and again? All the while some sinister force keeps talking to him, pumping him for information, varying their approach in this or that way, to get what they wanted out of him.

His mind couldn't help but harken back to his time in the time loop, back when he was just a humble lawyer wishing there was more to his life. Back to when he realized his life was literally an endless loop meant to exploit him. It was just like that now, but worse. Infinitely worse.

His vision began to darken. He wanted to do something, wanted to send a signal to his various contingencies in one final act of spite, but his mind was fading, fading, fading... He forgot Zorian's words, forgot what led him to this place, forgot any of this ever happened. He found himself back in Cyoria, surrounded by corpses of Zach and Zorian, knowing only one thing:

He was Jornak Dokochin, a humble lawyer from Cyoria, the *true* heir of House Denen, and the last surviving time looper...

...and he had won.

Again, and again, and again.

106. I Win (III)

Chapter 106

I Win (III)

He was Zorian Kazinski, the third son of a minor merchant family from Cirin, accidental time traveler, and quite possibly the most powerful human mind mage in all of Altazia...

...and he had won.

It was not an easy task to arrange all of this. Sure, he could have beaten Jornak and Silverlake, stopped the ritual, and left it at that... but that would be a very bittersweet outcome. Zach would have died at the end of the month and Zorian would have spent the rest of his future running away from Eldemarian assassins and whatnot.

Zorian did not spend all those years in the time loop just to settle for a... suboptimal outcome.

The first task, of course, was figuring out how to get past the mind blank spell. Even before he had known about Zach's angelic contract, he'd known the boy was hiding something of critical importance that he would have to wrench out of his head. Thus, he worked with Xvim, aranea, and many others to find the solution. A way to beat the ultimate mental defense – a spell that had been providing total protection against mind magic, no exceptions, for literal centuries now.

A lot of people Zorian had worked with thought it was a fool's task to begin with. What did Zorian have that so many other mind mages that tried to invent a workaround hadn't? But Zorian didn't embark upon this idea blindly. He already had an idea before he threw himself into the project.

The souleizer chrysanthemum was a very rare and obscure magical creature. It was so dangerous and frightening to people that they had long since eradicated it in more civilized areas, not even bothering to study it properly before doing so. Who was brave enough to research a flower that would *eat your soul* if you made a mistake in restraining it? Not many people. It didn't help that the plant was a very valuable component for many potions, meaning it was worth more dead than alive to begin with.

In modern times, of course, some mage or organization would have probably become interested in the souleizer and organized a hunt so its abilities could be studied... except that the plant only lived in monster infested wilderness these days, was surprisingly good at hiding, and smart enough to pick its fights carefully. Plus, its abilities were not well known, and old descriptions found in ancient tomes did not do the creature justice. They made the chrysanthemum look like a simple plant-shaped soul eater. It just wasn't that impressive sounding.

Zorian had experienced the flower's attack first-hand, however. Zach hadn't thought much about their experience, seeing it only as an embarrassing instance where they had nearly been beaten by a flower, and soon forgot about it. But Zorian had never forgotten. The way the plant's initial stunning attack had simply bypassed all of their defenses left a deep impression on him.

If the chrysanthemum could bypass their defenses by targeting their body, mind, and soul simultaneously... could the same method be used to target someone's mind even when it was protected by the mind blank?

Mind blank protected the mind by separating it from what the aranea called 'the Great Web'. The mind closed in on itself, rejecting all contact. But it was still connected to the brain, and to the soul. It should be possible to target the mind by going through those two, somehow. This wasn't a new idea, by any means, but most people who tried to make such a method work before hadn't had the souleizer chrysanthemum on hand to provide a working example of how such a thing would work in practice.

Zorian did. And he had a whole host of experts in both soul magic and mind magic to help him figure it out.

The process of studying the chrysanthemum's abilities had some unintended benefits. He probably would not have found a way to negate the wraith bombs in a reasonable amount of time if he hadn't spent so much time studying the flower and its abilities, and he wouldn't have been able to make the weapon that Mrva had used to disable Quatach-Ichl for a few moments. These were all just side benefits, however, paling in importance to the real end goal of the research: the manifold resonance spell.

The spell was not ideal by any means. First of all, the magic Zorian and his team designed could only be used through touch. Skin-to-skin contact was required to successfully cast the spell. It was also incredibly complicated and hard to control. Three whole minds were needed to execute the spell. Not an impossible requirement for someone who could make simulacrum like Zorian could, but still an issue. Finally, targets eventually acquired a resistance to it. Experiments showed that targeting the same person repeatedly with the spell made them instinctively resist it after only a handful of attempts. In the case of people with highly trained defenses like Xvim and Alanic, that meant they became resistant after only two or three attempts.

But it worked. It was complicated and inconvenient, but it did the impossible and that was all that mattered. With the spell to bypass mind blank in his arsenal, victory – *actual* victory – was finally possible.

In the end, that path had led him here: locked in a deadly battle against his fellow time travelers – Zach and Jornak.

When Zorian teleported next to the two combatants and lunged at them, hands glowing, he knew neither would take it lying down. Zach looked shocked at his sudden betrayal, but he was an experienced fighter and reacted immediately, firing a pair of blindingly bright white rays that nearly

took Zorian's head off. Only his defense cube saved him, by warping space around him slightly to make the beams miss. As for Jornak, he drew the imperial dagger out of his belt with a smooth, practiced motion and thrust it straight at Zorian's face.

Zorian didn't know much about the imperial dagger. Its main ability out of the time loop was supposed to be its ability to hurt spirits, but... why take that chance? He doubted Jornak would try to use it on him if it wasn't uniquely useful in this situation. He jumped back a little, evading the stab at the cost of losing some momentum and giving up some of his advantage of surprise.

"Zorian, what—" Zach started saying, outrage evident in his voice.

He never got to finish it. A marble Zorian 'accidentally' dropped out of his pocket before he jumped back suddenly activated and instantly sucked in all the air around them, creating a sizeable area of total vacuum between them.

The surrounding air quickly rushed in to fill the void, forcefully dragging all three of them into the center of the area. Jornak and Zach were unharmed, but caught off guard. But Zorian was ready.

The moment they collided with each other he clamped down on Zach and Jornak's hands and cast the spell.

A faint blue wave quickly rippled through them, expanding from the point of contact to envelop their whole bodies. They still had their mind blank spells on, but it didn't matter. Their bodies went limp, insensate to the world around them.

A moment later, they were plunged into a constructed dream world over which Zorian had total control.

It was an incredible achievement, creating this thing, and this wasn't just Zorian praising himself. The aranea were also in awe of the scale of what he created. That said, he wasn't doing this alone. Aside from him and his simulacra, many, many aranea were helping him control the illusionary world. On top of that, he wasn't really conjuring people's surroundings out of nothing. He was accessing eyes of people around the city and his iron beaks in the sky to give Zach and Jornak as convincing of an experience as he possibly could.

He had to mess with their memories slightly. Mostly to make it look like they won in a convincing manner – a process that took some trial and error, since Zorian didn't have a perfect understanding of their capabilities and habits. Thankfully, any mistake could be covered up by simply wiping away their short-term memories and letting them relive the battle again and again until he got it right. He also had to adjust Zach's perception of what happened to Quatach-Ichl, since his contract couldn't be fulfilled unless the lich was seemingly dead. He made it look like his chrysanthemum weapon actually managed to suck out Quatach-Ichl soul and kill him for good, which Zach thankfully accepted as actually possible. Zorian took it as a compliment that Zach had that much faith in his artifice.

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Then there was the matter of Zach going around reading people's minds. Zorian had known that Zach would try that. After all, how else was he going to confirm that people did not know anything about the time loop? Unfortunately, the boy was right that Zorian couldn't really create convincing fake minds. Even the dumbest, most boring person in existence had a mind more complex and intricate than anything Zorian could conjure purely from his own imagination. So he didn't even try. Through his network of sigils around the city, Zorian was potentially connected to every person who was still alive there. He could act as a mental bridge, allowing Zach to connect to any person in the city through him. The minds he was reading were very much real.

Sadly, that also meant that when Zach checked people's minds and saw they didn't remember anything that had happened during this past month, this was in no way faked. They really didn't remember anything. Zorian was forced to strip them of their mind blanks through dispelling, and wipe away their memories of the month. He had thought about being more selective about it, but he wanted things to be absolutely convincing to whatever evaluation mechanics Zach's angel contract employed.

He had gifted people like Xvim, Alanic, and Daimen memory crystals containing their deleted memories for later perusal, but he knew that wasn't nearly the same as having their real memories. They weren't trained psychics like he was, so digesting their memories from such a source would be a struggle.

As for the aranea, deleting their memories of the whole month was kind of tricky, since they were helping Zorian run this whole illusion, and he needed their help right now. Obviously, them not having any memories of all this would be a bit of a problem. Thus, only the aranea that Zach actually deigned to talk to deleted their memories, and Zach was never overly fond of the giant spiders. Thus, the damage to the integrity of the illusion was minimal in the end. Even better, Zorian didn't have to provide the aranea with anything to make them recover after this. They had their own well-developed system of storing their memories and had lots of practice of integrating stored memories into their minds later, so it shouldn't be a big chore for them to recover quickly.

Zorian was never as thankful for Zach's disinterest in learning about aranean society as he was at this moment. If Zach had known anything about them, he would have known that the only reliable way to make sure they forgot something was to murder them all. Which, admittedly, wouldn't have been that hard to fake, but still. Zorian suspected the aranea would have forever borne a grudge against the boy if they had all collectively been butchered by the guy they were trying to save, even if it was understandable in their current circumstances, and done entirely in pretend fashion.

As for Jornak, the main reason he was trapped in his own private illusion was because Zorian wanted to find all the dead-man switches the guy had scattered all over the place. He knew Jornak would make them suffer from beyond the grave if they just let him die. He needed to find out

what he had in store for them and how to disarm his traps and contingencies.

He tried to simply get their fellow time traveler to simply talk about his plans. It was a good thing he did. He had done a basic search of his memories, of course, but searching someone's memories for information depended on knowing what to look for, and Zorian knew that Jornak was a lot more devious and experienced in this kind of cloak-and-dagger bullshit than he was. It only took a few conversations with Jornak, in various guises, to understand that he would have missed many, many things if he simply tried lifting things out of his mind. However, even this wasn't enough. Jornak had no real friends. His closest emotional attachment was to the damn imperial dagger, of all things. Thus, he was understandably cagey around other people, even when Zorian prodded him with subtle suggestions and emotional manipulation to make him more talkative. Eventually Zorian resorted to messing with Jornak's perception of time, making him believe days or weeks had passed in order to learn what he would have done, and what he expected to happen.

Meanwhile, the invasion of the city was being beaten back all over the city. All of the invasion leaders except the upper echelons of the Cult of the World Dragon were gone now, and they were unable to rally the disparate forces around their leadership. Eventually the higher echelons of the Ibasan forces found out that Quatach-Ichl was no longer present on the battlefield, and sounded a retreat. Iasku Mansion was mostly demolished, but Sudomir had somehow managed to survive the angel's wrath by protecting the core of the mansion through particularly powerful wards. The surviving Ibasans hurriedly gathered around the ruin, after which Sudomir translocated it out of the city.

Annoyingly, Zorian had no option but to let it go. He was too busy to chase after them, his most powerful allies were incapacitated, and the other city defenders couldn't get through the gathered Ibasan forces fast enough. He would later find out that Sudomir translocated his mansion two more times after that, eventually landing on Ulquaan Ibasa, where he was granted refuge by the natives.

Great. If Eldemar had any doubts as to who to blame for the attack, they were unambiguously sure now. Not that Quatach-Ichl, the instigator of the attack, cared about that. If Zorian had learned anything from Jornak's mind, it was that Quatach-Ichl was likely quite happy with this outcome.

Kirielle and Kana were alive and well, despite the attack on them. Zorian breathed a big sigh of relief when he found that out. Sadly, Kosjenka joined Mrva in the hall of heroic golems by sacrificing herself to save his little sister. An event that caused many tears on Kirielle's part and prompted Zorian to consider if he should perhaps delete her memories of the whole incident and quietly replace Kosjenka's remains with an unharmed copy...

...but no, that was a bad idea. He shouldn't be that casual with memory wipes. And besides, Kirielle didn't know anything about golem theory, so she shouldn't see anything wrong with Zorian 'fixing' Kosjenka into pristine condition.

Overall, things had turned out great. He had to give away the imperial orb to get rid of Oganj, Quatach-Ichl and Sudomir were still alive and would probably make moves against them in the future, and there was a high chance of another continental war brewing in the near future, but it could have been worse. His friends and family were all alive, Zach was alive, and he was alive. The only thing that kind of worried him was that he found Silverlake's empty skin back where he left her fighting with her original self. It was clear that the spider not just killed her, but *ate* her as well.

Which was strange. Grey hunters primarily ate powerful magical creatures. To his knowledge, they thought humans tasted *vile*. The flesh wasn't magical enough for their tastes. Why was Silverlake eaten, then? Was it because of all the primordial essence Silverlake's body contained?

There was no trace of the grey hunter anywhere in the city, and Zorian had pretty much total coverage of everything on the surface at the moment. He had a sinking feeling the spider had fled into the local underground.

Which meant he had just let an immensely powerful magical predator – one that had recently gorged upon a great amount of primordial essence, no less – escape into the one place where there was absolutely no hope of tracking it down.

He sighed. There was no use in worrying about this now. The deadline had come and passed. Zach's contract with the angels had harmlessly dissolved, and Jornak's death pact claimed his life in a gruesome fashion, his own flesh turning against itself like a country in the throes of a civil war. Observing with his more magical senses, Zorian noticed that even the man's mind and soul were seemingly tearing themselves apart. After a few seconds of disgusting writhing and convulsing, Jornak simply collapsed in a pile of unsightly goo.

Zorian opened his eyes, letting the spell finally collapse. He breathed a sigh of relief. He was beyond exhausted. He and his simulacra had maintained a... fake illusionary world... two of them, actually... and had done that for more than a day, without rest or sleep.

He was no longer alone, however. He had moved to a secluded, secure space with Zach and Jornak in tow, but it wasn't really secret to Daimen, Xvim, and Alanic. All three were currently watching him with grave, vaguely unfriendly expressions. Xvim was sitting on a nearby chair, a small book in his hand. Alanic was standing in the center of the room, his hands folded over his chest. And Daimen was leaning against the nearby doorway, blocking the exit and juggling the imperial dagger that Zorian had removed from Jornak's possessions.

All three were also clutching memory crystals in one of their hands. Zorian doubted they had absorbed more than a small fraction of the memories stored in them, but they probably knew enough to understand the general situation.

"We need to talk," Alanic said blandly.

Rather than answering, Zorian ripped out a paper from a nearby notebook and started furiously writing on it while explaining the situation to all three of them. A whole bunch of Jornak's contingencies were about to activate relatively soon, and they had to be dealt with as soon as possible. His rushed scribblings were meant to be a reminder if they forgot some of the details he was telling them.

The three people in front of him seemed to be part annoyed and part curious about his rushed explanation, but they were polite enough to stay silent and listen while he was talking. It didn't take long, anyway – only a handful of Jornak's plans were so very time critical. His list of instructions done, Zorian stumbled to his feet, his limbs not working properly due to the long period of disuse, and thrust the written list straight into Alanic's confused hands before falling to the floor, unconscious.

He was Zorian Kazinski, third son of a minor merchant family from Cirin, accidental time traveler, and quite possibly the most powerful human mind mage in all of Altazia...

...and he had won.

And now it was time to finally get some rest.

Epilogue

Epilogue

Zorian's eyes abruptly shot open as a sharp pain erupted from his stomach. His whole body convulsed, buckling against the object that fell on him, and suddenly he was wide awake, not a trace of drowsiness in his mind.

"Good morning, brother!" an annoyingly cheerful voice sounded right on top of him. "Morning, morning, *MORNING!!!*"

Panic. Zorian's awakened mind felt nothing but pure, all-consuming terror. After all of his efforts, all the sacrifices he and people around him had made, it was all for naught. He was back where it all began, in his room in Cirin, about to start his third year at the academy...

...then the moment passed, and the nightmare dissolved.

The room around him was wrong. This wasn't his room back in Cirin. He was in Cyoria, in the room he shared with Kirielle, at Imaya's place.

And the little devil was currently still sprawled across his stomach, kicking her legs up in the air and giving him a mischievous, expectant look. His panicked reaction didn't seem to worry her. If anything, she seemed quite pleased with herself for managing to scare him so thoroughly.

"Kirielle... why?" Zorian asked, resisting the urge to sigh.

"What do you mean?" she asked innocently. "I always wake you up like this?"

"Not with those exact words you don't," Zorian grumbled. "He put you up to this, didn't he?"

"Zach said it was going to be funnier this way," Kirielle admitted, propping her chin with her hands. She gave him a toothy smile.

Zorian flipped her over the edge of the bed in response, causing her to fall to the floor with a silent thud.

The little imp had expected the reaction, and made no sound in response, simply scrambling to her feet immediately afterwards.

"It's been a month already," Zorian grumbled. "Just when is he planning to stop with this petty revenge crap?"

It wasn't like Zorian had *wanted* to deceive him like that. He'd done that to save Zach's life, for heaven's sake!

Well. At least he hadn't gotten another punch in the face for that...

He chased Kirielle out of the room and got dressed, idly listening to the sounds of the house and its tenants as he did. Imaya's place was very busy these days, nothing like the quiet household Zorian had gotten used to during the time loop. The academy dorms had suffered heavy damage during the invasion, both in the initial artillery bombardment and the fighting that had followed afterwards, which meant that a lot of students were suddenly homeless and in dire need of alternate accommodations. Since Imaya's house had survived the invasion mostly intact, it was soon filled to capacity and even slightly beyond. Zorian didn't really like it, but the situation was what it was, and there was nothing he could do to change it.

At least Kirielle had plenty of people to talk to these days.

After composing himself a little, he left the room and entered the kitchen, where a dozen or so people had already gathered, some of them still eating breakfast, and some of them pondering a stack of textbooks and papers arranged around them.

Most of the people gathered here were his classmates. Akoja, Raynie, Kiana, Kopriva, Kael, Naim, Edwin, and Estin were all gathered around the small table that was far too small to really accommodate them all. They immediately stopped what they were doing and turned to look at him as he entered, calling out greetings. Ilsa, who was sitting at a relatively prominent place at the table, was flipping through a stack of papers on her clipboard, and simply gave him a curt nod, before returning to her task. Nochka, Kirielle, and Kana were on the floor, playing with dolls and getting into everyone's way from time to time. Zorian had no idea why they felt the need to play their games here, instead of somewhere more private, but nobody else was shooing them away, so he wouldn't do it either.

As for Imaya, the landlord of this place, she was working around the kitchen while humming a happy tune to herself, looking like she was having the time of her life, despite the current overcrowded state of her home. Zorian knew she was getting paid for this, but he still couldn't quite understand her good mood. Some people were just weird.

After a few seconds of looking around, Zorian suddenly realized there were no free chairs left anymore.

"This is what happens when you wake up late," Kopriva helpfully explained to him.

"There should be some free chairs in the next room," Imaya added, stirring the contents of some giant pot, not even bothering to turn around and look at him.

"You should probably grab a nightstand or a wooden board or something, just so you have a surface to write on," Edwin told him. "The table is a little crowded right now."

Resisting a sigh, Zorian went about securing himself a chair and then carving out a place for himself at the table. This took a considerable amount of pushing and arguing, but eventually he managed to squeeze himself between Kael and Naim. Imaya immediately plopped down a plate of food in front of him and immediately walked away, not giving Zorian a chance to tell her he wasn't hungry.

"You really need to learn how to be more assertive in life," Naim advised from his left.

Zorian raised his eyebrow at him.

"Weren't you the one who just tried to chase me away from your side of the table?" Zorian asked.

"Well, yeah, you need to be more assertive towards others, not me," Naim responded, laughing slightly.

"Whatever. Where is Zach?" Zorian asked.

"Your friend already left," Ilsa said, glancing up from her clipboard for a moment. "He said he had a court meeting scheduled soon, and couldn't wait for you to wake up."

"He said you already know how to contact him," Kael added.

Zorian nodded slowly, giving the food in front of him a tentative bite. After their victory over Jornak and the invasion, Zach had wasted no time in filing a lawsuit against his caretaker. Zorian had advised him back then to wait a little for the circumstances to calm down a little, but Zach would have none of it. This decision had both positive and negative consequences. On one hand, the spotlight was still firmly focused on the failed invasion of the city, meaning Tesen was free to try and shut the whole thing down without too much outcry from the public. On the other hand, this was probably the worst time for Tesen to be accused of something like this, considering the royals were looking for someone to publically make an example out of, due to the debacle that had happened and all.

Zorian mostly stayed out of the whole thing. He trusted Zach to know what he was doing. He claimed he didn't need any help with this, and he had clearly been prepared for this a long time.

"Aren't you worried, at least a little?" Akoja said, frowning. "I mean, Tesen is a powerful man, and he surely knows you and Zach are friends. What if he decides to get back at him by going after you?"

Zorian smiled slightly. He found it interesting how pretty much none of their classmates thought Zach was lying about his accusations. He had expected that at least some of them would have thought Zach was making things up, but even Akoja, who definitely wasn't a fan of Zach, absolutely believed him when he publically stated Tesen had robbed him of his family legacy.

"I'm not worried," Zorian said. "This is the worst time to try and attack people in Cyoria. The whole city is crawling with soldiers and investigators. Tesen would have to be mad to go after me right now."

This was not entirely true, of course. Tesen had already tried to send people to scout Imaya's house and see if they could ambush him when he left the place, but these people had simply vanished into thin air before their mission was done.

After that, Zach's caretaker hadn't bothered sending anyone else.

"Indeed," Ilsa said. "Plus, I had the academy secure this house with additional wards, since we are effectively using it as a makeshift classroom. Anyone trying to infiltrate the place is in for an unpleasant surprise. And with that, I propose we start our usual lesson now. As you can imagine, an alteration expert like me is in high demand during this time of reconstruction, so I can only spare so much time here."

Everyone immediately gave their assent for the idea, some more enthusiastically than others, after which Ilsa started giving short demonstrations to the gathered students. Even Kirielle, Nochka, and Kana paid close attention when Ilsa was casting spells, not having many opportunities to witness magic spells like this in their daily lives.

The academy was temporarily closed. It had been closed for a month now, ever since the failed invasion. Not only had many sections of the academy been damaged in the attack, but most of the teachers had been recruited by the city to help deal with the aftermath as well. The place was scheduled to reopen in a week or so, if only to stop angry parents from demanding the money they had paid for attendance fees back, but for now, the student body was told to simply wait.

A large number of students did just that, treating the whole thing as a sort of vacation, but not everyone was willing to simply waste a whole month or more when they had already paid to learn how to do magic. These students self-organized into study groups and continued their education on their own.

Zorian was one of the people leading the charge on such things, at least when it came to his own class. He knew there were at least a handful of people in there that were serious about becoming a proper mage, and finding a study group that was not just an excuse to play cards every other night or some egoist's attempt to gather underlings was bound to be hard. This sort of initiative was admittedly not something Zorian was used to, and he had been absent from classes for most of the previous month, so his announcement that he was starting a study group had definitely raised some eyebrows. However, the fact that he had managed to talk Ilsa and some of the other teachers into occasionally giving demonstrations and lectures – something few others could boast about – made others more willing to trust him.

The fact Akoja had decided to give up on her own study group in favor of choosing his own probably helped too. Akoja was well known for her

serious attitude and work ethic – if she was willing to join Zorian’s group, he probably wasn’t just messing around.

He even got quite a few requests from older students and students from other classes about joining the group, though Zorian had to refuse most of them due to time constraints. He didn’t want to spend most of his time teaching people and managing groups. It just wasn’t something he was seriously interested in.

“I don’t understand what I’m doing wrong with this spell,” Kael complained.

Zorian glanced at the morlock and at the open book where the spell was detailed.

“You’re not doing anything wrong,” Zorian told him. “You’re casting the spell perfectly. Your shaping skills simply aren’t good enough to pull it off. I can show you some more shaping exercises if you want.”

“Great,” Kael mumbled. “More shaping exercises. You really remind me of that Xvim guy you occasionally bring here to teach us.”

“That guy is his mentor, so it kind of makes sense,” Kopriva said. “Based on what I heard about the guy, you kind of have to go all the way with your shaping skills if you’re assigned to him.”

“As if Zorian is suffering here,” Edwin grumbled. He was, like Zorian, one of the people who had been assigned to Xvim against his will, and still hadn’t gotten over it. Probably because he really only cared about magic if it could help him with golem making, and shaping skills weren’t high on the list of requisites for that. “He’s probably the only guy in the history of our academy that likes the guy and what he’s teaching.”

“You’d be surprised to know how many people speak highly of Mr. Chao’s teaching skills,” Ilsa remarked with a teasing smile. “Though most people don’t appreciate his genius, there are always one or two students that have what it takes to thrive under his tutelage. He didn’t keep his job at the academy all these years for nothing, you know?”

“We understand he’s good at what he does, but does he really have to be so mean about it?” Kiana said, pouting. “The last time he was here he said my shaping skills are ‘completely inadequate’. I’m pretty sure my shaping skills are average at worst.”

“Actually, they’re very much above average now, and it’s almost entirely due to Xvim pushing you further and further every time he comes here,” Zorian pointed out.

“Teacher’s pet,” Kiana accused him with a huff.

He was pretty sure Kiana was coming here only because Raynie was too, not because she was honestly so dedicated to improving her magic skills... but to her credit, she really did try to keep up with the rest of the group, unwilling to be left behind. Thus, whenever Xvim criticized her and pushed her to try for more, she reluctantly did her best to rise to the challenge.

She didn’t appreciate it right now, but Zorian was sure she would eventually understand that Xvim was doing her a huge favor. Most people had to pay a fortune to get personal instructions from an archmage.

After a while, Ilsa excused herself and left. The group continued interacting and helping each other for a while after that, but eventually people started leaving and the group was becoming smaller. The table, so crowded and busy earlier in the morning, started to clear up and fall silent.

In the end, the only ones left sitting there were Zorian and Raynie. Zorian had originally wanted to leave as well, but he could see from the glances Raynie was sending him and the emotions radiating off of her that she wanted to talk to him, so he remained patient and stayed in his seat.

The invasion had been thwarted. Panaxeth remained sealed. There was no more urgent danger constantly occupying his attention. He could finally waste an hour or two of his life and not feel bad about it in the back of his head.

“I just realized it’s been a whole month, and I never thanked you for helping me find my little brother,” Raynie eventually said, her tone hesitant.

Zorian didn’t know what to say to that. Since she hadn’t mentioned any of this in all this time, he kind of figured she wanted to pretend the whole thing never happened.

“Sorry,” she said, fiddling with her hands awkwardly. “I know this is very late and-”

“I don’t hold it against you,” Zorian assured her. “I didn’t do much, really. I just put you in contact with the right people. You did the rest, by organizing the other shifters into a rescue mission.”

“You already heard about that?” she asked, surprised. Then she shook her head. “Wait, of course you heard about that, what am I even saying? After what I’ve seen that evening, it would be a bigger surprise if you didn’t know anything about what happened.”

“I hear you rescued your brother successfully,” Zorian remarked.

“The cat shifters and pigeon shifters rescued my brother successfully,” she corrected him. “I just helped the police contact them and talk them into helping me. Then I just stood by the side and waited to see if they would succeed. Though yes, the newspapers have been crediting me for the whole thing. The city police insisted I should be the public face of the whole operation. I don’t really understand it.”

What was there to understand? She was a beautiful teenage girl with an emotional story of trying to save her little brother. The police probably

didn't want to release details about what was really going on before Eldemar's forces finished their investigation, and this was a nice way of distracting the public. Plus, it was a story with a happy ending, and Eldemar really loved pushing those to the forefront right now.

He didn't say that out loud, of course.

"I'm pretty sure talking those two groups of shifters into cooperating wasn't easy at all, so don't put yourself down so much," Zorian told her. "That aside, I get the feeling you're not really mentioning this because you're bothered by the newspaper exposure. What's got you so depressed?"

"I'm not depressed, it's just... my family has invited me to come back home," she admitted with a sigh.

"Ah," Zorian nodded. He paused for a second, considering. "Is this a problem? You were instrumental in saving your younger brother, no? They should give you a hero's welcome."

"They might," she admitted. "Or maybe they'll accuse me of overstepping my boundaries when I promised our tribe's help in exchange for help in the rescue mission. I really don't know what's going to happen when I get there, and it scares me."

Zorian was silent.

"I don't know why I'm telling you this," she admitted after a while. "It's not like I expect you to help. You've done more than enough already. I guess I just wanted to complain to someone other than Kiana for a change. She's getting a little annoyed with me lately, I think. She thinks being praised in the newspapers is great, and that I'm being a baby."

"The newspapers are using you as a distraction and would turn on you in a second if it suited their purposes, so it's good you're not letting it get to your head," Zorian remarked. "Still, I don't think you need to worry. I bet your family also doesn't know what's going to happen when you get there. They probably just want to see where they stand with you, since you surprised them so badly."

Further conversation was interrupted by a large buzzing sound from a stone disk tied around Zorian's waist. Zorian glanced at it, somewhat annoyed. It was a communication device House Aope had given him so they could contact him, though Zorian hardly thought it deserved to be called a device. It was just a stone that vibrated when told to by a second stone the Aope were in possession of, and did nothing else. Rather than convey useful information, the stone disk merely told him that House Aope representatives wanted to see him as soon as possible. He badly wanted to make *real* communication stones for this kind of use – something small and discreet and capable of facilitating actual two-way telepathy between holders – but doing that would be extremely suspicious and attention grabbing.

"I'm going to have to cut this meeting short," he told Raynie.

"The aranea?" Raynie guessed.

Zorian nodded.

"I still can't believe that's what you've been doing this past month you've been absent from classes," Raynie said. "Learning mind magic from giant underground spiders..."

"There was no other way," Zorian said. "My empathy was running out of control and they were the first ones to realize what was happening, and stepped up to help me. I'm really grateful for their help."

Sadly, although Zach and Zorian had been successful in keeping their involvement in the invasion itself a secret, there was no way to keep Zorian's involvement with the aranea a secret. This was because the Cyorian web had no way of hiding itself from Eldemar's authorities in the wake of the invasion, and asked Zorian to help them broker some kind of agreement with the city authorities. A hard task, and one that had given Zorian many headaches during this past month, but thankfully they had the support of Noble House Aope in this endeavor. It would have probably been an impossible task, otherwise. Zorian might be a master mind mage, but there was no way he could compel the entire royal bureaucracy to acknowledge a group of scary telepathic spiders as an ally against their will. Nor would he want to be that forceful, even if it were within his power.

Sadly, this also meant that knowledge of Zorian's innate mind magic was gradually becoming more common. People thought he was a complete beginner at mind magic, yes, but he had already noticed mages starting to raise their mental shields when he was around, and his empathy told him some people were scared of him on sight.

He dreaded to think what would happen if the full extent of his abilities became known.

"Well," said Raynie. "Don't let me keep you from your duties. I should really get going as well."

"I guess I won't be seeing you in our group meetings, then?" Zorian guessed.

"Yes, that was the other thing I wanted to tell you. I knew I was forgetting something," Raynie said. "I'll be travelling home tomorrow, and I will probably stay there until the academy reopens."

"We'll see each other in class, then," Zorian said.

"Hopefully," she agreed.

The two of them then each left their own way, and the kitchen was once again empty and quiet.

But not for long. Things were always lively at Imaya's place these days.

- break -

Though it was awful to even think so, Akoja had to say that this invasion business was the best thing that had happened to her in quite a while.

She always felt guilty whenever the thought occurred to her. So many people had died, lost their homes, or lost their jobs when their workshops got destroyed, she should really feel sorry for them. And she did! She really did! But it was also an undeniable fact that the immediate aftermath had breathed new purpose into her life, giving her both the clarity about what she wanted in life and opportunities for advancements that she would have otherwise missed.

In the month leading up to the attack of the city, she was lost, and more than a little bitter. She was putting so much work into her studies, into being a class representative and a model student, yet she felt it was all for naught. Two years of hard work had not given her any special position or advanced opportunities, it only made other students resent her and look down on her. Sometimes, when she sat alone in her dorm room, she couldn't help but wonder if she was just wasting her time...

Then the attack happened, and it was terrifying. She had only seen a fraction of the fighting, but what she had seen made her feel like a powerless ant, completely at the mercy of greater forces that could sweep her up without really trying. When the dust had settled and Akoja looked at the shattered remains of her old dorm, all of her belongings destroyed, she did not feel anger or despair at the money she had lost or the time and effort she would have to spend to replace it all. Instead, she felt a fire ignite within her, urging her to throw herself into her studies and make sure this kind of thing couldn't happen ever again. When war came for her again, she wanted to be ready.

And war was definitely coming. Everyone knew it. Akoja wasn't the most avid follower of news, but she had read enough newspaper articles and listened to enough rumors to know that Eldemar was definitely going to launch a punitive expedition at Ulquaan Ibasa in the coming months. Even though it risked leaving Eldemar vulnerable to opportunistic attacks by Falkrinea and Sulamnon, pride wouldn't allow Eldemar to swallow its anger and let this go. The only thing people were unsure of was how big the retaliation would really be, and how far Eldemar was willing to go to avenge Cyoria.

In any case, if Akoja had been on her own, perhaps her newfound drive would have eventually pattered out in the coming weeks, and she would have once again begun questioning herself. A lot of people were fleeing the city these days, especially students like her and workers who otherwise lived elsewhere and only came to Cyoria to make money. A couple of other girls from Korsa she occasionally talked to had already transferred themselves to other academies elsewhere in the kingdom, their parents having been spooked by the attack and fearful another one would follow in the wake of the first. It was, after all, still unclear how Ulquaan Ibasa had been able to strike so deep into Eldemar territory, so who was to say it couldn't happen again?

Akoja's parents had also wanted to transfer her elsewhere, but she had refused. Cyoria may be dangerous, but she had to stay.

Because Zorian was here.

It wasn't *just* because she had a crush on him, either. She talked to people, and it was obvious that the study group he had organized was the best one currently out there. He had teachers and even outside mages occasionally coming to provide lessons, which only one other study group had managed to do, and he himself was clearly very skilled for his age. He had an uncanny ability to notice the problems people were having, and how to fix them. Akoja had compared her progress during this past month with two other girls that had paid considerable money in order to be allowed in one of the 'better' study groups, and was shocked to realize she was handily beating them. The comparison wasn't even close.

She didn't know what to think about that. One of the things she really liked about Zorian was that he was like her – a regular guy from a commoner family that tried really hard and was serious about his studies. She had always been jealous of big name students who came from noble families, or had secret magic and bloodlines that gave them an edge over the competition, so it was refreshing to see someone she could empathize with. Even though he could be a little unfriendly and tactless, she understood. She herself was often described as bitchy and joyless, so they had common ground there.

But this new Zorian made her question if she really knew the guy. He was more skilled and well-connected than she imagined him to be, and apparently even had innate mind magic ability to draw upon. So unfair. Why didn't she have a famous older brother and a secret bloodline? How was a normal girl like her even supposed to compete with that?

But, she eventually decided, it didn't matter. Maybe her reasons for liking him were kind of misguided, but she still liked him regardless. And he was helping her get better. So she had to stay in the city.

It would have been better if she hadn't stated it quite like *that* in the letter she had sent to her parents, though, because now they wanted to meet him. She knew her father – he was definitely going to come over to Cyoria and confront Zorian on his own if she didn't manage to defuse the situation. Hopefully her last letter had reached them in time...

Still, that was thankfully a concern for another day. Today, she was simply going shopping around the city with Kopriva and Kael. All of her possessions had gotten destroyed in the invasion, after all, and she still hadn't had the chance to fully replenish them. Kopriva was in a similar

position to her, while Kael had apparently never had much stuff to begin with, as he had previously tended to constantly move around with Kana before coming to Cyoria, meaning until recently he owned very few things.

Neither Kopriva nor Kael was someone that Akoja would have wanted to associate with before the attack. Kopriva came from a family of criminals, and Kael was a morlock. Neither were people that a lady in good standing such as her would want to be seen with. However, strange times made for strange bedfellows. She had gotten to know these two over the past month, and they were alright, she supposed.

“Wait, so Zach bought you an entire lab?” Kopriva asked incredulously, looking at Kael.

“Well, a damaged, recently abandoned building that can be repurposed into a lab. But yes,” Kael nodded happily. “Now I can finally stop scaring Miss Kuroshka with the experiments I do in her basement.”

“Honestly, you were scaring me and the other tenants as well,” Kopriva told him. “Alchemy experiments shouldn’t be done right below where other people are sleeping, even if the place is warded. Still, I’m surprised Zach was willing to shell out that kind of money for you. Even if it’s been damaged in the attack, a building in Cyoria is still bound to be expensive as hell.”

“A lot of people are selling property in Cyoria these days,” Kael noted. “Prices have dropped considerably.”

“I’m pretty sure it was Zorian who talked Zach into spending money on this,” Akoja said, sighing internally.

She didn’t like Zach. His recent reveal that his caretaker was stealing from him made Akoja feel sorry for him a little... but only a little. He was the embodiment of everything she was jealous of when it came to Eldemar’s mage elite, except he didn’t even try to make something of himself, content to live the life of a clown and a wastrel. She hoped Zorian, as his new friend, would help him clean up his act, but she wasn’t holding her breath.

“Probably,” Kael agreed. “I was surprised when people told me they only became friends over the summer holidays. They seem like they have been friends their whole lives.”

“Yeah, I first thought Zorian was just taking advantage of Zach to get at his money, but these days I kind of doubt it,” Kopriva said. “He has a serious source of cash of his own, I can tell.”

“From what?” Akoja asked curiously. How could a teenager like Zorian have ‘serious money’ unless someone gifted it to him?

“Sales,” Kopriva said. “I don’t know what he’s selling, but it must be pretty rare and profitable because people have been asking about him a lot, trying to get in contact with him.”

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“You mean... in your circles?” Akoja asked worriedly.

“Yes, in ‘my circles’,” Kopriva laughed at her. “I’m sorry, but your crush isn’t as clean as you imagine him to be.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Akoja told her quickly. “We’re just colleagues.”

“Yeah, sure,” Kopriva rolled her eyes at her.

“So, I hate to interrupt your conversation,” Kael suddenly said, “but have any of you recently found a book... or a collection of notes, maybe... in your room?”

“What kind of book?” Akoja asked curiously. What was the boy even talking about?

“A book you’ve definitely never bought, and notebooks you’ve definitely never written,” Kael said. “Just... sitting there on your night stand, full of magical secrets that seem almost as if they were specifically tailored to you, and you alone...”

There was a second of silence as the two girls processed this statement.

“That seriously happened?” Kopriva asked incredulously. “You found a book and some notebooks in your room-”

“My locked room,” Kael clarified. “My locked and *warded* room that Ilsa later confirmed hadn’t been broken into.”

“-and they contained a gift of magic specifically tailored for you?” Kopriva finished. “You damn morlock bastard, first you have a rich guy buy you your very own alchemy lab, and now this? How are you so damn lucky!?”

“The most disturbing thing,” Kael said hesitantly, ignoring Kopriva’s outburst, “is that some of the passages use the exact same wording, codes, and symbols that I do. This happens over and over again, to the point I don’t think anyone can reasonably fake it.”

“What are you saying?” Akoja asked, not really understanding.

“It’s my writing style,” Kael said. “I have several years’ worth of alchemical and medical research, seemingly made by my hand, but no memory of

writing any of it. And I don't know what to think about that."

The two girls stayed silent. Their first instinct was to deny the idea as completely absurd.

But these were mad times they were living in, and nothing was too absurd to fully dismiss. So they just stayed silent and filed the topic in the back of their heads, put aside but not forgotten, and went about their shopping in peace.

- break -

Elayer Inid was the special investigator sent by the crown of Eldemar to find out what exactly had happened in Cyoria on the day of the attack, and he was not happy. Not happy at all.

It wasn't just about a foreign power having the ability to strike deep into Eldemar's territory at their leisure. It wasn't just about the rampant betrayal among Eldemar's highest ranks that had allowed this attack to progress as far as it had.

It was about the fact that *someone* had stopped the invasion and saved the city, and it wasn't anyone that Elayer recognized.

Regular people often talked about mysterious organizations and enigmatic hermits moving about in the shadows of polite society, but the truth was that organizations that held real power and powerful individuals didn't spring out of nowhere. It took a lot of resources and connections to raise a top tier mage, and even more to build an organization around one. By the time these rising powers were able and willing to exert their will and influence on the world around them, people like Elayer will have already noticed them and learned who they were. When mysterious events like the one that had happened a month ago in Cyoria occurred, investigators were often unsure who exactly was behind them, especially if the perpetrators had been thorough and erased all the evidence. However, they always had an idea who *could have* done it, even if they had no proof or couldn't narrow down all the possibilities to one actor.

At the moment, though, Elayer had plenty of evidence. He had witness testimonials, magical recordings, field reports from soldiers and mages that had been present when the attack took place, and even material evidence.

And all of it was telling him that this couldn't have been done by anyone he knew about. Even more disturbingly, even after he had consulted with some of his foreign sources, he was no closer to finding a likely candidate. No one had any idea who could have done this. It was as if these 'saviors' had materialized straight out of thin air, and vanished just as suddenly afterwards.

Elayer stood in front of the wreckage of a large golem, hands folded behind his back. To his left, two researchers shuffled uncomfortably in place, hesitating to speak.

"Well?" he asked them impatiently. "Have you identified the maker of this thing?"

"None of the known golem makers produced this, Mister Inid," one of the researcher said after fumbling with his clothes a little and clearing his throat. "Although the animation core has been shattered beyond recovery, enough of it survived that we have been able to make some startling discoveries. We are very sure the established golem makers would never make such a thing."

"Hmm? Why is that?" Elayer asked, suddenly curious. Honestly, he thought the golem wreckage would bring him no answers, so this was a pleasant surprise.

"The spell formulas inscribed on the animation core are completely unprotected," the other researcher said. "No codes, no misdirection, no attempts to shroud the method of creation at all. Usually artificers spend almost as much time trying to hide how they made something as they do making designs for it. Golem makers especially so. But there is no evidence of that here - whoever made this thing cared only about pure efficiency."

"Are you saying we could potentially replicate this thing?" Elayer asked.

Now wouldn't that be something... he had heard reports about how good these golems were, and it was apparently something on a whole different level from your typical combat golem. If they could duplicate one of these, then this would be a huge gain.

When Elayer saw the two researchers share a knowing look with each other, however, he knew it wouldn't be that simple.

"The issue is that the animation core has been totally shattered, and some parts of the spell formula inscribed on it are missing. Even after we compared it with the remains of other golem wrecks we have recovered from the city, we are still missing about 10% of the design."

Just 10%?

"And you can't fill in the blanks?" Elayer asked curiously.

"Heavens no," the first researcher said, bursting into laughter. "The design for this thing is one of the most complex things I've ever seen in my life. Everything slots together perfectly, and even the slightest mistake would make everything collapse on itself. And considering how expensive the materials for the construction of this kind of core are, experimentation would be hellishly expensive. Never mind 10%, even a 1% gap would make this design completely unviable. Unless we managed to find an intact golem, the only thing this is useful for is for serving as inspiration."

"Alright," Elayer said, turning away from the wreckage and walking off. The two researchers quickly followed after him. "What is this about some

mysterious books that I'm hearing about?"

"Ah, you mean the mysterious gifts some people have been getting?" The second researcher asked. Elayer nodded. "We have only managed to recover a handful of them from the people they were given to. Rumors of us confiscating them have spread among people fast, as has the fact they are of no danger to the recipient, so people no longer report them to us. But from the few we have in our hands, they seem to be full of novel magic specifically tailored for the recipient."

"If I may make a suggestion, it might be prudent to return the books we've confiscated to the people they were given to," the first researcher said. "We've already copied the contents, and it might motivate people to let us take a look at the stuff they're currently hiding if they see they're eventually going to get it back."

"I'll think about it," Elayer said, not thinking much of it. He didn't like the idea of someone handing over magical secrets to people like that, not at all. Plus, he had suspicions their mysterious 'saviors' were behind this as well. Those 'gifts' were evidence and he was keeping them, at least so long as his investigation lasted.

Infuriatingly, said investigation was encountering a lot of unexpected obstacles. The Triumvirate Church had clearly been heavily involved in the battle – there was a giant angel battling a dragon mage in the skies of Cyoria, for heaven's sake! – but they refused to let him interrogate the priesthood involved, and the crown was reluctant to offend them. The church had been spectacularly successful recently, providing valuable help and information on necromancer hideouts, demon summoner bases, and some of the more awful criminal groups. Elayer had no idea how they had gotten so much critical information about Eldemar's criminal underbelly, but they had, and this unfortunately meant they currently had an upper hand over him and his investigation.

At the same time, Elayer was having trouble keeping the funds and manpower for the investigation going. Eldemar's attention had been stretched very thin lately. They had an invasion of Ulquaan Ibasa to organize, complicated heavily by the fact the Ibassans had somehow managed to take over Fort Oroklo without Eldemar realizing it. They were throwing a lot of money and manpower at Cyoria in order to get the city up and running again in order to make a show of strength and lift up morale, and these efforts often clashed greatly with Elayer's own investigation into what had transpired there. Sulamnon, Falkinea, and even many smaller countries were stirring, trying to see just how badly the kingdom had been hurt and whether they could fish in troubled waters while Eldemar's forces were distracted elsewhere. And finally, there was that permanent gate that linked Eldemar with the jungles of Koth, which had everyone and their mother excited about the incredible opportunities this presented. The gate was clearly related to the Ibasan invasion somehow, but Elayer and his men were not allowed to examine it closely for fear that they would destroy the precious, irreplaceable, intercontinental gate with their tampering.

Bah. And then his superiors complain he has no results. Of course he had no results! Just what did they expect when they constantly keep taking his money and resources, and don't let him touch things or question people?

But Elayer was patient. His foes may have won this round, but he knew what to look for now, and everyone slipped up sooner or later. It may take a year, or even a decade, but they were bound to make a mistake.

And when they did, Elayer would be there, and he would be ready.

- break -

Daimen Kazinski was having a stressful, but very exciting month. From the day he had woken up in an unknown room in Cyoria with an entire month of his life missing from his memory, it had been a non-stop wild ride of crazy reveals and maddening complications. It was annoying, but truth be told, he kind of enjoyed it. A safe, boring life had never been something he coveted. He somewhat resented his little brother for wiping away a month of his life to save his friend, but he understood. He would have done the same in his place, probably.

At the very least, Daimen could safely say he had profited handsomely from this whole time loop business. Not only had Zorian gifted him a veritable treasure of research and notes he had apparently made for himself during this 'time loop', but he also indirectly allowed the Taramatula to seize the permanent gate linking Koth to Eldemar.

A permanent intercontinental gate... the sheer possibilities of that thing were breathtaking to consider. Eldemar's forces quickly moved to secure their side of the gate, but they didn't try to push through it to monopolize the whole thing. It would be too easy for the Taramatula to simply destroy their side of gate back in Koth, and thus ruin this whole thing for everyone. Thus, the Kingdom of Eldemar and the Taramatula now found themselves in possession of a permanent dimensional link between continents. Both sides were positively salivating at the potential profits and other benefits involved, and since Daimen was closely connected to both of said parties, it was often up to him to act as a bridge and negotiator between these two sides.

And then there was Zorian... his little brother, the time traveler. Well, it wasn't *real* time travel, but it may as well be, from Daimen's point of view. He had beheld a doomed future, and then he had traveled back to their own world to stop it, and save as many people as possible in the process.

And in order to pull it off, he'd had to kill the original Zorian, and steal his body for his own uses.

Daimen would have liked to say he was conflicted about this information. Zorian was right: in a very real sense, his little brother had been murdered and replaced by an imposter. He should have been outraged. He should have been deeply disturbed by the implications, just like Zorian himself clearly was.

But he wasn't. Maybe it was because the whole situation was so utterly ridiculous and it was hard to really know what to feel. Maybe it was

because, by Zorian's own admission, the original Zorian hated him something fierce. Or perhaps it was because he damn well knew that if he had been in Zorian's position, he would have murdered his own original without a shred of hesitation and thought nothing of it. All he knew was that he'd simply told Zorian that everything would be fine, and that he shouldn't worry about it. He had only done what he had to.

Maybe it was just Daimen imagining things, but he thought he'd seen a small flash of gratitude in his brother's eyes when he said that. He hadn't expected the big bad time traveler to actually care about his opinion that much. Interesting.

Now, here they were – every Kazinski sibling gathered together. Daimen, Zorian, Kirielle, and Fortov were all standing next to one another at Cyoria's train station, waiting for the next train to arrive.

Their parents were coming to Cyoria.

It was kind of funny, actually. If his parents had arrived to Koth as planned, they could have been here way earlier. Daimen would have arranged for them to step through the brand new interdimensional gate linking Koth to Eldemar, and they would have been home before you knew it. Alas, they'd actually heard about the attack on Cyoria when they had almost reached their destination, and decided to immediately switch ships and turn back. As a consequence, they had spent almost an entire month in transit before they were able to return to Eldemar.

Sighing inwardly, Daimen noticed that no one except him looked actually excited about that fact. Zorian looked bored and disinterested, clearly intending to just get this over with as quickly and painlessly as possible. Fortov seemed nervous and unsure how to behave. His *other* younger brother had been acting strangely ever since Daimen had evacuated him from Cyoria along with Kirielle, and Daimen had no idea what was going on in his head at the moment, but he clearly wasn't looking forward to this meeting. As for Kirielle, she was playing around with the fancy snow globe Zorian had bought for her while they had been waiting for the train to arrive, but Daimen could see she was extremely nervous under this disinterested facade.

He should have brought Orissa with him, he lamented. He had originally left her behind because he didn't want to provoke his parents in this particular meeting, since they were bound to be extremely distraught already, but now he wondered if her presence would have been a positive thing instead.

It was too late for such regrets, however. The train soon entered the station and began to disembark; it wasn't long before Daimen spotted their parents.

They weren't carrying much in the way of luggage. Daimen winced internally. It made sense, since they must have dropped off most of their stuff when they had stopped by in Cirin. Still, the fact they were carrying practically nothing meant they expected this to be a very short visit. This... was probably going to get unpleasant.

Not long after Daimen had spotted their parents, they also spotted him. The two groups quickly made their way towards one another.

"For heaven's sake, what are you children still doing in this city?" Mother complained the moment they were within earshot.

"Mother—" Daimen tried futilely.

"The whole city was under siege until recently. The academy is *closed*. Why aren't you all back in Cirin already?" she continued. Father was totally silent, simply studying each of them in turn. Once he saw that all of them were unharmed, he seemed to relax a little. Most wouldn't be able to tell, but Daimen was the closest to Father out of all the Kazinski siblings, and could read his little tics pretty well by this point. "Never mind, I'll help you pack your bags and we'll be home by tomorrow."

"What? No we won't," Zorian simply told her in a bored tone of voice.

"Zorian, please let me handle this," Daimen urged in a low tone of voice.

Father gave Zorian a penetrating look for his statement, a gesture that would usually instantly put Zorian on the defensive, but of course, this time traveler Zorian was not bothered by it in the slightest. Zorian didn't talk about family all that much, but Daimen got the notion that Zorian had barely interacted with Mother and Father during the time loop. The two were practically strangers to him, and it showed in his attitude towards them.

That, more than the fact he'd had to kill his original self to be here, greatly disturbed Daimen.

"You seem to have grown some spine in the short time you've been here," Father remarked, still staring intently at Zorian. He didn't say whether this was good or bad, but Daimen knew he thought it was both. He liked when his sons had a firm, decisive attitude, but he also didn't tolerate disrespect towards himself and Mother.

"Zorian is just dedicated to his studies," Daimen hurriedly explained, shooting Zorian a quick look to shut him up. "Just because the academy is closed doesn't mean we're all doing nothing. Zorian is organizing a study group for his class so they can continue studying on their own in private. He even got some of the teachers to help him out."

"But Kirielle—" Mother tried.

"I like it here!" Kirielle immediately exclaimed. "I have friends here and everything!"

“It’s dangerous here,” Mother said firmly. She glanced around the group for a second. “I really regret not taking her with us this time, but what’s done is done. What I don’t understand is how you could all let her stay here under the circumstances. She must be terrified after what happened here!”

“But I’m not!” Kirielle protested.

“Quiet,” Mother barked at her.

Kirielle immediately shrank back.

Out of the corner of his eye, Daimen could see Zorian’s mood immediately worsen. Out of all of them here, Kirielle was the one Zorian cared about the most. Daimen was pretty sure his little brother would be willing to make an enemy out of his whole family for Kirielle’s sake, which was more than a little disturbing. Kirielle was a cute kid, but she could be a massive brat sometimes.

“Anyway, if Zorian is as busy as you say, what about Fortov?” Mother continued. “He could have taken Kirielle back to Cirin just fine, yes?”

“Yes, he’s already a failed student wasting his time and our money here,” Father agreed. “Why not have him be useful for a change?”

“You!” Fortov protested, visibly outraged.

“Am I wrong?” Father challenged.

“Why even send me back here if that’s what you think about me!?” Fortov protested.

“Please, Father,” Daimen urged. “Look, I know Fortov had some issues with his studies lately...”

Father scoffed. Mother sighed. Fortov looked furious, and very bitter.

“...but I have been giving him some help lately, and I’m sure he’ll turn the situation around,” Daimen said.

He had promised to take care of Fortov back in the time loop, apparently. Although Daimen didn’t remember it, he had to admit Fortov needed his help. Certainly Zorian made it clear he didn’t want to do anything with the guy. Apparently, despite having lived in the same city for years, Zorian had never bothered to interact with his brother and figure out how to help him.

For all his newfound maturity, this new Zorian still had clear traces of his old self.

He sure could nurse a grudge, for instance.

“And for how long will that last?” Father challenged. “You’ll be back in Koth soon, I imagine, and then he’ll be back on his own. I doubt one month will make that much difference.”

“Actually, I’m going to be around much more often than I usually am,” Daimen said. “Haven’t you wondered how I got here before you?”

Father and Mother looked at each other.

“Well... I thought maybe you used the teleport network...” tried Mother.

Daimen shook his head with a slight smile.

“Mother, Father... I want to show you something. We can go and meet my fiancée and her family now, if you’re willing. It’s what you were travelling to Koth for, after all.”

“What? They came here with you?” Mother asked incredulously. Daimen understood her disbelief. A single individual like him could conceivably cross large distances on a whim, but a small group of people was a much bigger challenge.

“You’ll see,” Daimen said with a grin. “Things are going to change a lot in the future, I think. Who knows, maybe even your family business might profit out of this.”

Thankfully, this was sufficiently interesting that it distracted Mother and Father from further questioning. He knew that sooner or later, Mother would realize that Zorian had already started teaching Kirielle magic behind her back and that her beloved daughter had been literally attacked by assassins during the invasion – if nothing else because Kirielle was sure to blurt it out at some point – and that once she did, there would be hell to pay. For now, though, the crisis had been aver-

“Zorian! Hey! Zorian!”

Daimen looked at the person calling out to his brother and saw a chubby boy with a happy smile on his face hurrying over. An older, well-dressed man with a mustache followed behind him at a more sedate pace. Probably the boy’s father.

The funny thing about this was that the boy clearly acted like he was Zorian’s friend, but Daimen himself had never seen Zorian interact with him at all. That was interesting to say the least.

"Hey Zorian! I see you already got back, too!" the boy said once he got closer.

"I never left, Ben," Zorian said politely.

Oh, so they did know each other. By this point the boy's father also arrived, though he stayed silent behind the boy. He simply gave a small nod and quiet greeting to the gathered Kazinskis before waiting for his son to calm down.

"You never left? Man, you work too hard," the chubby boy said. "I heard you got roped into being an ambassador for some giant spiders. You got to introduce me to them someday, man. Sounds like one hell of an experience."

There was a long silence as all the Kazinski siblings looked incredibly uncomfortable.

"What?" the boy said, realizing he made some kind of mistake. "What did I say?"

"Giant... spiders?" Mother repeated.

Daimen couldn't help it. He sighed audibly this time.

So much for averting disaster.

- break -

As he walked through the streets of the city and observed the reconstruction efforts around him, Zorian couldn't help but feel satisfied with how things had been going lately. There were a few complications here and there, but the city was slowly beginning to recover, and neither Zach nor Zorian had been implicated in what had happened. The thanks for that partially went to Alanic, due to him running interference on their behalf in exchange for helping him clean up Eldemar of various threats, as well as Eldemar having its hands full with all kinds of problems these days, but mostly it was because they were currently complete unknowns to most people, so nobody even suspected they could have been involved. Zorian sincerely hoped that by the time they were forced to reveal some of their real skills, too much time will have passed, and people would not connect the dots linking them to the events that had taken place during the invasion.

Sadly, his quiet enjoyment of the city was marred by the fact people kept giving him curious and occasionally fearful glances as he passed them, the crowds parting in front of him like he was diseased.

Well, they probably weren't doing that because of him, specifically. Rather, it was because of the giant telepathic spider strutting around the city beside him. Spear of Resolve seemed completely unperturbed by the reception, however, and gave no indication this sort of behavior bothered her. If anything, she seemed immensely pleased with herself that she could walk through the city of Cyoria in broad daylight without being immediately attacked, or met with screams and calls for help. This was already a victory for her and her web.

The aranea hadn't been entirely accepted by the city authorities yet. Legally, they were still considered monsters that had no rights, and there was a portion of Eldemarian leadership that really wanted to just wipe them out or drive them out of the city. However, the aranea had quietly gathered a considerable amount of support in the city over the years, so there was also no shortage of people willing to argue on their behalf. More importantly, even the critics that considered them dangerous telepathic parasites had to admit they were instrumental in preventing the various threats from the lower reaches of the dungeon from menacing the city. Considering the amount of destruction and suffering Cyoria had suffered recently, the last thing it needed was to go through a monster invasion too because some general couldn't tolerate the aranea living beneath the city.

The opinion of regular citizens was, from what Zorian could understand, somewhat mixed. The aranea were said to have helped fight the invaders, which won them some good will, but they were also monsters, spiders, and mind mages. None of those three sounded good to the average citizen. Accordingly, when people saw Spear of Resolve walking down the street like she always belonged there, their reactions were... mixed, to say the least.

Thankfully both Zorian and Tinami were accompanying her on this stroll to make sure no incident occurred. Zorian was certain that Spear of Resolve was resourceful enough to evade any real conflict with frightened citizens, but it was best not to risk things.

"So how are the negotiations going?" Zorian asked Spear of Resolve, not bothering to use telepathy for Tinami's sake. The Aope had managed to secure a magic exchange with the aranea, and Tinami was a part of that, but she wasn't psychic, and her advancement was slow. She wasn't good enough for casual telepathy yet.

"Somewhat disappointingly," Spear of Resolve admitted, using sound magic to speak out loud as well. "We have managed to block any initiative to have us driven out of our homes, but it's unlikely we will get legal recognition any time soon."

"That was always a little naïve of you to expect," Tinami told her. The Aope usually preferred to employ older and more experienced people for these kinds of meetings, but Tinami was the designated heir of the House, and she was throwing her weight around to get personally involved in something that very much interested her. "You're still too much of an unknown for people to trust you, regardless of your help with the invasion."

"Oh, I know that," Spear of Resolve assured her. "I didn't expect a better outcome, so much as hope for it. I have already made the necessary preparations. The colony can retreat from Cyoria on a moment's notice, if it becomes necessary."

"Where would you go, though?" Tinami asked. "I can't imagine there are that many places suitable for your kind."

"We would simply assault one of the smaller webs around the area and steal their home for ourselves," Spear of Resolve said blandly. "The aranean world is a rather brutal place, I'm afraid."

"Oh," Tinami lamely responded.

"I heard your academy is about to reopen soon," Spear of Resolve said, turning slightly towards Zorian before resuming her walk.

"So I'm told," Zorian said. He spotted Taiven and her team in the distance, trailing after a large group of other mages, and gave her a small wave. She waved back, but didn't linger or try to talk to him, simply following after her group so she wouldn't slow them down. She looked happy, though. In the wake of the invasion, there was an urgent demand for combat mages, so she had plenty of job offers and opportunities to prove herself. "If it doesn't start again soon, the parents that didn't get frightened by the attack will start pulling their children out of the academy out of concern they're not getting taught anything."

He looked at Tinami, somewhat curious as to how she was handling that. She had never expressed any desire to join their study group, or any study group for that matter. Was she so focused on this aranean business that she had no problems putting her education on hold for a month, or did she have some kind of alternate arrangements?

"My family has arranged private instruction for me," Tinami admitted, somehow guessing his thoughts. "I mean no offense to your study group and your efforts, but this seemed a better idea."

She was probably right. As good as he was, he wasn't really a teacher and he had a whole group to deal with anyway. Tinami probably would get far better results out of private instructors. It kind of made him wonder why her family had even sent her to the academy in the first place, if they could just hire a bunch of private instructors for her. Was it too expensive? Did they just want her to socialize with people? Hmm...

"I have a favor to ask of you, then," Spear of Resolve told Zorian. "I've made some arrangements with the academy to let Novelty attend a few of your classes as an observer. I'd like you to keep an eye on her and stop her from getting herself into more trouble than she can handle."

"Hmm? Why would you do that?" Zorian frowned. "I know she wants to learn human magic, but do you have any idea how mundane and repetitive our classes are? She'll be bored out of her skull in three days, maximum. It would be better to just have her come to me for instruction. I did promise I would teach her, after all."

"No offense Zorian, but you're just a beginner mage still," Tinami said frowning. "You're not really qualified to teach a member of a completely different species how to do magic. That kind of thing is best left for actual experts."

"Uh, yeah, I meant I would teach her later," Zorian fumbled slightly. "Years later, when I mature into a mage who is qualified to help her. That's what I meant."

Tinami gave him a really strange look.

"It's a good thing for Novelty to receive a much-needed reality-check from time to time, so I'm not really concerned about her being bored out of her mind there," Spear of Resolve said, ignoring their interaction. "Besides, I didn't mean for this to become a regular thing. I just want to have the students see an aranea walking around and interact with them a bit. It's a publicity stunt more than anything."

"Oh, so this is kind of like what we're doing right now," Tinami said. After all, it wasn't like they had to have this conversation in the middle of a street where random people could see them. They could have just as easily met in a private room inside the Noveda Estate, or even inside one of the many Aope properties, but Spear of Resolve insisted they had to do this this way.

"Yes, exactly," Spear of Resolve said.

"I have to ask... why Novelty?" Tinami asked suddenly. "Not that I dislike her or anything, but I get the notion that you're pushing her pretty hard, and I can't figure out why. She is not exactly someone I would pick for an ambassador if I had to choose. Surely you have aranea that are more... solemn than her."

"Enthusiastic Seeker of Novelty is more suited for the role than you might think," Spear of Resolve said after a short pause. "You have to understand that the number of aranea living beneath Cyoria is... not that great. We must hunt to survive, so we can't support large populations. Of the people I do have, many have no interest in learning how to interact with humans, or even downright look down on them."

"Ah. The flickermind thing," Tinami said, sniffing disdainfully.

"Yes, that. The point is that I really don't have all that much to work with, and Novelty is one of the few aranea who is downright enthusiastic about going out into the city and meeting humans face-to-face. Besides, while her antics might not be exactly professional, I've noticed they put many humans at ease better than a solemn, respectful approach. They often perceive her as a harmless clown, or an innocent little girl, which never fails to amuse me. She's an adult aranea specializing in interactions with humans. She's far more dangerous to a human than your average, less excitable aranea."

"Oh. I didn't think of it like that," Tinami admitted.

What Spear of Resolve didn't say, but what Zorian strongly suspected, was that she was pushing Novelty partly because she knew Zorian liked her. It was clear to him that the Cyorian web was determined to build a closer relationship with him and keep him as close to them as possible, so

it made sense to have Novelty talk to him.

After a few more circles around the center of the city, the three of them separated and went about their own business. Zorian never went home, however, instead choosing to continue wandering the city, lost in his own thoughts.

He picked up a couple of newspapers as he walked, and idly flipped through them. As he expected, most of the news was still dedicated to the attack on the city, even a whole month after it happened. An article about the sulrothum warriors that had helped the defenders during the attack caught his eye, if only because of the detailed drawing of a flying sandworm hovering above the city. He remembered that one... the devil wasps had refused Zorian's offer of simply gating them back home to their ziggurat and had decided to instead have their giant flying sandworm pick them up and slowly fly them back to their continent. Some kind of power play, probably. Thankfully, no one in Eldemar had been in the mood to pick a fight with a giant flying sandworm, so they let them leave without incident.

Leafing through the articles more thoroughly, he also found subtle clues that the people who had received his 'gifts' had already started to make waves with the knowledge he provided them with. In all honesty, Zorian had yet to hand out even a fraction of the stuff he owed to people for their help. It would take him literal years to finish paying back his debts this way, but he would persist. In any case, he was glad people were starting to make use of the knowledge they had been given. It assured him he wasn't doing all that in vain.

He had also started writing a book on mind magic, but that was still in its early stages, and nowhere near to completion. Publishing anything related to mind magic on a wide scale was going to be difficult, but he would find a way.

Hours passed, and the night began to fall. Zorian still continued to wander the streets of the city, restless. Though he had no real emergency to worry about, it somehow felt wrong to him to just lay around and do nothing. He had spent so much time constantly on the move, constantly tackling one crisis after another, that he felt like he had to do something with himself... even if that something was basically wandering the city with no clear aim in sight.

His mind wandered to the couple of issues he still hadn't dealt with. For instance, Princess. The giant divinely-enhanced hydra had survived her fight with Oganj's apprentice, and Zorian had no idea what he was going to do with her. There was no way to transfer ownership of her to Zach, so he was stuck with her. Thankfully, she was doing just fine for now, lazing around in the Great Northern Forest, but he knew that couldn't continue forever. He had to figure out what to do with her one of these days.

Another complication was the giant iron beak flock. Zorian had simply released them into the northern wilderness when he had been checking up on Princess, thinking they would simply scatter and continue on with their own lives from now on. Instead, they decided to stick around Princess and now followed her around everywhere, helping her hunt and feeding on the remains of her prey when she had her fill. It made Princess far more noticeable and eye-catching than she would have otherwise been, and made the question of what to do with her all the more pressing.

He also didn't know what to do about Mrva. He had managed to get the golem colossus out of Cyoria before the army could move in and confiscate him, but his precious construct was still completely non-functional and the place where he was storing him was not really as secure as he would have liked.

Annoyingly, he was probably going to have to tolerate this state of affairs for quite a long time. Restoring Mrva back into combat condition and making a properly secure place to house him in would both take a large amount of money... and money was annoyingly hard to get out of the time loop. There were no more invader caches and bank accounts to steal from, so unless he wanted to prey on innocent citizens he had to find other sources of funds... and vastly scale down his expenses.

He had a bit of a problem, in all honesty. During the time loop he'd gotten into the habit of spending money like water, and though he was mindful of it after their victory, he still struggled to keep his expenses under control. He still had a sizeable stash of funds to draw upon, but it was constantly getting smaller by the day. He had tried to get large sums of money by selling some of his creations, but that had drawn way more attention than he had thought it would, so he was forced to stop with that for the time being. The only thing he could do was, ugh... *spend less*.

At least until he found a convenient way to make a lot of money without it making huge waves or being traced back to him.

He stopped walking and looked at the full moon shining bright in the skies above. For some reason, the sight of the night sky, accompanied by the warm night air, helped put his mind at ease.

"Well, Zorian, you wanted a normal life," he said out loud to himself, "Now you're having money problems. What could be more normal than that?"

"You said it, brother!" an unknown man shouted at him from his left. It wasn't anyone Zorian knew – it was just some drunk that happened to be close by. Drunk enough to be spouting nonsense, but sober enough to make himself understood. "I too am comp-le-tely penniless! I spent everything I had tonight... and there is *nothing* wrong with that! What could be more normal than that? Yes in-deed, yes in-deed, yes in-deed..."

Zorian sighed, and then turned in the direction of Imaya's house. He supposed it really was time to get some sleep.

- break -

She had no name. She did not need one. She was a hunter and a mother, devoid of any higher purpose except for surviving, protecting her territory, and raising as many offspring as she could.

But that was Before. After her last feast, she had found herself imbued with greater purpose. The essence of her prey, the hated two-legs that had

provoked her again and again, had proven so sweet and so powerful. It filled her up, suffusing her in a way she had never experienced before, then filtered through her and settled inside her eggs.

Her eggs were special now, she knew. The brood that would hatch out of them was going to be special too. She had always guarded her eggs and young diligently and with passion, only chasing them off when they grew too big and needy, but this time it was different. These eggs, and the young that would hatch from them, had to be guarded with her life. She would do anything to keep them safe. She would *die* for them if she had to.

With her special purpose and her special eggs, there came a voice, *an urge*. She had to go deeper. Her new children couldn't be satisfied with the weak prey that lived on the surface, or even the more palatable things that wandered the upper tunnels of the world. No, if she wanted to raise them right, she had to go deep, deep, deep – deeper than she would ever dare go under normal circumstances. She was mighty, but some of the things that made their homes here could end her in a moment if she weren't careful.

She was afraid. She wanted to go back, go up, return to the safety of higher hunting grounds... but the urge, *her purpose* was stronger.

She had to survive. She had to protect her eggs. She had to go deeper.

So despite her fears, despite what all her life experience was telling her, she stubbornly kept going deeper...

...where her destiny awaited.

Afterword

Afterword

You have reached the end of the story. What follows is merely some general musings about the story and what comes next. If this doesn't interest you, feel free to click away.

When I first started posting *Mother of Learning* on Fictionpress, all the way in 2011, I had no idea it would become as popular as it did. The story, as it was originally conceived, was meant to be a tool for fleshing out the fantasy setting I was building. I had noticed that diving into the setting from the perspective of an actual person living inside it really helped me notice the missing details and various inconsistencies that I would have otherwise missed or glossed over if I was just looked at it from a big picture perspective. *Mother of Learning* was simply going to be a way for me to visualize the daily life inside the world I was building.

I needed a plan, of course. I knew from my previous writing attempts that I wasn't one of those people who can write a story while making things up as they go along. Rather than picking something sensible, however, I chose to make it an epic time travel plot spanning multiple continents and involving a small legion of supporting characters. Because if I'm already going to dream, might as well dream big, right?

Right. I wrote a story summary, outlining the entire novel from start to finish. I created a character document containing brief descriptions of all important characters. And then I sat down and started writing.

I wrote about eight chapters before I decided they were not good enough and just plain wrong. So I completely discarded them all and started from scratch.

I then wrote four brand new chapters. I soon discarded them as well. They were no good, either.

The third time I also wrote four chapters, but this time I actually liked the result. I liked it so much, in fact, that I decided it wouldn't hurt to share my work with the world. I posted all four chapters on Fictionpress, thinking I would be lucky to get even a hundred regular readers. Nine years later and here we are.

Mother of Learning is finally done. I very much enjoyed writing it, but I'm glad it's done. It was meant to end here, and being able to bring it to a completion feels good. Some parts of the original concept had to be cut out of the story as it progressed, but I feel the story is ultimately better for it. I was a very inexperienced writer when I first made the original story plan, and its sheer scope was almost unreal. It's a miracle it served me as well as it had by the end of it.

The story is not perfect by any means. Over the years, I have seen a fair amount of criticism about my work and writing style that feels true. I am pretty sparse in my descriptions, for instance, especially of people. My characters apparently have a tendency to sound very similar to one another. My word choice can be occasionally jarring to perceptive readers, since I often use modern terms without thinking about whether or not they fit the setting. Some of the info dumps and extended explanations probably drag on a little too much. Parts of the story, especially ones towards the end of it, can feel rather hurried and poorly paced, and I'm not sure I really did them justice.

If you discover this narrative on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the violation.

Still, I am happy with how the story turned out in the end, and I am happy to have found so many readers interested in reading this silly story of mine. My audience has been extraordinarily patient and generous to me over the years, and I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

I hope that, having read entire story now, you find the journey to have been worth it.

>What do you intend to do now?

Well, in the short term, I intend to sit down and do some editing. I have received many, many typo reports and lists of mistakes from my readers, but I have been focusing solely on writing new chapters for a while now, so they have simply been gathering dust in my editing folder. Now that the story is over, I intend to go over each chapter and correct all the typos people found, so that new readers stumbling on the story have a less frustrating experience.

Also, while the story itself is done, I intent to continue writing more worldbuilding articles for the setting of the story as a whole. Ironically, despite starting the story to help with my worldbuilding, I have kind of been ignoring the worldbuilding side of things. That's kind of sad, so I hope that will change now that the story is done.

>You should publish the story!

I fully intend to look into publishing options, now that the story is done. I've been putting this off until *Mother of Learning* was finished, since it's bound to be a time-consuming and frustrating task. Since I am almost entirely ignorant of what this will involve, however, I will not make any promises in regards to this.

>Do you intend to continue writing after this?

Of course. I like writing and I have plenty of ideas for new stories after this. I'm not sure if the ideas are any good, but I certainly have no shortage

of them. I'm going to have to make some story plans and write up some test chapters, but I'll be sure to come back with another story.

>**Are you going to write a sequel to *Mother of Learning*?**

Maybe. Definitely not any time soon, but I do have some ideas about a possible sequel *eventually*. My current idea is that it wouldn't be nearly as long or grand as the original, and would mostly focus on showing the aftermath of the original and what the characters do in their everyday life. A sort of extended epilogue, more slice-of-life than a grand mystery of the original.

Anyway. This is still in very rough stage, and I can't even guarantee that it's going to happen for sure. I guess you'll just have to wait and see about this one.

>**What was your inspiration for the story, anyway?**

Various *Dungeons & Dragons* content, the *Avernum* series of games, *Fullmetal Alchemist* manga and anime, and time loop fanfiction.

>**Anything else you want to say?**

Nope. This is it. Thank you for reading and have a nice day.

New story is out - Zenith of Sorcery

Hello dear readers. It has been a while. Mother of learning has gotten amazingly popular over the years. The entire story is published as an e-book (both on Amazon and elsewhere) and an audiobook, and is even in the process of getting physical editions! The first two Kickstarters have been amazingly successful. If you somehow missed my various announcements over the years and are interested in these things, well, there is still plenty of time to get them.

This content has been misappropriated from Royal Road; report any instances of this story if found elsewhere.

But aside from that, I'm making this post to draw your attention to something else. I'm writing a new story called Zenith of Sorcery. The first three chapters are already out! You can read them here:

<https://www.royalroad.com/fiction/71045/zenith-of-sorcery>

It's not a continuation of Mother of Learning or set in the same universe, but I know many of you will still be interested so I figure I should point people at it. I hope you will like it.

