





Domagoj Kurmaic

# MOTHER OF LEARNING

Arc III - Part 1

*Published on [fictionpress.com](http://fictionpress.com) and [royalroad.com](http://royalroad.com)*

*Front Illustration by Zilch*

*LyX files by Mike Schwörer*



Mother of Learning © Domagoj Kurmaic.  
Text downloaded from [royalroad.com/fiction/21220](https://royalroad.com/fiction/21220)  
Illustrations © Zilch,  
downloaded from [pixiv.net/en/artworks/69959210](https://pixiv.net/en/artworks/69959210).  
Typesetted by Mike Schwörer ([mikescher.com](https://mikescher.com)).

## 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 come 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... 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?"

"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.



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 skimmed 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."



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..."



"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.

## Chapter Fifty-Six

---

# 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.

"Mr 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 any more, 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.



"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?"



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.

"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.



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 bound-

ary 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 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..."



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 that 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 Ima'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 do 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 a 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 uncomprehendingly. 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?"



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 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 it 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 funnily, 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.



## 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's 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 simulacrums, 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 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.



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 teach-

ers 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 with-



out 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 blood-line 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.



"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' sort of story, though, and Zorian didn't put much stock to 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 heard 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.



"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 prob-

ably 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.



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 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 dis-

tinctive 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.



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..."



## 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?"

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 Dragon Below 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?"



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 Dragon Below 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 ex-

traction 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 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.



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 only 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.



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 was 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.



## 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 cranium 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 mages.

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 cranium rats. What would be the point, really? The idea of making the cranium 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 cranium 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 cranium 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 even 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? Miniscule, 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.



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 as 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."

"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 Dragon Below 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 hesitance 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 Marbolcano 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.



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.



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 over-cautious. 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 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.



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 matri-

arch'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 Dragon Below 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."



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 just 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 Ikosian 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.



## 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 battle-group 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 battle-group 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 man-

aged 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 sent it careening to the side, where it 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 thrust 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 reac-

tion 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.

"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 Cyorian 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 matter 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.



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 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 Nochka, 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 and 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.

## Chapter Sixty-One

---

# 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 engineer-

ing," 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 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 treasuries 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."

"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.



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.



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.



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.



## 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 ex-

planation 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 draw-

ing upon raw ambient mana.”

”But not *every* way?” Zach asked.

”Well, it is admittedly somewhat easier to kill yourself by over-drawing 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.



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."

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.



"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.





"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 Haslush, 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.



In the Ishekatarra 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.

Analic 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 simulacrums 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 simulacrums 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 simulacrums. 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.



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 fol-



lowed 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 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 the 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.

## 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 fid-

dling 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 hasting 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, cour-

tesy 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-racking 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.



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 mo-

ment, 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."

"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 Ima and Kael something fierce when he didn't immediately veto the idea.



"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.



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 Falkrinea'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 Falkrinea 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 Falkrinea'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 al-

chemists. 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.



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 mo-



tioned 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.



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, Sulamnon, Falkrinea 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 grouched. "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..."



## 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 Al-tazia 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 publically 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 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 simulacrum. 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 simulacrums, leaving one less for him to boss around. He could only maintain three simulacrums 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 simulacrums to exist for 24 hours. However, he didn't really foresee much problems with that – his simulacrums had been really well behaved, all things considered. His current simulacrums 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 simulacrums 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 Tmili-cen, 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?"

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'.



"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 simulacrums 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 simulacrums from time to time to see how they're faring. This did mean he had to rely on the simulacrums being able to effectively summarize their existence for him, but there was no real alternative. If he asked the simulacrums 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 simulacrums 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 homogeneous from the neck down."

Huh, he didn't know that. He knew that simulacrums 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.



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 back 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 threading 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.



"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 discontentedly. 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. The 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.



## DAINGEROUS 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 techni-

cally 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."

"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.



"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 short-

ened 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 cer-

tain 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 spell-casting requires a soul."

Zorian hummed thoughtfully. Pretty solid logic there, he had to admit. By now, Zach had long got 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 move-

ments 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 on 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.



"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 simulacrum do all the work. And the traveling speed is bound to improve as your simulacrum 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 simulacrum 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."



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 bird 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 go-

ing 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.



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 battle-



group 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 sto-

icism.

"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.

## 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 in-

volved 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 Siqi 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. Ilisa 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.



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—"

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 Ibasia 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 Ibasian 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 battle-group 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 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 Iljator (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 signa-

ture 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..."



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.



## 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 de-

cided 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 anything."

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 simulacrums 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.

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*?



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 impossible 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 simulacrums, 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 of 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, Zorian just shrugged and went back to tracking 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..."



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 above-board 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 men-



tal 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.



“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 be-

have," 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."

## 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 cel-



eborate 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 per-

ceptive 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.



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 simulacrums outside of it, dispersing them in very short order. This meant that he would have to keep sending simulacrums 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 nav-

igate 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 cranium 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."

"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."



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-Temti 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..."



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 imme-

diately 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 to-

wards 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.



# CONTENTS

55	Threshold	1
56	Obscure	25
57	Unwanted	49
58	Questions and Answers	69
59	One Step Forward	91
60	Into the Abyss	117
61	Anthills	143
62	Improperly Used	167
63	The March of Days	193
64	Distance	229
65	Dangerous Ground	255
66	Marred Perfection	287
67	Convergence	313
68	Green Hell	339

◇  
Repeti-  
tion is the  
mother of learn-  
ing, the father of ac-  
tion, which makes it  
the architect of  
accomplish-  
ment.  
◇



2019  
Typesetted  
with  $\text{\LaTeX}$  &  $\text{\TeX}$ ,  
using Crimson and Linux Biolinum.