

Domagoj Kurmaic

MOTHER OF LEARNING

Arc I - Part 2

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Chapter Fourteen

THE SISTER EFFECT

After telling Kirielle to pack her things for the trip (a task she immediately set off to accomplish), he filled his room with multi-colored orbs of light and went down to the kitchen to face mother. The lightshow was something he did in every restart, since he wasn't sure Ilsa would agree to arrange additional tutoring for him unless she stumbled on it. Not that it did him much good, since these short loops he was stuck in ceased too soon for him to gain anything from it, but he kept doing it regardless. Just in case. Who knew, maybe this particular restart would be the one where Zach stopped dying so soon.

Mother studied him like a hawk as he descended down the stairs, looking for any flaw in his appearance she could criticize. He knew from experience that she would find *something* to complain about, but he didn't really care. He was dressed well enough to avoid a protracted lecture about family honor, and that was all that mattered. For a while he had tried to use his time loop given foreknowledge to appear 'perfect', but that hadn't worked on her. Talk about high standards. Maybe she really *was* deliberately trying to annoy him to make sure he'd refuse to take Kirielle with him?

Sitting at the table, he pushed the cold porridge to the side and started eating apples instead, ignoring mother's annoyance at spurning her food. After she had realized he wasn't going to say anything she released a dramatic sigh and launched into one of her long-winded monologues, dancing around the real issue she wanted to talk to him about – the possibility of him taking Kirielle with him to Cyoria.

"Now that I think about it," mother said, finally deciding to get to the point, "I never told you I'm going to Koth with your father to visit Daimen, did I?"

"You want me to take Kiri with me to Cyoria," Zorian 'guessed'.

"I.. what?" she blinked, surprised for a second. Then she shook her head slightly and sighed. "She told you," she concluded.

"Yup," Zorian confirmed.

"So much for picking the right moment like we agreed upon," mother said. "I guess I should go and comfort her."

"Why would she need comforting?" Zorian asked. "I said yes. She was ecstatic. She's in her room right now, packing her things."

She looked at him like he had suddenly started reciting classical poetry. Zorian didn't know whether to feel guilty or annoyed. Was it really *that* weird for him to agree to this? Before he had enrolled into the academy he had spent more time with the little imp than anyone else in the family, mother included. He was more of a parent to Kirielle than she and father ever were! Really, if Kirielle had just told him she wanted to go herself instead of having mother speak for her, he probably would have agreed to it after some arguing, even before the time loop.

Annoyed. He was definitely feeling annoyed with her. He leveled a challenging glare at mother, daring her to say something.

"What?" he snapped after a few seconds of mutual staring.

"Nothing," she said, schooling her expression into something unreadable. "I'm just surprised, that's all. I'm glad you're finally

starting to think about someone other than yourself. Have you thought about housing?”

“I have,” confirmed Zorian. “It depends on whether I’ll have to pay for the arrangements from my own pocket or if you’ll give me extra money for rent.”

“Now you’re just being insulting,” his mother snapped. “Of course we’ll give you rent money. When did we ever make you pay for essential living expenses by yourself? How much do you need?”

As if her own remark about him finally thinking about someone other than himself wasn’t just as insulting. He was just responding in kind. But yes, Zorian grudgingly admitted she was right – his parents had many flaws, but they would never let him go hungry or homeless unless they were completely bankrupt themselves. He was the disfavored son, but a son nonetheless. They spent the next several minutes discussing living expenses in Cyoria, arguing back and forth about how much money he would need to rent some place and feed Kirielle. He, of course, favored larger sums, and he knew enough about Cyoria’s economy to give weight to his arguments. Mother made no secret about her surprise at his knowledge of rent prices in various districts of Cyoria – apparently she was under the impression such ‘down to earth’ knowledge didn’t interest him. Zorian decided not to explain he was keeping track of rent prices so he could move away from home at a moment’s notice, instead trying to change the subject. He was not very effective in that regard – mother was stubbornly fixated on that little factoid – but Ilsa’s arrival saved him from her interrogation. Mother quickly excused herself, saying she was going to help Kirielle pack, but Zorian still led Ilsa back to his room when she asked him where they could have some privacy. He had to show her all those lights he ‘accidentally’ forgot to dispel, after all.

At first the talk proceeded in a fairly standard fashion, but

the usual routine he was used to was quickly shattered when they reached the topic of habitation.

"According to this," began Ilsa, momentarily shaking a piece of paper she was holding, "you lived in academy housing for the past two years. I assume you intend to do the same this year, too?"

"Err, actually, no," answered Zorian. "I'm taking my younger sister with me this year, so I can't do that. Unless the academy makes allowances for such things?"

"It doesn't," Ilsa said.

"I figured," Zorian said, not really surprised by that. "We'll just stay in a hotel for a few days until I find a place to rent."

Ilsa gave him a strange look that Zorian had trouble deciphering.

"You don't have a place reserved already?" she asked.

"No," Zorian said. "The decision was a bit abrupt so I didn't have any time to make proper preparations. Why?"

"I may have a solution for you in regards to that," Ilsa said, straightening her posture into a slightly more serious stance.

"You mean you know a place I could rent?" Zorian asked. Ilsa nodded. "That's... fortunate, I guess. What do you have in mind?"

"First of all, I want to emphasize that what I'm about to offer you has nothing to do with the Cyoria Royal Academy of Magical Arts," Ilsa cautioned. "This is something strictly between the two of us, understand?"

"Okay," said Zorian cautiously. He was getting slightly concerned now, but he sensed no deception or ill intent from Ilsa. He waited to hear what she was offering.

"A friend of mine is renting rooms at very reasonable rates..." Ilsa began.

After several minutes of questioning and reading between the lines, Zorian decided he would give Ilsa's friend a chance. Her 'reasonable rates' were a tad expensive, but it was manageable. Ilsa also

suggested her friend loved children and would be all too happy to take care of Kirielle while he was at class, which would be worth every piece he paid for the place if actually true.

After that, the topic shifted to his choice of mentor (or rather, the fact that he wasn't allowed to choose one), and his choice of electives. Since he had pretty much tried out every elective he was even remotely interested in by now, his choices were pretty constant at this point: botany, astronomy, and human anatomy. He chose them solely because he knew for a fact that teachers of those particular subjects didn't care in the slightest if he chose not to come to class, and because Akoja didn't choose any of them as *her* electives (and thus wasn't aware he was skipping them).

The moment Ilsa went back to the academy, Kirielle came barreling down the stairs like a herd of elephants, ignoring mother's admonishments about running inside the house. No doubt she had finished packing a while ago and had been simply waiting for Ilsa to leave so she could come out.

"I'm ready!" she grinned happily.

"So you have everything packed?" asked Zorian.

"Yup!" she nodded.

"What about my books?" asked Zorian.

"Why would I pack your books?" she scowled. "You can do that yourself, lazy ass!"

"Well, you did take them from my room and hide them under your bed," Zorian remarked.

"Oh!" Her eyes widened in understanding. "*Those* books! Umm... I guess I kind of forgot to give those back to you. I'll put them back in your room, okay?"

"What are you two talking about?" mother asked as she approached.

"Nothing!" Kirielle said in a slightly panicky voice, whirring quickly to face mother. "I just forgot something, that's all! I'll be

right back!"

She quickly bolted up the stairs, ignoring mother's repeated admonishment about not running in the house. Zorian looked at her retreating form with narrowed eyes. Why was Kirielle so frightened about mother finding out she had been taking books out of his room? It was hardly the first time she helped herself to his things, and mother never cared before. There was something of significance hidden in that seemingly innocuous reaction, he just knew it.

He was starting to think he didn't know Kirielle half as well as he thought he did.



"I'm bored."

Zorian opened his eyes and glared at his little sister. He couldn't close his eyes for more than a minute without her saying something or 'accidentally' kicking him in the knees with her pointy little shoes. And he had thought the station announcer was annoying.

"I can tell," he said, rolling his eyes. "What do you want *me* to do about it?"

"Play a game with me?" she said hopefully.

"Haven't we done enough of that already?" he sighed. "There are only so many times I can beat you at hangman before it gets boring."

"You were cheating!" she protested. "'Asphyxiation' isn't even a real word!"

"What!? Of course it is!" he shot back. "You're just--"

"Liar!" she interrupted.

"Whatever," Zorian scoffed. "It's not like that was the only game where I won."

"So you admit you cheated in that one!" she concluded triumphantly.

Zorian opened his mouth to retort before he closed it again.

"Why am I arguing about this?" he asked out loud, though it was directed more towards himself than Kiri.

A sharp crackling sound that always heralded the voice of the station announcer stopped any further argument they may have had.

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

"Oh thank the gods," Zorian mumbled. Not only did arriving in Korsa mean three quarters of the journey was over, it also meant someone was going to join them in their compartment, thus giving Kirielle someone else to annoy.

Someone other than Ibery, though – he purposely avoided his usual compartment to ensure she and Kiri would never meet, since he had a suspicion a conversation between them wouldn't end well. Kiri didn't like Fortov any more than Zorian did, and she was a lot less tactful about it.

"So many people," Kiri remarked, watching the throng at the train station through the window. "Are those all students like you?"

"Most of them, yeah," Zorian said. "Though not all of them go to the same school as I do. There is more than one academy in Cyoria."

"I thought mages were rarer than this," she said. "Mom says you need to be really smart to be one. Do you think I could be a mage too one day?"

"Sure," he shrugged.

"Really?" she asked, a mixture of excitement and suspicion radiating from her voice and posture. Zorian supposed she half-

expected him to use his agreement as a set up for a mean-spirited joke or something along those lines.

"Yes," he confirmed. "I don't see why you couldn't. You seem to be doing well enough in school from what I heard, so I don't see why your intelligence would be a problem. And it's not like our parents can't afford to send you somewhere, even if it isn't Cyoria."

Kirielle didn't answer, choosing instead to look through the window in silence and pointedly refusing to look him in the eye. He was just about to ask her what's wrong when the door to the compartment slid open, distracting him.

"Byrn Ivarin," the boy introduced himself. "Can I sit here?"

Zorian waved him in without a word. This was the guy who inspired him to seek employment in the library the last time they had spoken with each other. The boy had been quite talkative back then, so he should be perfect! Even if he was disinclined to talk to someone so young, he doubted Kirielle would let him ignore her, and he seemed too polite to just plain snub her to her face. Hopefully he would keep Kirielle busy till the rest of the journey.

"I'm Kirielle Kazinski," his sister promptly introduced herself, "and that's my brother Zorian. Are you a student like Zorian? Can you do magic?"

"Err, well... yes," Byrn said, torn between desire to ask about the surname and a desire to be polite and answer Kirielle's question. Politeness won in the end. "I'm only a first year, though, so it's not like I have anything to brag with."

Sadly for Byrn, he would have to wait for a while before he could ask about the surname – Kirielle was on a roll, and promptly assaulted the poor kid with every question imaginable. Zorian soon found out that Byrn was an only child of two first generation mages from Korsa, and that his family had pretty high expectations of him. Byrn was as excited to be away from his overbearing parents as he was about learning magic. That, at least, was something

Zorian could empathize with.

"3 older brothers, huh?" Byrn laughed. "Poor you. Though... I kind of wish I had a few older brothers myself. My parents could have someone else to focus on every once in a while."

"I know what you mean," Kirielle said. "Ever since Zorian started going to the academy, mother has no one but me to pay attention to. It sucks."

Zorian flinched in sympathy. He hadn't thought of that, but it shed a great deal of light on Kirielle's behavior for the past two years. Without Zorian there to act like a figurative lightning rod for mother's criticism, Kirielle's time at home probably took a sharp turn for the worse in his absence. A part of him was pleased that the little imp was forced to experience some of what he went through in his daily interactions with their family, but he mostly thought she didn't deserve something like that.

"So, I've been meaning to ask," said Byrn. "Your last name is pretty distinctive. Not that many Kazinskis walking around. Are you related to Daimen Kazinski by any chance?"

"He's our brother," Kirielle said.

"Really?" asked Byrn excitedly. "You know, I haven't heard anything about him in a while. What is he up to currently?"

"He's in Koth," Kirielle said. "I think he found something in the jungle but... I don't know. I don't really talk to him all that often. He's always traveling. You're more likely to find out about him in the newspapers than by talking to me. Zorian knows him better than I do."

Zorian shot Kirielle a quick glare for putting him on the spot like that, and on the topic of Daimen no less! The little imp just stuck her tongue at him. Hmph.

"Daimen and I don't get along," Zorian said bluntly. "There is not much I can tell you about him that Kiri hasn't already."

"Oh," Byrn said, obviously disappointed. He let out a slightly strained laugh, trying to dispel the somewhat awkward atmosphere that descended on the compartment. "And here I thought I would get some inside stories about one of my heroes. Though I suppose in a way I did, didn't I? It's a bit sad that he doesn't have time for his family."

"Hmm," hummed Zorian noncommittally.

The rest of the journey was uneventful, except that Byrn decided to tag along with them for a while after they disembarked. Both Byrn and Kirielle were awed (and more than a little intimidated) by the sheer size and activity of Cyoria's train station, and Zorian decided to be nice and give them a brief tour around the place. The tour turned out to be not as brief as he had intended, however, because Kirielle insisted on browsing the stores. He tried to tell her that every shop in and around the train station sold massively overpriced merchandise (because they could, thanks to their favorable location) and that he wouldn't be buying her anything, but that didn't deter her in the slightest. She was 'just looking'. Byrn, for some unfathomable reason, sided with Kiri. He liked browsing stores too, apparently. Madness.

Since they had wasted so much time, however, the rain had already started falling by the time they were ready to depart. Byrn had no umbrella, of course, and even if he had, the amount of luggage he carried would make a trek through the rain a problematic endeavor. Zorian reluctantly offered to help – the boy looked so miserable at this sudden turn of events that Zorian didn't have the heart to just walk away.

Besides, Kirielle wouldn't let him do that, and he didn't want to make a scene by dragging her away so they could be on their way.

"I really appreciate this, you know?" Byrn said, curiously brushing his fingers against the dome of the rain barrier spell surround-

ing them. "I don't know what I would have done if it weren't for you. It doesn't seem like the rain is going to stop any time soon."

"For the last time, it's alright," Zorian sighed. "Really, I live to help."

Byrn 'covertly' mouthed 'thank you' to Kirielle, who was unabashedly playing with the rain barrier by sticking her arms and legs outside the protective dome and then drawing them back in, causing her to give him a thumbs up. Apparently the boy knew whom to thank for his good fortune. Hmph. If he ran out of mana halfway to their new home after getting Byrn to the academy, it would be on her head. Rain barrier was quite draining, and he had to enlarge it so it would cover all three of them plus the floating disk that carried their combined luggage.

"This spell is awesome," Kirielle declared. "How hard is it? Do you think you could teach me how to cast this one? I won't tell anyone!"

"Oh please," Zorian snorted. "You can't even *feel* your mana, much less shape it. It's not a question of legality, it's a question of skill. It would take months if you're some kind of genius, a year or two otherwise. Just wait until you enroll into a magic school yourself, okay?"

Kirielle immediately deflated.

In the end they managed to deposit Byrn to the safety of the academy's own rain wards without issues before going their own way. In fact, they nearly made it to their destination before Zorian ran out of mana, causing the rain barrier to wink out of existence.

Emphasis on 'nearly'. He hoped Ilsa's friend wasn't sensitive about people bringing water into the house.



"You should have waited! Honestly, what possessed you to

walk around in this horrid weather? Kids these days think they're invincible..."

Zorian rolled his eyes at his host's scolding, not hiding his reaction in the slightest since she was busy rummaging through a set of drawers and wasn't really facing him. The rain would have continued throughout the entire night – though he couldn't exactly tell her how he knew that – so waiting it out hadn't been an option. Besides, they would have made it just fine if Kirielle hadn't been so stubborn about getting Byrn to the academy grounds first. And also, it's not like their brief run through the rain was all that traumatic. So really, why was she getting so worked up about it?

His thoughts were interrupted by a towel hitting him in the face.

"There. You can use that to dry your hair," she said. "I'll go see if your sister needs any help. You just hope she doesn't get sick from this or you'll be hearing from me about this, you hear?"

"She's not a sugar cube," Zorian mumbled. "She's not going to fall apart just because she got a little wet."

Either that was spoken too softly for her to hear or she decided to ignore him, but either way she just walked past him and left the room. Unconcerned, Zorian sat down on a nearby chair, studying the place they were in.

Their landlord, one Imaya Kuroshka, was a lively middle-aged woman that quickly ushered them in when she found them, soaking-wet, on her doorstep. She hadn't even asked for their identities before she had done that – it took an introduction by Zorian until she realized they actually had a reason beyond getting out of the rain when they knocked on her door. Zorian was tempted to deliver his own scolding to the woman about naiveté and letting strangers into the house, but unlike *some* people, *he* chose not to be difficult. She seemed nice enough, all things considered. At the very least she didn't appear to be one of those

landlords that tried to bleed their tenants of everything they could part with, though it was hard to be sure this soon.

The part that irked him a little was that Imaya seemed to consider them living at her place a done deal already. He only agreed to check the place out, nothing more!

Once Imaya returned with Kirielle (who had changed her clothes and mostly dried her hair at this point, and seemed completely unaffected by the fact she had been running through the pouring rain less than an hour ago) they started talking. Zorian had to steer the conversation back to the topic of their stay every once in a while, since both Imaya and Kirielle were content to let the conversation wander around if he let them. He also had to kick Kirielle a few times under the table to get her to shut up – Ilsa had told him never to broach the topic of marriage and husbands in front of Imaya for... some unspecified reason. Zorian liked it when people respected his privacy, so he was content to do the same of Imaya, and had warned Kirielle to abide by the rule as well. Something she evidently had problems with, due to her tendency to babble.

Their arrangement was not exactly to his liking, in all honesty. Imaya's house clearly hadn't been designed for rent – it was a normal, if large, family home that had a bunch of empty sleeping rooms on the second floor. Zorian and Kirielle would be getting one of them, and they would be sharing the rest of the house facilities with Imaya and 2 other tenants that were scheduled to arrive in the next few days. That was a lot less privacy than he was comfortable with. Not to mention that their room only had one bed, meaning he would have to sleep together with Kirielle. Zorian had actually spent a few nights with Kirielle when she had been younger, and knew for a fact that Kirielle was a restless sleeper and a cover hog, so he had big issues with that. Thankfully, they were the only tenants at the moment, so Imaya allowed him to

claim an additional room for himself at no extra charge, with the stipulation that he move back in with Kirielle when she found a proper tenant for it.

Zorian decided to quietly look into other places to rent tomorrow. Just in case.



Despite his novel living arrangements and Kirielle's presence, the next few days were fairly standard. He applied for the job at the library. He went to talk to Ilsa about advanced instruction and chose divination as a discipline he was interested in. He practiced various shaping exercises whenever he had some free time, concentrating mostly on the north finding one since that exercise was supposed to help with divinations. Taiven tracked him down, despite his change of residence, and Zorian notified her about the 'rumors' about mind magic using giant spiders running around the sewers to make sure she'd survive the encounter. Despite his misgivings, he decided not to leave Imaya's place, since Imaya did a masterful job of keeping Kirielle happy and off his back. For her part, Kirielle was remarkably well behaved. She spent a lot of her time drawing things. He didn't even know she liked to draw. She never did it at home as far as he knew. Maybe the trip had inspired her to take up a hobby?

In any case, once those first couple of days had passed, everything just... went off the rails. For one thing, the restart hadn't ended at that point and instead just kept going, which was noteworthy by itself. More importantly, however, he was once again asked by Ilsa to greet Kael and his daughter at Cyoria's main train station... only to find out that Kael had also rented a room at Imaya's place. For pretty much the same reason that he had, too – Ilsa had recommended the place.

So now he was living in the same house with his little sister, a teenage morlock and his daughter, and a landlord that didn't really act like a landlord. He was finally going to meet his divination instructor, Xvim would be throwing marbles at him again come next Friday, Ilsa apparently visited her friend's house on a regular basis, and Imaya invited Taiven to eat with them next Sunday while she was trying to talk Zorian into following her into the sewers. Clearly this was not going to be your average restart.

"I still feel like I'm taking advantage of you," Kael said, pouring a fist-full of blue powder into a transparent glass container.

"And I still can't imagine why," Zorian said, not taking his eyes off the tiny blue mushrooms he was currently grinding into more powder. "I stock your lab with ingredients, and you let me be your assistant while you do your work. You get to save a little money on reagents and I get some practical alchemical experience. What on earth is predatorial about that? Here."

He thrust the powdered mushrooms to the white-haired boy, who sighed in defeat and went back to work. Zorian took the time to look around the workshop without being too blatant about it.

Kael's workshop was pretty amazing considering it was really just a basement that Imaya donated to the boy so he could convert it to his purposes. Setting it up was the first thing Kael did after moving into the place, with Imaya being surprisingly unconcerned about a mere academy student working with dangerous magical concoctions right under her home. 'Ilsa assured me Kael knows what he's doing,' she said. Well, he probably did, but still. As for equipment, it was loaned to Kael by the academy authorities. According to Kael, it was rather outdated, but the morlock couldn't afford to be picky and was lucky to get anything at all.

"I just don't think the price of restocking my workshop is worth whatever experience you're going to get," Kael said, pouring boiling water into the powder-filled container and adding

some weird little black balls that Zorian didn't recognize. "In fact, considering how good you are at this I should probably be paying *you* for the help."

"Don't worry about it," Zorian repeated, hoping this time it would stick. He couldn't exactly tell the boy that his savings account would spontaneously refill when the loop restarted, so it was hard to explain why money wasn't too important for him.

Overall, his interaction with Kael was a lot friendlier this time around. Grudgingly, he had to admit Kirielle had a lot to do with it – she hit it off with Kana pretty quickly, despite the other girl being practically a baby, which seemed to put Kael at ease with both of them. After that, the two of them discovered they got along pretty well and Zorian decided to help the morlock with his alchemy and learn something at the same time. Which led to their current situation.

"This whole situation is terribly strange," Kael said after a minute of silence. "Not in a bad way, though. Kana is the happiest I have seen her in a while. I really am grateful to your sister for everything she has done for her, by the way."

"To be honest, I'm not sure how long it's going to last," Zorian admitted. "For now she finds Kana cute, and probably finds it pleasing to have someone pay attention to her with such rapt attention. She tends to get bored really quickly, though. And in any case, she's only in Cyoria temporarily while my family is off visiting my brother in Koth."

"Well that's too bad," Kael sighed. Then he smirked at Zorian. "Though I supposed you'll be relieved when she finally leaves."

"Well, who knows," Zorian said. "We'll see how things go. She's not so bad right now, so maybe she won't be a total pest like she usually is. I'm hoping some of your daughter's attitude will rub off on her in time."

"Oh, that would be such a pity," Kael said. "It would be a shame

for such a lively girl to lose her spark of life. I myself wish Kana had some of that boundless enthusiasm."

"Shall we trade, then?" offered Zorian.

"No," Kael snorted. "Fetch me the water celery and be quiet for a while. I need to concentrate on this part."

And so Zorian stood in silence and watched Kael work, and thought about what the rest of the month would bring.

Chapter Fifteen

BUSY FRIDAY

Zorian felt the mana-charged marble approaching him, but didn't move. He couldn't tell whether it was aimed to the left or to the right, but he knew it wasn't aimed at his forehead. He could always tell when it was. Always. He wasn't sure how he could tell that with absolute certainty when he could not actually pinpoint where the marble was going, but he was grateful for it. He just wished he could replicate that success to the exercise in general.

The marble whizzed past him and he struggled to identify on which side it passed him by.

"Left," he tried.

"Wrong," Xvim said in a disinterested tone. "Again."

Another marble was thrown towards him. This one wasn't aimed at his forehead either. Not that surprising, really – Xvim stopped doing that when he realized Zorian could identify those with perfect accuracy. It wouldn't do to give Zorian free points, after all.

"Right," he said.

"Wrong," Xvim immediately responded. "Again."

Zorian frowned behind the blindfold. Did it just seem that way or was he actually getting *worse* at this as time went by? Something was very wrong here. At the beginning of the session he

was getting more than half of them correctly, but now he was constantly getting it wrong. He'd have thought he'd guess correctly every once in a while, through statistical inevitability if nothing else. There were only two possibilities!

That's why, when Xvim threw the next marble, Zorian quickly wrenched the blindfold off to see what the deal was.

The marble flew straight over his head.

That son of a bitch!

"I didn't say you could take the blindfold off," Xvim calmly said, as if Zorian didn't just catch him red-handed.

"That's cheating!" Zorian protested, completely ignoring Xvim's remark. "Of course I couldn't guess correctly if you're not even going to abide by your own rules!"

"You're not supposed to guess, mister Kazinski," Xvim said unapologetically. "You're supposed to *sense*."

"I *was* sensing," Zorian ground out.

"If you were, you would have realized what was happening far sooner, and you would not have needed to take off the blindfold to identify the problem," Xvim said. "Now stop wasting your time and put the blindfold back on so we can continue."

Zorian cursed Xvim mentally but did as he was told. As much as he hated to admit it, Zorian had to admit there was a lot of truth in Xvim's words. He had been mostly guessing over which shoulder the marbles were going, relying on gut instinct instead of a clear perception of its location. But it was hardly his fault he couldn't reliably track a fast-moving object through its faint mana emissions – according to books, that was a highly advanced skill that took years to master! Honestly, asking a student to master this sort of thing in their third year was completely unreasonable. But completely in character for Xvim, he supposed. At least he no longer had to worry about being hit in the head anymore.

The rest of the session was typical, which is to say repetitive and boring. Then again, what part of school wasn't boring at this point? He had been stuck in the time loop for little over a year now, and feigning attention during classes was starting to get hard. He was tempted to take a page out of Zach's book and go wander somewhere else for a few restarts, but he couldn't. For one thing, it would be irresponsible to waste time like that when he could be working on skills he needed to get to the bottom of this. For another, he didn't want to attract attention to himself. The memory of their interaction was probably still fresh in Zach's mind, and there was a possible third party to consider. Completely blowing off classes would be completely out of character for him, and would raise a lot of eyebrows. He was already playing it close by taking Kirielle with him and skipping almost a quarter of his classes to do his own thing, but those changes were at least easily explainable. If his current course of action didn't produce results, he'd have to drop the masquerade to preserve his sanity, but that wasn't an immediate concern. He had more pressing problems to worry about, so he put off that issue for later, when and if it became relevant.

His session with Xvim done, he went to the library to report to Kirithishli. Normally he didn't go to work on Fridays, since dealing with Xvim tended to kill his mood very fast, but he was feeling just fine today. He was getting used to the irritating man's antics, it seemed.

"Zorian!" Kirithishli greeted. "Good timing! We just got a new shipment today and Ibery had to go home early."

"Uh, okay," Zorian said slowly. He was about to ask what kind of shipment arrived, but then he decided it was a stupid question. It was a shipment of books, of course. "What do you want me to do?"

"Just unpack the books out of their boxes and separate them into rough categories," answered Kirithishli, pointing in the direc-

tion of a small mountain of boxes. "I'll inspect them in more detail later to see what to do with them."

"You don't know what to do with them?" asked Zorian, baffled. "Why did you order them, then?"

"I didn't," Kirithishli said, shaking her head. "Someone donated their personal library to the academy. It happens from time to time. Sometimes people leave their books to us in their wills, or people who inherit them don't have a use for them and can't sell them. A lot of old books are only useful as historical curiosities and sometimes not even that. Most of the books in these boxes will be disposed of, to be honest."

"Oh?" asked Zorian, opening one of the boxes and pulling out one of the books stacked inside of it. It was a manual about cultivation of plums. The cover said it was published 20 years ago. "I'm surprised by that. I distinctly remember you saying that librarians should preserve everything they can rather than pick and choose what they think is 'good' or 'useful'."

"Oh shut up," Kirithishli grouched, taking a half-hearted swipe at him that he dodged. "It's an ideal to be followed, not an unbreakable law. There is only so much space in the library, no matter how big it appears. And besides, most of these books are duplicates of ones we already have. Stop being a wiseass and get to work."

Zorian threw himself to the task, unpacking box after box. Kirithishli gave him a huge book that contained list after list of the most common books they received in these sort of deliveries and told him to use it to separate the obvious duplicates from the rest. Using the book manually to find the matches would be a total nightmare of course, especially since the letters were in a really tiny print in order to cram as many words as possible on every page, but Zorian knew it was designed with something else in mind. One of the spells he learned from Ibery in the previous restarts involved making a list of terms you wanted to search for

and then connecting the list via divination spell to a target book you wanted to search. It sounded a little pointless to him back then, but now he realized it was made with precisely this sort of thing in mind. And the huge, densely-packed reference book was probably made with the spell in mind, in turn.

Nearly 2 hours and 20 hastily scribbled lists later he had separated the duplicates from the rest of the books and was in the process of leafing through one of the spellbooks he had found in the boxes when Kirithishli finally returned from wherever she had disappeared after giving him his assignment. His rapid progress surprised her, seeing how she had no idea he was so well-versed in library magic, and she apparently also found it a little disappointing.

"You're no fun," she sighed dramatically. "I wanted to show you that trick when I came back, after you spent 2 hours painstakingly searching for matches in that monster of a book. The expression on your face would have been priceless."

Zorian simply raised an eyebrow at her, but otherwise stayed silent. Kirithishli showed her maturity by sticking her tongue at him like a 5-year-old, before eyeing the book he was leafing through.

"Found something interesting?" she asked.

"Not really," Zorian said, snapping the book shut. There was nothing particularly interesting in it anyway. "I sort of hoped I would find a book on powerful ancient magic and the like, but no such luck."

Kirithishli snorted. "Even if you did find something like that, it would do you little good. Contrary to what various adventure novels may have led you to believe, ancient magic is almost always inferior to what we have available now. Those spells that are lost are usually lost for a good reason – generally for being too impractical, requiring ingredients or conditions that no longer exist, or

because they would be considered massively unethical in the modern age. For example, you'd be hard pressed to find participants for orgy ritual magic these days, and Heruan volcanic spells relied on conditions present in one particular volcano that hasn't been active for more than 200 years."

Zorian blinked. "Oh. Well that's disappointing."

"Quite," Kirithishli agreed. "And even when those spells can be cast without issue, they tend to be infuriatingly inflexible and long to cast. Mages of old didn't have the sort of shaping skills modern mages have, so they compensated by making their spells long and hyperspecialized. There were hundreds of color-changing spells, for instance, but most of them differed only in which color the spell changed the affected objects into. It has been a persistent trend in modern times to generalize spells, since better training methods allow modern mages to make up for the spells' lack of precision with the sheer control they have over their magic."

"Making a lot of old spells obsolete to a properly trained mage," finished Zorian. He had always known that most history books presented a heavily idealized image of their ancestors – their portrayal of the desertification of northern Miasina (he refused to call it 'Cataclysm', as if it was some natural occurrence beyond Ikosian control) and subsequent exodus to Altazia was proof enough that they were given a sugar-coated version of history – but he hadn't realized Ikosians were also crappy mages in addition to being short-sighted assholes. "And you have to be one if you plan to get certified. You know, I've always wondered why so many really easy spells are classified as first circle ones. I thought it might be a deliberate policy by the Guild to encourage certification, but I guess a lot of those were not nearly as trivial when they were first rated."

"That, but you also have to consider things from the perspective of the spell's maker," Kirithishli said. "It's a lot more prestigious and profitable to make a 1 circle spell than a 0 circle one. So

they almost never classify a spell as anything less than 1 circle, and the guild allows them to get away with it, probably for the very reason you stated. A determined person could probably get the guild to lower the classification on a lot of those spells, but you'd make a lot of enemies, especially the spell crafter interest groups. It would be a thankless task, and you'd constantly have to watch out for people trying to roll back the changes."

Zorian digested this information in silence. He had no intention of involving himself in such high-level politics, of course, either in the time loop or outside of it. If there was one thing his parents had driven into his skull with their endless sermons, it was that his strengths did not lie in that area. Granted, that probably wasn't what those sermons were designed to do, but that wasn't his problem. Still, things like these were useful to know. He'd have to prod Kirithishli for more stories in the future.



When Kirithishli told him to go home, Zorian was all too happy to oblige her. It had been a long (and boring) day, what with the regular classes, his session with Xvim, and working in the library, and all he really wanted was to go back to Imaya's place and relax. Sadly, it was not to be, because the moment he stepped out of the library he was accosted by a shady-looking man that had been waiting for him just outside the entrance.

Well, maybe 'accosted' was a too strong of a word – technically, the man in question was just leaning on a pillar next to the entrance, not blocking his path or even speaking to him. Nonetheless, the moment the man glanced up and their eyes met, Zorian knew the man had been waiting for him, and him alone. Middle aged, dressed in a cheap, rumpled suit and unshaven, he almost looked like one of Cyoria's many homeless people, but there was a confidence in his posture that didn't fit that image.

He halted in his tracks instantly, and an uneasy silence descended on the scene as they both analyzed one another. Zorian had no idea who the man was or what he wanted to do with him, but he wasn't inclined to be charitable. He had not forgotten the way he was assassinated in one of the initial restarts, and had no wish to repeat the experience.

"Zorian Kazinski?" the man finally asked.

"That's me," confirmed Zorian. He didn't think lying would work, and it would be better to have a confrontation close to the library than to get ambushed in an empty street on the way home.

"Detective Haslush Ikzeteri, Cyoria's police department," the man said. "Ilsa sent me to be your divination instructor."

Zorian didn't know what to say. Ilsa picked a *detective* as his instructor? So much for his idea of talking his new divination instructor into teaching him the restricted divination skills he needed to actually investigate this time loop business. Why did it have to be law enforcement, of all things?

"That's great," Zorian said flatly. "I was wondering when Ilsa would find someone."

If his lack of enthusiasm bothered the man any, he didn't show it. He turned and walked away, gesturing Zorian to follow after him.

"Come on, kid, let's go find a tavern to sit in," he said, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jacket.

Oh yes, a tavern – the perfect learning environment. Gods, not only was the man a detective, he was unprofessional as well. His unkempt appearance sort of suggested it right from the start, but Zorian always tried to not judge too harshly on appearances alone – too many people did it to him, and he always found it very annoying.

His thoughts must have been more visible in his demeanor than he thought they were, because the man quickly started to jus-

tify himself.

"Come now, don't look at me like that," the man said. "It's not like we'll be doing anything too serious today. It's been a long day for both of us, I think – you're tired, I'm tired, we don't know each other, and we'll accomplish nothing if we just jump straight into lessons right away. Hell, maybe we'll decide we don't like each other and call this whole thing off. So today, we're just going to share a drink and talk."

Okay, so maybe Haslush was smarter and more capable than Zorian gave him credit for. He had to stop judging people so quickly. Though...

"I don't drink alcohol," Zorian warned.

Haslush gave him a curious look. "Religious taboo?"

Zorian shook his head. He was never very religious – the gods had been silent for centuries, and as far as Zorian was concerned that meant they either killed each other off or abandoned their creations to fend for themselves. Hell, listening to some of the stories from the age of gods, he couldn't help but think humanity was better off without them – they had a disturbing tendency to throw around plagues and curse entire cities on the flimsiest of pretexts. He didn't think it was a coincidence that humanity only started to advance, both socially and technologically, *after* the gods had fallen silent.

"Bad experiences," he simply said, not wanting to discuss that topic any further.

"Ah," Haslush said, content with his answer. "That's okay, you can order some fruit juice or something. Hell, I can even show you a spell I use when I'm on duty but don't want to offend people by refusing an offered drink."

Now that sounded useful! Zorian looked at Haslush and the man correctly interpreted that as permission to go on.

"It's a neat little alteration spell that converts alcohol into

sugar,” Haslush said, raising his right hand to show a plain metal ring on his middle finger. “I have it imprinted into this ring so I don’t have to visibly cast it – visibly casting a spell on your drink is often resented even more than outright refusing it, believe it or not. The moment I touch the glass the deed is done.”

“Convenient,” Zorian said appreciatively. That spell would have saved him so much trouble over the years. “But I thought organic matter cannot be restructured through alteration spells?”

“Usually not, but that’s because most of them are impossibly complex and poorly understood, not because organic compounds are somehow impossible to replicate,” Haslush said, studying various tavern signs as they walked. Apparently he wasn’t merely looking for the closest one. “Both ethanol and glucose are fairly simple molecules, and quite well understood, so there is no difficulty in converting one into the other.” He suddenly stopped in front of a nearby sign, studying it for a moment before turning to face Zorian again. “I think this is a nice place. What do you think?”

Zorian’s experiences with taverns were very limited and generally unpleasant, so he simply gestured Haslush to go in before following after him.

It wasn’t as bad as Zorian had feared: the insides of the tavern were dark and the air was a bit stale, but the tables were clean and the noise was manageable. Haslush picked an out of the way table in the corner and cast a long, complicated spell on it after they both ordered a drink. Probably a privacy ward of some kind.

Zorian expected the man to start interrogating him the moment the spell snapped into place, but it didn’t play out like that. If Haslush was interrogating him, he was doing it too subtly for Zorian to notice. Hell, the man didn’t even ask him about Daimen, which was always nice. Gradually, Zorian began to relax and started asking questions of his own. Questions like ‘how come a detective has time and inclination to tutor a third year

student in divination magic?

"Hah," snorted Haslush. "A good question. Usually something like this would be the last thing on my mind, but yesterday my commander dumped a really silly case on my lap. Apparently there is a rumor circulating around the city about mentalist spiders lurking in the sewers, and I'm supposed to check it out." He rolled his eyes with a sigh. "Mentalist spiders, honestly..." he mumbled.

Zorian struggled not to let his surprise show and somehow succeeded – largely because Haslush was paying more attention to his drink than to him at the moment. He started a rumor without even realizing it? He supposed he shouldn't be surprised, since he had told Taiven about the spiders right in front of Ima and his sister – between Taiven and those two, they probably blathered about it to a dozen people *at least*.

"Anyway, after work I went to meet with my good friend Ilsa so we could complain about our problems to each other over a drink or two, when she told me she was having problems finding a divination tutor for you. And at that point I realized I have a perfect solution for my problem. I could pawn off the case to some other poor schmuck, help a friend in need, and settle a long-standing argument between me and my commander in one fell swoop. See, a couple of years ago the bureaucrats in Eldemar decided to launch an initiative for getting more mages interested in a career in law enforcement. Only, instead of doing something concrete to attract new talent they asked mages already working inside the police force to go introduce the profession to mages in training on their own initiative."

"Ah," said Zorian. "So you're supposed to do things like this anyway?"

"Yeah, but I've been kind of slacking off in that regard, so my commander is constantly nagging me about missing my quota. Can you blame me though? We get paid extra for doing it, but it's

a pittance considering the hassle.”

“You know better than I do,” Zorian shrugged. “How does, err, ‘introducing me to the profession’ get you off the spider case, though?”

“I don’t have time to do both,” Haslush said. He frowned for a second and then shook his head, as if to clear it. “Yup. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it.”

The discussion petered out after that, and Haslush promised to meet him again at Monday. Zorian was lost in thought as he went back to Imaya’s house, wondering whether anything would come out of the whole spider investigation. Probably not, considering how seriously it was taken by Haslush, but still. He’d have to prod the man for additional details after a week or so.



Zorian tapped his foot impatiently as he waited for Imaya to open the door. He had the key to the front door, but that was no help – Imaya had an annoying habit of leaving the key in the lock, and today was no exception. He couldn’t enter without her help.

She probably liked it that way.

The sound of unlocking brought his attention back to the door itself, which flung open to reveal a concerned-looking Imaya staring at him.

“Umm... did something happen?” he asked. Did Kirielle do something stupid while he was gone?

“I should be the one asking that,” she said. “Where were you? You were supposed to be back hours ago.”

“Uh...” Zorian floundered. “What’s the problem? It’s not like I’m coming in the middle of the night or anything...”

The annoyed look she was giving him told him he shouldn’t have said that. Not that he understood why – it’s not like there was

a rule saying he had to rush back home after class, after all. Back in Cirin, his parents never cared what he did in his free time, so long as he didn't neglect his duties or embarrass them in the process. It was an alien feeling to have someone concerned for him just because he didn't come home on time.

"Look, I'm sorry but I had to meet with my divination instructor after class and the meeting sort of dragged on," he said. "Really Miss Kuroshka, you're going to lose your nerves if you freak out every time I'm late from classes. It's not the first time I've been held up after class, and its certainly not going to be the last."

She sighed and shooed him inside, apparently somewhat mollified by his speech.

"In the future, try to notify me when you're going to be late," Imaya said. "Surely there is some piece of magic that can transfer messages within city limits, yes?"

That was a good idea, Zorian had to admit. "I'll see what I can find," he promised.

"Good," Imaya said. "Your sister has been asking for you for a while now, you know?"

Zorian groaned. "She hasn't been a bother, hasn't she?"

"No, she's a little angel," Imaya said, waving his concerns away. Zorian silently rolled his eyes at the idea of Kirielle being an angel. If Kirielle was so nice then why did Imaya want him to come home so badly? "She spent most of the day drawing, playing with the magic cube you gave her, and talking with Kana. Or should that be talking *at* Kana? I swear, that child is far too quiet. I have to talk to Kael about it one of these days. It's not normal for a child to be so withdrawn..."

Zorian quietly nodded, pleased that the cube he made was such a success. It was nothing special, just a simple stone cube with a bunch of light-emitting sigils arranged into a childish puzzle. He found a design in one of the books Nora recommended to him back

when she had been tutoring him in spell formulas and decided making one would be doubly useful: it would give him some practical experience using spell formula and give Kirielle something to pass the time with.

"Sounds like she had fun today," Zorian remarked. "What did she need me for, then?"

Imaya gave him a strange look. "You're her big brother. She doesn't need a special reason to miss you."

"And the real reason?" Zorian pressed.

"Kana dozed off and your toy ran out of mana and went inert," Imaya finally admitted after a second of silence.

"Ah," Zorian nodded. He noticed the design had very little in the way of mana storage, but he wasn't feeling confident enough to redesign it while creating the cube. There was a reason why the cube had such rudimentary mana reserves, after all – large concentrations of mana tended to explode if handled inappropriately, and the cube was meant to be practice for beginners. Beginners that could totally botch things during the first couple of tries. Considering how many problems he had with simply recreating the design on the stone cube, he felt he had made the right choice when he had decided not to mess with the base design. He would simply make more of them if Kirielle still wanted to play with one – it was good practice, anyway. "She's in her room, I guess?"

"No, she's in your room, reading your books," Imaya said casually.

Zorian's eye twitched, resisting the urge to march straight into his room and throw Kirielle out. In reality, he was lucky to have a room to call his own at all. Imaya still hadn't found anyone willing to rent the other room in the house, and Zorian was grateful for it, since it meant he could keep the room for himself. Unfortunately, his ability to keep Kirielle out of it was completely nonexistent. Kirielle had no inhibitions about coming and going there when-

ever she pleased, and Imaya was even less inclined to stop her than their mother had been back in Cirin. She seemed to find Kirielle's behavior 'natural'.

And the little imp knew it! She knew she could get away with just about everything, since Imaya liked her better than she did him, and she exploited it to the hilt. That's why, when Zorian loudly entered the room, she completely ignored him. She was lying on his bed with an open book in front of her, her feet comfortably resting on his pillow. As he watched her, she reached towards the plate of biscuits Imaya had brought her, intent on scattering even more crumbs over his bed sheets.

"Hey!" she protested. "Those are mine! Get your own biscuits!"

Zorian ignored her and studied the plate full of biscuits he had snatched away from his demonic little sister. "You know, originally I just wanted to get your attention and stop you from making an even bigger mess than you already have, but they do look kind of tasty..."

"Nooooo!" Kirielle wailed as he opened his mouth, threatening to swallow a handful of biscuits at once. She seemed reluctant to leave his bed to get them back, though. She probably knew he wouldn't allow her to claim her spot back easily should she ever relinquish it, clever little imp that she was.

"Tell you what," he said, closing his mouth and putting the biscuits back on the plate. "I'll give you your biscuits if you get rid of all the crumbs you put on my bed."

Kirielle immediately swept her hands over the sheets a couple of times, pushing all the crumbs to the floor in front of the bed. Her task done, she flashed him a cheeky smile.

"Ha ha," said Zorian humorlessly. "Now go get a broom and do it properly. I'll eat a biscuit for every minute this mess remains in a room."

He punctuated his words by shoving one of the biscuits into

his mouth. They were quite good actually.

Kirielle let out a cry of protest and jumped off the bed in a huff. She unsuccessfully tried to retrieve her plate of biscuits, but when she realized she couldn't make him give it back (and when he ate a second one) she instead ran off to get a broom and a dustpan. Apparently she also complained to Imaya, because several minutes later she showed up with another plate of biscuits, 'so he didn't have to steal from his little sister'. Whatever.

Sadly, even after he recovered his bed from Kirielle's clutches, she still returned to his room. Currently she was sprawled over his chest, having collapsed atop of him when he closed his eyes for a second.

"Why are you still here, Kiri?" Zorian sighed.

Kirielle didn't answer at first, being too busy climbing over Zorian's body like he was an inanimate object that didn't feel pain and discomfort. Once she lay firmly on the bed with him, having wriggled sufficient free space for herself, she spoke.

"I'm bored," she said. "Your puzzle broke, by the way."

"It didn't break," Zorian said. "It just ran out of mana. I can make you a new one tomorrow if you want."

"Okay."

A short silence descended between them and Zorian closed his eyes to take a little nap.

"Zorian?" Kirielle suddenly prompted.

"Yes?" Zorian asked.

"What's a morlock?"

Zorian opened his eyes and looked to the side, fixing Kirielle with a curious expression.

"You don't know what a morlock is?" he asked incredulously.

"I just know they're these white-haired blue-eyed people," Kirielle said. "And that people don't like them very much. And

that Kael is one. But mother never wanted to tell me what the deal with them is."

"She didn't, huh?" mumbled Zorian.

"No," confirmed Kirielle. "She said a young lady like me shouldn't talk about those kind of things."

In the interest of avoiding an argument, Zorian refrained from making a snide comment about whether or not Kirielle qualified as a lady. Not even a derisive snort. Someone should give him a medal for self-control.

"Basically," Zorian said, "they're a race of underground humans. Though most of them don't live underground anymore. The disappearance of the gods hit their civilization hard, and the other denizens of the Dungeon have largely driven them out to the surface. Ikosian settlers sort of helped the process along by kicking them while they were down and burning down a couple of their more prominent settlements."

"Oh," Kirielle said. "But that doesn't explain why people don't like them. Sounds like they should be angry at us more than we should be at them. And Kael doesn't look like he hates us."

"Kael is probably totally ignorant of his ancestral culture. I understand a lot of morlocks are. And the reason people don't like them is that the old morlocks had some pretty barbaric customs. They liked sacrificing people to their gods, and seemed to have been cannibals," said Zorian.

"Cannibals!?" Kirielle squealed. "They *ate* people!? Why!?"

"Hard to say," Zorian shrugged. "Ikosian settlers were more interested in condemning them for their practices than understanding why they did what they did."

"Well yeah, they ate people," Kirielle said. "That's evil and disgusting. Don't tell me they're still doing that?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Zorian scoffed. "The authorities would never let them get away with something like that."

"Oh," said Kirielle. "That's good. Is that why people don't like them? They're afraid the morlocks are going to eat them?"

"It contributes," Zorian sighed. "I lost count of the number of rumors I've heard about morlocks supposedly kidnapping children off the street to eat them or what not. But there is more to it. The morlocks had their own brand of magic, which is currently banned just about everywhere, but a lot of morlocks still practice it. The guild calls it 'blood magic'."

"Sounds sinister," Kirielle remarked.

"It does, doesn't it?" Zorian said. "There is no official information about what blood magic actually is, but most people think it has something to do with sacrifice. The story is that morlocks could use a ritual killing of a person or animal to power their spells. Modern morlocks can't exactly kill a bunch of people at whim, but supposedly they still engage in animal sacrifice, both for magical and religious reasons."

Kirielle snuggled in closer to him, shuddering.

"I'm glad Kael and Kana aren't like that," she said.

"Me too, Kiri," said Zorian, patting her on the head. "Me too."

WE NEED TO TALK

Tearing out a piece of paper from one of his notebooks, Zorian wrote down a short message for Imaya, explaining that he had another of his divination lessons with Haslush and would thus be late today. He still didn't see what the big deal about being late was, but he really didn't want to argue about it.

Of course, writing the message was one thing and getting it to Imaya was another – he was at the Academy currently, and it was a long way from there to Imaya's place. He was pretty sure he had a solution, though. He had found plenty of spells for long range communication, and although not many were within his ability to cast or suitable for his purposes, one of the spell combinations seemed promising. Basically, he was going to make a paper airplane and animate it to fly under its own power. A simple locator spell should guide it towards Imaya. The method worked when he tested it with Kirielle, but that was over considerably smaller distances.

Undeterred by the somewhat experimental nature of his actions, he folded the piece of paper into a paper plane and cast his spells on it before flinging it out of the nearest window. It sailed away out of sight soon enough, tracking its target.

Well... classes were over, and the message sent. Time to find Haslush.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, Zorian discovered Haslush had arranged their second meeting in another tavern. Of course. Undeterred, Zorian walked into the place and tried to ignore the stares of the other patrons as he scanned for Haslush among them.

Haslush wasn't there. Did Zorian find the right place or had Haslush simply decided not to show up? He did have a bit of trouble finding the place, since Haslush had given very vague directions to it, but Zorian was sure this was it. He was just about to leave the tavern to see if he had missed something when he realized it.

Something was wrong. He felt an almost unnatural desire to leave this place. If he hadn't spent the dozen or so restarts suffering through Kyron's 'resistance training' he probably wouldn't have noticed it, but there was a compulsion effect targeting him.

He pulled out his divination compass and murmured a quick locator spell, seeking out Haslush. The needle immediately pointed towards an unassuming brown-haired man in factory worker getup sitting in the left corner. Sighing, Zorian shuffled over to the man and sat on one of the chairs facing his table.

"Can I help you?" the man asked in a painfully scratchy voice, staring at Zorian with hollow, bloodshot eyes. Very creepy. Very uninviting.

Instead of answering, Zorian muttered a quick dispel. A wave of dispelling force rushed towards the man, disrupting the illusion. The creepy man melted away to show Haslush pouting at him like a little kid.

"I must say, I didn't expect that," Haslush said. "I figured you'd enter and leave the tavern at least three times before you figured it out. I dare say you just broke the betting pool – only two people voted for you getting it right away."

Out of the corner of his eye Zorian saw two of the bar patrons

giving him a thumbs up.

"Can you drop the compulsion spell now?" Zorian sighed. "I don't think I'll be able to pay attention to you with this constantly hanging over my head all the time."

"Oh. Right," said Haslush, snapping his fingers. Zorian's head cleared immediately and the desire to bolt out of the tavern evaporated.

"So what exactly was the point of that?" Zorian asked.

"I wanted to see where your observation skills stand," Haslush said, taking a sip from his glass. "Divination is one of the trickier magical disciplines, because failure is not obvious. You could perform a divination flawlessly and still get nothing out of it. You could mess it up totally and not even realize you did something wrong. Ask the wrong question, interpret the results incorrectly, or fail to take an important variable into account and it's all just wasted effort. Experience can help you minimize those kind of issues, but it helps to be naturally perceptive."

"I guess getting it right immediately means I scored really well?" Zorian tried.

"It means you're off to a good start," Haslush said. "We're not done yet."

And with that, Haslush reached out across the table and caught him by his wrist before he could pull his arm away. All sights and sounds around Zorian instantly disappeared, his surroundings replaced by an inky silent void. The only things he could still see and hear was his own body and Haslush, who seemed to be sitting on thin air, what with his chair being replaced by the same darkness that consumed everything else.

"Don't," Haslush warned when Zorian tried to wrench his hand free of Haslush's grasp. "It's a harmless spell, and it will disappear the moment we break skin contact. If it makes you feel any better, I'm suffering the same effects while it lasts."

"What's the point of this, then?" asked Zorian.

"How many people were present in the tavern when I used this spell on you?" Haslush said.

"What?" Zorian tried to look around him and immediately realized what the darkness was supposed to accomplish. "Oh. You want to see how much I noticed about the state of the tavern."

"How many people?" repeated Haslush.

Zorian wracked his brains for a moment. He did get a pretty good look at the patrons of the tavern when he was scanning them, trying to spot Haslush, but he never actually counted them. And it's possible someone left the tavern while he was talking to Haslush without him noticing it.

"Twenty... three?" he tried.

"Close. How many trophies are lined up on the wall next to our table?"

Unfortunately, while Zorian had noticed the trophies he didn't give them more than a single glance. 15 more questions from Haslush in that vein, and Zorian was no longer feeling so confident about this. Haslush finally let go of his hand and the rest of the tavern immediately appeared again.

"Oh don't feel so down," Haslush said. "You're not half-bad, really. And honestly, I wouldn't have canceled our lessons just because you did badly in something like this. How are you standing with divination, anyway? Standard second year graduate or do you have something extra?"

"I know a bunch of library divinations and I have mastered the north finding shaping exercise," Zorian said.

"What, north finding exercise already?" asked Haslush in surprise. Personally, Zorian felt that exercise was very easy. "Well, there goes the homework I intended to give you after today's session. Anyway, today I'll teach you how to analyze objects."

He reached into the pockets of his long coat and placed a number of objects on the table in front of them: a sealed envelope, an old pocket watch, a locked box, some kind of giant nut, a spell rod, and a fancy-looking glove.

"Analyzing objects is something I do a lot, so I figure it's a good thing to start with. Identifying what the object does, finding out who handled it last, what kind of magics and protections are placed on it... you could make an entire career out of it, and some do," Haslush said. "I hear you're interested in a job at the spell forges so this is bound to be rather useful for you."

"So what do I do?" asked Zorian.

"Now I teach you the spells you'll need and you practice on these," Haslush said, pointing at the various objects on the table.

It was a very productive session after that, and it got Zorian thinking. Based on the man's various comments, Haslush was clearly somewhat high in Cyoria's police hierarchy. Maybe he could do something useful with the information about the invasion without tipping off the organizers? It might be worth dying once or twice to find out.

"I really must thank you, Mister Ikzeteri," Zorian said. "You are a lot better at this than I initially gave you credit for."

"It's fine," Haslush said. "I actively cultivate a somewhat unflattering façade. It helps people relax around me. So what are you trying to butter me up for, anyway?"

Zorian sighed. How should he put this then?

"Could you put up some privacy wards first?" Zorian asked.

Haslush raised an eyebrow at the request but nodded in agreement soon afterwards. He quickly set up some sort of spells over their table and then waited expectantly. He would have to get the man to teach him some of those protective spells in one of the restarts.

"I have heard there is a plot to smuggle war trolls into the city during the summer festival, after bombarding the city with artillery magic during the fireworks launches," Zorian said.

Haslush immediately sat up straighter, so at least it seemed he wasn't going to get dismissed out of hand. Now he just had to make sure he doesn't get carted off to the police station.

"And I don't suppose you'll tell me where you heard that?" asked Haslush suspiciously.

"Can't," Zorian confirmed. "It seemed reliable to me, though."

"I see," Haslush sighed. He poured some more alcohol into his glass and took a sip. "I hate the summer festival, you know? Virtually all buildings have their warding schemes loosened while it lasts, the huge amount of visitors makes it hard to spot trouble-makers in time, and the mayor and other bigheads want all sorts of stupid things done in preparation for it. It's a perfect time for criminals and terrorists of all stripes to go wild in the city."

Huh. Zorian didn't actually know that until now.

"So how are these people going to smuggle in goddamn war trolls of all things, and what are they trying to accomplish?"

"Through the Dungeon," said Zorian. "As for the purpose, I honestly don't know."

"Anything else you can tell me?" Haslush asked.

"Not really, no."

"Then I have just one more question," Haslush said. "Why are you telling this to *me*, of all people?"

"There are some very high placed people involved in this, and I'm not sure who I can trust," Zorian said. "You seem like a fairly influential person who is unlikely to be involved. Also, I'm hoping you won't drag me off to a cell for questioning."

He didn't actually know whether high placed people were involved or not, of course, but he felt it was a good bet they were. He failed to see how an invasion of this kind of magnitude could be or-

ganized without the cooperation of some very influential person inside city administration.

"I'm tempted," Haslush admitted. "But all you'd really have to do is claim it was all a prank and I'd pretty much have to let you go. The mage guild was founded because mages didn't trust civilian law enforcement to judge them fairly, and they guard their privileges jealously. They would get you out within days and perform their own investigation. You'd get a slap on the wrist for being stupid and I'd spend the next year being punished by my bosses for falling for a childish trick and getting the mage guild angry at us."

"Um," Zorian fumbled. Haslush sounded more than a little bit bitter. He didn't know Cyoria's police force harbored such resentment towards the mage guild.

"It's fine," Haslush said. "I'm not angry at you. I guess I'll do some investigating and we'll talk more about it after our next session. You try finding out more from these mysterious sources of yours."

Zorian left the tavern in a good mood, though it was somewhat dampened by fear of assassins. Hopefully Haslush would be discreet in his investigation.

When he got to Imaya's place he was told by Imaya that she got his message, but she was still fairly unhappy with him – apparently the paper plane rammed straight into the back of her head when delivering his message, and that was dangerous. What if it had rammed into her face and poked out her eye?

Some people were never happy.



The house was calm, the only two occupants currently present being Zorian and Kirielle... and thankfully, Kirielle was amusing herself with doodling into her notebook instead of pestering him.

That was good, because trying to levitate a snail, like Zorian was currently doing, was not at all easy. Not only was the snail alive, and thus inherently resistant to magic, but it was also actively fighting the levitation effect, twisting and bending in the air in an attempt to break free of the unseen force holding it aloft.

He was cheating a little – he was actually levitating the shell, which was largely immobile and much more solid than the actual snail. The real test of skill would be levitating a slug or something, but... well, he was having enough trouble with the damn snail at the moment.

"Poor snail," Kirielle remarked from the sidelines. "Why don't you let this one go and find another one to torture? It's going to end up traumatized if you keep this up."

"I'm not torturing it," Zorian protested, trying to split his attention between holding the snail in the air and talking with Kirielle. "It's completely unharmed. I'm not even sure if snail brains are complex enough to be traumatized. The damn thing is as enthusiastic about escaping as it was when I started this."

Kirielle looked as if she was about to argue but then just grunted and melted back into her chair.

"Where is he?" she said after a minute of silence.

"I don't know, Kiri," sighed Zorian. "Be patient. He isn't even late yet."

"Maybe we should start without him?" she tried.

"No we should not!" snapped Zorian. The snail wobbled in the air, its eyestalks swinging wildly as it sensed its bonds weakening and redoubled its efforts. "Honestly, Kiri, you can be so callous sometimes. The only reason I'm even doing this is because Kael asked me to. You should be thanking him for letting you participate."

"You're the one to talk about callousness," Kirielle grumbled. "You'd rather help a stranger you met a week ago than your own

little sister. And I am grateful, I just-

"Then be nice and wait." Zorian interrupted her, slowly lowering the snail into his hand. He clearly wasn't going to get any more work done today. "He'll be here soon enough. If you want something to do, go release the snail back into the garden."

"What? No way!"

Zorian raised an eyebrow. "Weren't you just advocating its freedom?"

"Well yeah, but I'm not gonna touch it or anything. It's slimy and disgusting and eww."

Zorian rolled his eyes and put the snail into a small box by his side. He would release it outside later. A sound of door opening signaled Kael's arrival.

"I'm here," Kael said. "I'm not late, I hope?"

"How did you know he was coming?" Kirielle asked suspiciously, turning to Zorian.

"Alarm spells," Zorian said dismissively. "And no, Kael, you're not late. Though Kirielle was impatient like usual. Anyway, you said you need my help to catch up to 3 year curriculum, right? Which part do you need help with?"

"I really don't know," Kael said. "As I said, my education was somewhat spotty so even though I know a lot of things, there are things that formally trained mages take for granted that I'm not even aware of. Why don't you give me a brief overview of your first two years and we'll see where to go from there? Ilsa said she will test me three months from now, so there is plenty of time to work with."

Zorian gave his sister a knowing look, but she was avoiding his eyes. He was sure that Kael knew exactly where he was deficient knowledge-wise, but Kiri had probably asked him to play along for her, being largely ignorant about magic herself. He really

didn't know why she was so adamant to learn magic Right Now, as opposed to later, in a proper school environment.

Honestly, as much as he cared for his sister and liked Kael, he probably wouldn't be taking Kirielle with him to Cyoria too often. He spent most of his time in the house dealing with Kirielle, Imaya or Kael (and occasionally Kana), leaving little time for his personal self study. Relatively speaking, of course – Kirielle already complained he spent too much time studying and not enough having fun or paying attention to her.

But all things considered, he could take it easy every once in a while. He could set aside a few hours on helping Kael study for his test, even if he would never actually live to take it during the time loop, and if Kirielle wants to listen in then so what?

He gave them both a brief explanation of the first two years in the academy. Magic-wise, most of the first year was spent on teaching students how to consciously and consistently draw on their magical core, mostly by making them activate various magical objects. There was even a first year class called 'Operation of Magic Items', which was exactly what it said in the title. They also worked on their memorization by doing increasingly complex strings of gestures and chants shown to them by teachers, a practice for later study of invocations. The rest was theory: introductions to various magical traditions and disciplines, learning how to understand the basics of Ikosian language, biology, history, geography, law and mathematics. Not all of it was strictly related to magic, but wait, who's that?

"We'll have to postpone that for the moment," he said, looking at the door. "Someone is–"

Before he could say anything, the door slammed open and Taiven barged into his room in her usual aggressive manner. She scanned the room quickly and immediately stalked towards him when she noticed him.

"...coming here." He finished with a long-suffering sigh.

"Roach!" she exclaimed excitedly. "You're just the man I... wait, am I interrupting something?"

"Yes?" Zorian tried.

"Never mind, it will only take a minute." She shoved a newspaper into his face. "Did you see this?"

He sighed and snatched the newspapers out of her hand so he could put them on the table. There, now he could actually see what she was taking about. Let's see...

Academy Student Kills Oganj!

Yesterday morning Zach Noveda shocked the world when he announced in front of gathered reporters that he had slain Oganj, the feared dragon that had terrorized northern Altazia for more than a century. Naturally, such a bold claim requires suitable proof, and the young Noveda heir had certainly delivered when he summoned the dragon's corpse for inspection. Alliance officials invited in for the occasion have confirmed the body almost certainly belongs to the infamous Terror of the North, although further examination is necessary before they are willing to present Zach with the promised bounty for killing the beast...

Zorian read the article in stony silence. He was dimly aware of Kirielle and Kael staring over his shoulder so they could see what had captivated his attention like that, but he didn't let that distract him.

Was this the reason for all those short restarts? Because Zach wanted to kill a dragon? Zorian wasn't sure what to think about that. On one hand, the mage dragon was a menace, and killing him was an impressive feat. On the other hand, it seemed like a waste of time and effort – what did Zach really gain from this, other than combat experience? Dragon magics were of no use to humans, and

Zach was already so rich that he wouldn't gain much from Oganj's hoard.

Whatever game Zach was playing, Zorian couldn't figure it out. Or did the other time traveler just do whatever popped into his head at any particular moment?

"Hey, Roach, you went to class with this guy, right?" Taiven prodded after a while.

"Yeah," he confirmed. "He was supposed to be in my class this year too, but failed to show up when the classes started."

"He ran away from home," Taiven said. "There was a recent scandal about that a week ago. They asked him about it in the article but he kind of dodged the question there."

Zorian nodded. Zach simply told the reporters he had 'a great number of disagreements with his former guardian' and refused to elaborate. There was an interesting story in there, Zorian was sure, but if the newspapers hadn't managed to dig something up on the whole thing then Zorian definitely wasn't going to accomplish much by poking his nose where it didn't belong.

Zach also told the newspapers he intends to go back to school 'for a few months' when he was prompted for his immediate plans. Great. He would have to lay low during the next few restarts, until Zach got tired of the academy again.

"Isn't Oganj the dragon that annihilated an army sent to kill him?" Kirielle asked. "Or was that mother just trying to scare me?"

"A small army, and Oganj lured it into a trap," Kael said. "The general seemed to think Oganj would wait in his lair while the army approached. He instead decided to do something about it before it reached him. He carved exploding runes into the walls of a canyon and lured the army inside. The only reason anyone survived is that some of the mages teleported out before the whole thing collapsed on top of them."

"And I heard he killed two of the Immortal Eleven, too,"

Taiven said. "So how the hell did this Zach guy kill the thing?" Taiven said. "Is he some kind of legend or what? Why didn't you tell me you had that kind of guy in your class?"

Zorian sighed. What the hell was he supposed to tell her?

"Let me put it like this," he said carefully. "During the first two years, Zach had trouble with just about everything. He was such a poor mage that people weren't sure if he would pass his certification, and you know how easy that thing is."

"That... doesn't make sense," Taiven said. "Even if the whole killing Oganj thing is a trick of some sort, he still summoned a corpse of a fully grown dragon. Even I can't summon something that big yet."

"I guess everything changed during the school break," Zorian shrugged. "Somehow he went from a borderline failure to amazing genius between year 2 and three."

"That's totally ridiculous," Taiven huffed. "How would that even work?"

"Time travel?" suggested Zorian shamelessly.

"Like I said, ridiculous," Taiven countered immediately. "Are you sure he wasn't faking incompetence?"

"I'm not sure of anything, Taiven," Zorian said. And he really wasn't – even after a whole year of being trapped inside the time loop he still felt the entire situation was all kinds of crazy. "And the few things I do know are so insane you wouldn't believe a word of it."

"Oh, now I just have to hear them," said Taiven, crossing her arms in front of her chest defiantly. "Go on, just try me."

"Tell, tell!" agreed Kirielle. Kael didn't say anything, but Zorian could tell he was curious as well.

Hm. He could tell them about the time loop, but even if they believed him, what would that accomplish? They were no more qualified to solve this mystery than he was, and if they went around

telling that story to people they could blow his cover to Zach or possible third parties. Then again, he already told Haslush about the invasion, so he was already playing with fire in this restart...

Oh to hell with it, as if they'd ever believe him anyway.

"If I told you that Zach and I are time travelers perpetually reliving this first month of school, and that a giant army of monsters and hostile mages invades the city during the summer festival, what would you say?"

Taiven raised her eyebrow at him.

"Well, go on," Zorian prompted.

"You're right," Taiven sighed. "I don't believe a word of it. So you're saying the things you know are *that* insane?"

"At the very least," Zorian confirmed.

"Huh," Taiven said speculatively. "Sounds interesting, but you'll have to tell me those stories some other time. I kept you long enough, I think. See you around, Roach!"

Zorian watched as Taiven left before turning back to Kael and Kirielle. "So. Shall we continue where we left off?"

They both remained silent, staring at him.

"Um," he said. "Why are you staring at me like that?"

"Is it true?" Kirielle asked fearfully. "Are you really a time traveler?"

Zorian opened his mouth and closed it again. What?

"Your friend may be too oblivious to recognize an answer couched as a hypothetical, but we're not," Kael elaborated. "You really do believe that, don't you? That you're a time traveler?"

"I... yes. If it's a delusion, it's a very convincing one," Zorian said carefully. "The magics I learn in each iteration of this month transfer over into the next one. Insanity doesn't give the victim spells and shaping skills."

"I don't understand," Kirielle complained.

"You and me both, Kiri," Zorian sighed. "You and me both."

"Perhaps you should explain from the start?" Kael suggested patiently. "Tell us what you do understand."

"I lived through this month before," Zorian said after taking a moment to collect his thoughts. "The first time, before I knew about the time loop, I did not bring Kirielle with me to Cyoria."

"What!?" protested Kirielle. "Zorian, you jerk!"

"I lived in one of the academy-provided apartments and I went to classes like normal," said Zorian, ignoring her. He glanced at Kael. "You did too, but I didn't know you then. However, we had an extra classmate."

"Zach?" Kael guessed.

"Yes," Zorian confirmed. "Unlike the previous two years I shared a class with him, this time he was amazing. He solved every test perfectly, he had mastered hundreds of spells and he was good enough at alchemy to impress *you*, of all people."

Kael raised his eyebrow at him.

"Yes," Zorian assured. "It was like he was completely transformed during the summer break. At the time I didn't care very much – I was curious as to how he accomplished it, but it was not my business to pry. And then the summer festival came, and everything went to hell. Artillery spells descended from the sky on the city, and an army of monsters followed in their wake. As I was running through the burning city, I witnessed Zach fighting the invaders. He was throwing high-level spells as if they were candy, fighting with a skill that no third year student could possibly possess. He fared pretty well at first, but then a lich arrived at the scene and demolished him."

He paused for a moment to consider his next words, but Kirielle evidently didn't want to wait that long.

"And then what?" Kirielle asked. "What happened next?"

"What else?" Zorian scoffed. "We died. The lich cast some kind of weird spell at us – a necromantic spell, I am told – and we

were instantly killed.”

“So how did you go back in time then?” asked Kirielle suspiciously.

“I have no idea. All I know is that I was suddenly back in my bed in Cyoria, with you wishing me a good morning in that uniquely charming Kirielle way. At first I thought this was something the lich did, but I would soon find out this was not an isolated occurrence. Every time I die, or at the end of the Summer festival if I don’t, my soul is transported back to that morning in Cirin before I take a train to Cyoria.”

They stared at him for a few seconds, and Zorian was already becoming certain they would suddenly start laughing and mocking him when Kirielle decided to speak again.

“So you are a time traveler, but you can only go one month into the past and only until one specific day,” said Kirielle carefully. Zorian nodded. She understood that a lot better than Zorian had thought she would. “And you don’t control any of it, except by deliberately killing yourself.”

“Yes,” Zorian confirmed.

“You are the lamest time traveler ever,” Kirielle opinionated. And just like that the tension was broken.



It had been three days since he had told Kirielle and Kael about the time loop and he was honestly a little bit disappointed by their reactions. They both seemed to believe him, but neither was terribly affected. Both of them were still asking him questions about it whenever they could catch him alone, and he knew Kael was researching the topic in his free time, but they continued to go about their business as if nothing was wrong. They weren’t even giving him weird glances when they thought he wasn’t looking or anything!

"I told you already, I've only been in the time loop for little over a year," Zorian told Kirielle. "I'm not even close to all-knowing and I can't answer these questions you keep asking me."

"I can't believe you've been going to school all this time," Kirielle grumbled. "I'd have quit after the second time."

"You'd have ended up mind wiped or slaved to Zach in a heartbeat," Zorian retorted. "There is a reason I'm doing this slowly and carefully."

A gentle knock on his door stopped their argument short. Zorian was a bit paranoid about visitors ever since he had told Haslush about the invasion, and telling Kael and Kirielle about it only increased that. Even though he had told Kael and Kirielle not to spread the 'festival invasion' part of the revelation to other people, he could never be sure if they had listened to him. Especially not Kirielle. He kept expecting assassins to barge into the house any day now, but his paranoia had thankfully been groundless so far. Since only Kael knocked so lightly, Zorian had a pretty good idea who it was.

"Come in," Zorian invited.

Instead of coming in, however, Kael remained standing in the doorway.

"We need to talk," Kael said, a hint of nervousness in his voice. "Can you come into my room for a moment?"

"Is it about time travel?" Kirielle said excitedly.

Kael sighed. "Kirielle, I know you won't like this, but can you stay in your room while I talk to your brother? It's related to time travel, but it's a bit... private."

For a moment it looked like Kirielle was going to complain, but then she shot him a speculative look and nodded in assent. As he watched her leave back to her room, grumbling all the way, Zorian had to admit he was a little jealous of Kael's ability to control Kirielle. She never listened to him when he tried that sort of thing.

Shrugging, Zorian followed Kael into his room, where the morlock boy promptly dragged a chest from under his bed and retrieved a mysterious black book with no title out of it.

"I've been looking into your... problem... the last few days," Kael said. "I may have found something."

"You did?" Zorian asked excitedly.

Kael opened the book he was carrying and leafed through for a few seconds before he found what he was looking for. He handed the open book to him and pointed at the page.

"Based on the chant you memorized from the lich, and everything else you told me, I think this is the most likely spell he used," Kael said.

"Soul Meld," Zorian read aloud. "Requires at least two targets. Causes target souls to merge and blend into one. Typically used as a component in more complicated rituals, which heavily modify the effects. If the spell is used in isolation, the resulting entity is virtually always rendered insane or otherwise defective from the stress of the merger. Commonly used in... creation of familiar bonds, and soul bonds in general..."

That definitely sounded like a likely candidate for the spell, but where on earth had Kael found this? Frowning, Zorian leafed through the rest of the book. It was full of soul magic spells, and much of it was written in several unknown scripts that Zorian couldn't read. This... wasn't the sort of thing you could find in the Academy library, least of all with just a student clearance.

Which meant this was probably Kael's personal book.

"Kael... are you a necromancer?" asked Zorian carefully.

"A difficult question," Kael answered after a short pause. "I do not enslave the dead, or curse people. There is more to soul magic than that, though."

Well this was just great – he told his secret to one of the few people who could actually do something to put him down perma-

nently. And he was scolding Kirielle about being reckless just a few minutes ago, too. He really was a giant idiot sometimes.

But hey, what's done is done, and at least Kael didn't seem very hostile at the moment. If anything, the other boy seemed to be more afraid of Zorian than the other way around.

"I won't report you, if that's what you're worried about," Zorian said. Partially because he was deathly afraid of what the other boy would do to him if he tried. A necromancer, of all things... "You agreed to keep quiet about my secret, so it would be hypocritical of me to betray yours without reason. Still, necromancy? Err, I mean, soul magic?"

Kael gave him a weak smile. "It's an interesting discipline, if unfairly judged. My teacher had an interest in it and I wanted to continue the tradition."

Tradition, right. Zorian thought about pressing the matter further, but decided against it. Mistake or not, he could at least get some benefit out of this – he'd just met a decent-seeming necromancer willing to answer his questions. How often does that happen?

"So if the lich performed a soul meld on me, why am I still... well, me?" Zorian asked. "As I understand it, a spell like that would have fused my soul with Zach's completely. We would both cease to exist as individual people."

"Well, I must admit I am not an expert on soul magic by any means," said Kael. "My primary strengths are alchemy and medicine, with soul magic being merely a side interest. That said, I assume the spell was simply stopped before it could complete the effect. It's entirely possible Zach committed suicide when he realized his soul was being targeted."

"It would have been a sensible course of action in his case," Zorian agreed. "Though he didn't exactly give me the impression that he was aware of the danger when I talked to him. I suppose it

could have been the amnesia playing tricks on him."

"Or he may have a contingency spell placed on him, set to kill him if it detects unauthorized tampering of his soul. You already said he may not be the originator of the time loop. Whoever placed the magic on him was doubtlessly aware of the danger, as the time loop you are trapped in is clearly a work of a skilled soul mage."

"Right. So since the spell was only allowed to work its magic for a moment, we were spared from the worst effect," Zorian mused. "And I ended up with some kind of a soul bond that drags me along for the ride. Possibly. There was obviously some soul melding involved, in any case. Can you find out what the spell actually did?"

"Maybe," Kael said slowly. "Although this would involve spells. Soul magic spells, to be more precise. Are you sure you want to trust an evil, slimy necromancer with this?"

"Yes," confirmed Zorian, rolling his eyes at Kael's dramatics. Maybe it wasn't the smartest thing to agree to, but he was honestly desperate for some answers and he was getting an honest feeling from Kael. He was usually a good judge of character. "It is true that I am leery of soul magic, but that doesn't mean I automatically hate you now. Go ahead and cast whatever spells you need."

After 15 minutes of mysterious spellcasting (which had no visible effect on him, and didn't even give him an uncomfortable feeling), Kael was forced to admit he didn't get much. The only thing the other boy could tell him was that he definitively didn't have a classical soul bond with Zach – if he was connected to the other time traveler, it was through something more exotic and subtle than that.

"I'm sorry," Kael said. "I thought soul magic as grand as this would be blatantly obvious but I guess I was wrong. Maybe if I tried it on Zach...?"

"There is no way to perform an examination on him without

telling him the truth," Zorian said. "I'm not sure I want to do that yet."

"Of course," Kael said. "Although I'm not sure what else I can do. I'd have to be a vastly better soul mage to help you with this, and if you're right I just don't have the time to become one. Even if you convinced me of all this right at the start of the time loop – and I'm not sure you could do that so soon, before I have gotten to know you a little – one month is not enough to get anywhere in a field like soul magic."

"Uh," fumbled Zorian after a few seconds of silence. "Maybe you could teach me soul magic?"

"You would be willing to do that?" Kael asked in mild amusement.

"You said there is more to soul magic than cursing people and enslaving the dead," Zorian said. "And I really do need answers that only soul magic can provide."

Also, if he learned soul magic personally he would no longer have to trust strangers to mess around with his soul. If someone had to cast soul magic, he'd rather it was him.

"Though I'm flattered you are willing to set aside your prejudices, the truth is you would never be good enough for what you want to do with it," Kael said. "Although most soul magic can be performed by normal mages like you, the really sophisticated spells require a certain amount of soul perception – a skill that can only be gained by drinking a special potion made from a properly harvested dirge moth chrysalis."

"And is the potion rare?"

"Dirge moths spend most of their lives in the ground," Kael said. "For 23 years they live their lives as larvae before emerging from the soil en masse as swarms of poisonous dirge moths. The moths live for exactly one day before laying their eggs and dying. In case you're curious, the last emergence of the moth swarms was

less than a decade ago.”

”There will be no dirge moth chrysalises for at least another decade,” realized Zorian.

Kael nodded. ”And the potion requires a fresh chrysalis – they cannot be preserved.”

”And there is no other way to gain soul perception?”

”Maybe there is, but I only know of this one,” Kael said. ”There are some rituals involving human sacrifice that claim to provide the same benefit to the mage, but I have never tried them and I suspect you would not want to either.”

”Definitely not,” Zorian agreed.

After a few more minutes of discussion Zorian left Kael’s room, lost in thoughts.

He wasn’t quite willing to give up on the idea of learning soul magic, but he had more than enough on his plate right now so he wouldn’t push it. There were plenty of other restarts in which to try that later.

The moment he had entered the room and closed the door behind him he felt a very familiar touch on his mind. It was not unlike the time he had ventured with Taiven into the sewers, yet a lot subtler and less alien, like cobwebs brushing against the edges of his thoughts.

He immediately panicked, his eyes swinging from one corner of the room to another in search of his assailant while he tried to mentally block the presence from his mind. Despite his practice with Kyron, he found himself unable to do so.

[*So you are Open?*] a clear, confident voice resonated through his mind. Unlike the last time, there was no pain or confusing images involved... but that was somehow even more terrifying. In his last encounter, his opponent was obviously unused to dealing with humans. This one knew exactly what it was doing. [*Interest-*

ing. You have met one of us before? This will be easier than I thought then.]

There! Did the shadows in that corner move? He was about to cast a magic missile at the spot when his whole body suddenly froze and refused to listen to him.

A dark shadow suddenly jumped from the patch of darkness in the corner of his room and landed on his bed – right in front of him. It was a spider, like he suspected, but it looked nothing like what he expected. The spider was relatively small for a giant spider breed, no bigger than Zorian's chest, and a lot more compact than the spindly, long-legged varieties that people usually associated with spiders. Wracking his brain, Zorian identified it as a type of jumping spider.

As the creature turned around to face him, Zorian suddenly found himself staring at a pair of giant, solid black eyes that gave the spider a surprisingly human-like face. There was another pair of smaller eyes on its 'forehead', for the lack of a better word, but the two big ones kept drawing Zorian's attention. The other thing he noticed, of course, was a pair of giant fangs that looked like they could pierce his skull with ease.

[Greetings, Zorian Kazinski,] the spider spoke telepathically. [I have been wanting to meet you for a while now. You and I need to have a long, looong talk...]

SYMPATHY FOR THE SPIDER

For a moment, silence reigned (both literal and mental), as Zorian stared into the unblinking eyes of his adversary. Zorian wasn't one of those people who had a phobia of spiders, but it was hard not to be intimidated by a creature that could read your thoughts and have you completely at its mercy due to induced paralysis. He couldn't even try to physically overpower the effect, since the paralysis was a purely mental one – he was quite literally locked out of control of his own body.

The situation wasn't completely hopeless. As a mage, Zorian was resistant to mind reading almost by default. The ability to clear away stray thoughts and emotions, and otherwise discipline their mind, was a must for any aspiring mage. That said, controlling your thoughts for long periods of time was tiresome. It was only a matter of time until a stray thought escaped him and he slipped... *an important secret* to the blasted spider. And resistance to mind reading would do him no good if the creature grew frustrated with his resistance and decided to take a metaphorical sledgehammer to his mind.

In the end, the spider decided to speak first. Or rather, communicate telepathically to him first, as that appeared to be its only

method of talking to him. It made sense, really – the spider had no recognizable mouth from which to speak out of.

[You're untrained,] the spider opinionated. [It's a pity. I would have loved to trade techniques with a human psychic. I suppose it's to be expected, though, considering the unhealthy attitude towards mind magic your species has.]

...What?

[Why the confusion? You cannot possibly be ignorant of the Gift,] the spider said, torn between bafflement and amusement at the thought. [See, right there! You just sensed my emotions. What do you think that is, if not empathy?]

Zorian's brain froze for a moment. Him, an empath? That... that was ridiculous! He was neither social nor pleasant enough to be empathic!

[What a strange chain of thought,] the spider mused. [Aranea like me are all Open, yet there are plenty of loners and unpleasant individuals among us. I'm sad to say that some even use their empathy to purposely promote discord within the Web.]

Zorian's mind was momentarily aflame with possibilities before he forcibly reined himself in and shoved those trains of thought into the back of his mind. Focus! This was a horrible time for getting distracted. He had a far more serious issue to think about.

[You must be mistaken,] Zorian thought back, knowing that the spider would pick up on his thought. [It's far more likely you accidentally attached some of your emotions to the telepathic message you sent me.]

[There is no need to be insulting,] the spider immediately sent back. [I am an aranea matriarch. If I had attached something other than speech to our communication, it wouldn't have been by accident. But never mind – if you want to deny the obvious truth of your empathic abilities, I'll play along for now. What I want to

know is what your quarrel is with my Web. As far as I know we've never done anything to you, so I'm baffled as to why you felt the need to sic the enforcers at us.]

What was she- Oh. The warning he gave Taiven to watch out for telepathic spiders and the subsequent search for the creatures by the enforcers. Right. Of all the things he had been worried about during this past week, having the spiders track him down for setting enforcers at them had never even entered his mind. Funny how these things worked...

[I'm not sure if you'll believe me, but I never intended to send the enforcers after you,] Zorian sent. [All I did was warn a friend to watch out for you when she went to the sewers. It all seems to have spiraled away from there.]

[Why wouldn't I believe you? I am literally reading your mind as we speak,] the spider noted. [But that still doesn't explain how you even knew about us. We tend to be a tad secretive. Or, for that matter, why you felt the need to warn your friend to watch out for us, since we don't really attack humans without provocation.]

Well crap. How can he possibly explain that without revealing anything sensitive?

[I suppose this is something related to this time loop you're trapped in, then?] the spider asked innocently.

Zorian would have grit his teeth if he could. Damn it, how!? He pointedly didn't think about that!

[Your ability to control your train of thought is fairly impressive for an amateur, but it is a form of mental defense that only works if you know your mind is being read. I observed you and your group for quite a while before I executed this ambush. And while you are Open, and thus hard to read covertly, your friend and sister are virtually defenseless against my powers. They didn't even notice while I was trawling through their memories, much less when I skimmed their surface thoughts.]

Zorian felt like slapping himself for such an obvious oversight. Of course sharing his secrets with the likes of Kirielle would come back to haunt him – a secret is only as secure as its weakest link. He considered the situation for a moment before giving a mental sigh. It was hopeless. The spider had completely outmaneuvered him, and currently had him over the barrel. The creature seemed reasonable enough, but he would have almost preferred that it was murderous – he could recover from death easily enough, but the things a skilled mind mage could do to him would linger with him on subsequent restarts.

[Your insistence on viewing me as an uncompromising threat despite no hostile moves on my part is honestly getting rather tiresome,] the spider sent, and Zorian detected a distinct note of annoyance in her bearing. Zorian idly wondered how the esteemed matriarch would describe her current ambush and her gross violation of his friends' privacy if not as hostile. [I came here to talk, not fight. The enforcers hadn't even managed to track us down, much less dispatch any of us, so there is no reason for hard feelings on my part. This isn't a revenge run – it's an attempt to defuse a situation before it spirals out of control. I know our kind looks frightening to your eyes, but please stop thinking of me as some slavering beast out to eat you or some sadist intending to torture you into insanity for absolutely no reason. We're no worse than humans, really.]

[I'm not sure that sets me at ease. Humans can be pretty horrible,] Zorian noted. [But I see your point. So what now? The enforcers will get tired of their search quickly enough and leave you alone, and I have no intention of taking any further action against you and your... Web. Problem solved, then?]

[Well yes,] the spider agreed. [But in the process of confronting you I found something a hundred times more interesting than a human kid with a grudge. You don't really think I'm going to just ignore the whole time loop business, do you?]

[I was kind of hoping you would, actually,] admitted Zorian. [It's not really your concern-]

[Oh, I beg to differ,] the spider interjected. [I just found out I'm being effectively memory wiped in regular intervals. I am *greatly* concerned.]

Zorian wracked his brain for a response that could dissuade her from getting involved but gave up after a couple of seconds. He was getting an impression of resolve and stubbornness from the spider, and had a feeling all of the arguments he could marshal were doomed to fall on deaf ears. He didn't know how he could read a giant spider's body language, but apparently he could. Maybe there was something to her claim of him being empathic.

[Look,] Zorian tried, [if we're going to have a serious conversation about this I would really appreciate if you released me from paralysis. This is very uncomfortable and I'd be a lot friendlier if I weren't frozen like this.]

[I don't trust you that much,] the spider told him bluntly. [All you have to do is scream and things could get uncomfortably messy.]

[I'm not going to do that,] Zorian assured. [That would just put my sister and friends in danger. I'm sure you could handle anything anyone in this house could throw at you.]

[Well, I'm not. I've lived too long to underestimate mages,] the spider said. [Tell you what, though. Why don't I simply let you go for now and leave? Later, when you calm down a little, you can descend into the city tunnels and track me down for a nice friendly chat in neutral territory where we both feel a lot safer.]

That... sounded like a great idea, actually. Well, except for the question of why-

[Why would you bother tracking me down when you can just pretend this never happened and ignore my existence entirely?] the spider surmised. [Well for one thing, I can tell you're interested

in what I mean by you being Open, no matter how hard you try to hide it. You will never get a satisfactory answer unless you seek me out. Secondly, there is a reason why I accepted the idea that you're trapped in a time loop without dismissing you as crazy. I have important clues that could help you solve this puzzle and break out of the loop, but I'm not sharing them until I get something in return. I'm sure we can agree on a fair price. And finally, working with me isn't just going to be an unnecessary chore like you seem to think. I am a leader of a shadowy group of mind reading spiders that have their feelers throughout the entire city – surely you can see how a group like that could be useful in making sense of this event?]

Zorian swallowed heavily as he finally realized the seriousness of the situation he was dealing with. Her group was that big and organized? He knew the spider before him was a representative of a larger group since she introduced herself as an 'aranea matriarch', but he thought it was just a loose pack consisting of a dozen spiders or so at best. Suddenly the pitch black eyes staring at him seemed a lot more threatening than they were just a moment ago. Gods, what had he gotten himself into?

[I'm glad we were finally able to understand one another, Zorian Kazinski. Rest now, and we will talk when you're less tense.]

Zorian suddenly felt a smothering blanket of telepathic force press itself against gently but firmly against his mind. He tried to resist, but the mental attack seemed to ignore his mental defenses entirely. Despite valiant efforts, Zorian soon blacked out. When he woke up a few minutes later, he was alone in the room and there was no trace of giant spider anywhere in the house.



Afterwards, Zorian thought long and hard about the matriarch's 'offer' and ultimately decided he really didn't have much

choice. He somehow doubted she would patiently wait for him if he ignored her for too long, and raising a fuss about her actions would attract unwanted attention to him and might cause the matriarch to retaliate out of spite. And since she knew about the time loop, she was bound to pick something that would haunt him beyond the confines of this particular restart. Of course, there was also the fact that some of the things she said during their brief exchange interested him greatly. The potential benefits of hashing out a deal with her were simply too great to ignore.

That said, he had absolutely no intention of rushing to the damn spider at the earliest opportunity – that would just make him seem desperate. Let her wait for a while. It was a good idea to do some preparations before confronting the matriarch, anyway.

First of all, he needed to know more about these 'aranea' he would be meeting with. His previous searches for information about the spiders left him empty-handed, but now he was armed with an actual name of the species and his search was much more successful. He found plenty of descriptions, though they were of much poorer quality than he had hoped. Apparently aranea were considered semi-mythical due to their rarity and there were many conflicting reports circulating about them. Everyone agreed they were sentient and magical in nature, but from there the details diverged wildly. Depending on the author, all sorts of powers were attributed to them, from the ability to assume human form to the ability to manipulate shadows and other, crazier abilities. Zorian could see three possible explanations for this. One, the aranea had a dizzying number of subspecies, all with a wildly different appearance and abilities. Two, the authors were making stuff up. And three, the aranea were mages in the human sense, armed with a flexible spellcasting system capable of producing a wide variety of effects. Knowing his luck, it was definitely number three – the most worrying of possibilities. A group of one-trick ponies lim-

ited to mind magic was a dangerous foe, but one that could be countered with enough preparation. A group of mages utilizing a completely novel spellcasting system whose limitations he was unfamiliar with? That was practically the definition of unpredictability.

Still, the aranea he had met never gave any indication of knowing any magic beyond the mind-based one, so maybe this group specialized in the field or something. Having a way to deal with their mind affecting abilities was certainly a must before going off to confront them. One of the books also suggested aranea were vulnerable to light-based attacks, being nocturnal in nature and lacking eyelids. It sounded plausible to Zorian, and he was pretty sure his spell formula skills were sufficient to cobble together some flash grenades. A few more general defensive measures and he should be set. Well, as set as a mage of his own caliber and resources could possibly be – it wasn't much, but it would hopefully buy him enough time to flee if things turned sour.

The other thing he was trying to puzzle out was the matriarch's claim that he was an empath. The idea seemed so wrong to him. The stories he'd heard about empaths painted an image of a compassionate, sociable person possessing great wisdom, respect for tradition, and lots of friends. Zorian didn't really fit this mold. Did that prove anything, though? Empaths were so rare – among humans, at any rate – that any sort of 'fact' about them was suspect. As strange as it may sound, he rated the opinion of a giant telepathic spider higher than those of human authors. If he really was an empath, however, why didn't he... well, know it? You'd think the ability to sense other people's emotions would be very obvious. He supposed it was possible that his abilities were too weak and erratic to manifest themselves in an unambiguous fashion. Which raised the question - how to discern the truth, then?

Fortunately, empathy wasn't a particularly sensitive topic so

nothing stopped him from asking Ilsa or other teachers for help and information. Before he did that, however, he decided to try looking for help closer to home. He had noticed their landlord had an interest in esoteric branches of magic, even though she wasn't a mage herself. She had enough books in her house to stock a small library. It wouldn't hurt to ask, he supposed, and Imaya was a lot more approachable than anyone else he could reach.

He approached her while she was washing the dishes one evening.

"Miss Kuroshka, could you spare a minute?" he asked. "I'd like to talk to you about something."

"I told you to call me Imaya," she said, halting her task long enough to give him a mild glare. "And of course I can talk to you, but I have to finish this first. Pull up a chair and wait till I'm done."

Instead of doing that, however, Zorian moved to help her with her task. She'd be done quicker with him helping her out, and it was a cheap way to score some points with her before asking for help. She seemed momentarily surprised by his gesture, but recovered her composure quickly and continued on as if his action was totally expected.

Once they were done, Imaya sat down at the kitchen table and motioned for Zorian to join her.

"So..." she began. "What exactly is weighing so heavily on the mind of my grumpiest tenant that he would come to me for counsel? The way you've been avoiding me this whole time, I almost thought you hated me."

"I don't hate you, miss K... uh, Imaya," finished Zorian, correcting himself after seeing her cross look. "I've just been pretty busy, that's all. Kirielle kind of monopolizes all of my free time here."

"She is quite a handful, isn't she?" Imaya said speculatively. "Still, I can't see what a busy boy like you would want from me. You aren't trying to seduce me, are you?"

"What!? No!" sputtered Zorian. She was at least twice Zorian's age, for heaven's sake! "I am not-"

He stopped himself when he saw the barely restrained mirth emanating from Imaya.

"Very funny, *Miss Kuroshka*," he deadpanned, deliberately not calling her 'Imaya' to spite her. "Very, very funny..."

"It was from my perspective," Imaya said, laughter dancing in her voice. "But I can see you don't take jokes at your expense too well, so let's just move onto the reason you sought me out."

"Well..." started Zorian, pointedly ignoring her remark about him being too sensitive about jokes. "It's actually magic related. I noticed you have a lot of books about esoteric magic in your home."

"It's a hobby of mine," Imaya said. "I always did have an interest in magic, especially the rare kind. I even went to a mage academy as a teenager, much like you did. That's how I met Ilsa, actually – we were classmates back then. But... that was a long time ago."

Zorian nodded, accepting her last statement for what it was – a request not to pursue that topic further. He was fine with that.

"So I assume you read all these books then?" he asked.

"Each and every one of them," she confirmed.

"Did any of them perhaps relate to empathy?" Zorian asked. "Specifically, how can you tell if you're an empath yourself?"

"I did read something about that topic, though I don't have the book in question here with me." She gave him a curious look. "Why? Fancy yourself an empath?"

"Well... maybe," admitted Zorian. "I mean, it doesn't sound very likely to *me*, but I met an actual empath recently, and she seemed sure I was one too. So I don't feel comfortable with just dismissing the possibility."

"Hmm," Imaya hummed. "And why do you think it's so unlikely if you've been told that you're one by another empath?"

"Shouldn't empathy be pretty obvious to the one who has it?" Zorian asked. "Well it's not obvious to me. Off the top of my head, I can't think of anything that would indicate I am one."

"Nothing?" Imaya asked curiously. "I find that hard to believe – the indicators of being an empath are so common and mundane that false positives tend to be a major problem. In fact, a lot of experts insist that there is nothing supernatural about empaths – that some people are simply a lot better at reading people's body language and environmental cues than most of humanity. It's far more likely that you're just ignoring the signs. For instance, can you honestly say that you've never had an instinctive 'feel' about a person you just met?"

"Well no, I can't say that," Zorian admitted. "I get feelings like that all the time. That isn't anything unusual, though."

"It might be," Imaya said. "Just how often do you get such hunches and how reliable are they overall?"

"I..." Zorian hesitated. "I get those feelings pretty much every time I talk to someone. They tend to be pretty accurate from what I can tell. Why? Is that so unusual?"

Imaya gave him a speculative look. "A bit, yes. Every time you talk to someone, you say? How about random strangers minding their own business? Do you get these... 'feelings' about them too?"

"Uh, sometimes?" admitted Zorian, shifting nervously in his seat. "Some people have really intense personalities, you know? You can pick them out of a crowd from the other side of the room without even trying."

"Interesting. How about groups of people? Can you make a spot judgment about the mood of a group without speaking to anyone?"

"Well, no," said Zorian. "Frankly, the pressure crowds out all other sensations when I'm in a large enough group. If I'm subjected to it long enough, I lose even the ability to make judgments about

individuals, much less the group as a whole.”

“The pressure?” Imaya asked, giving him a baffled look.

“It’s a... ah, a personal problem,” fumbled Zorian. “Every time I enter a big enough crowd, I feel this weird mental pressure that gives me a headache if I stay inside long enough.”

Zorian shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He hated telling people about the pressure thing, since most people immediately assumed he was either delusional or making things up. His family, for instance, had never believed him when he tried to describe the phenomenon to them as a child, believing instead that he was making things up so he wouldn’t have to follow them to their various social events. Eventually they grew tired of his claims and threatened to send him to a madhouse if he didn’t admit he was lying, so he never brought the issue up again.

“That’s... an interesting problem,” Imaya said carefully. “Tell me, is the pressure constant or does it vary according to some criteria?”

“It varies,” said Zorian. “The more people there are in a crowd and the more densely they’re packed the stronger it is. It’s also stronger if the crowd is...”

He trailed off as he suddenly realized something. Gods, he was so *stupid*!

“Yes?” Imaya prodded. “If the crowd is what?”

“...emotionally charged for some reason,” finished Zorian lamely.

A short silence descended on the scene, before Zorian rose from his seat and began angrily pacing around the room.

“Your empathic abilities are so strong that you literally feel the emotions of a crowd as tangible mental pressure bearing down on you,” said Imaya after watching him pace around for a while, “and you think there is nothing to indicate that you’re an empath?”

"It's not that easy! How was I supposed to know what the pressure was?" Zorian protested, nervously running his hand through his hair. "It's just... there. It has *always* been there, a constant annoyance that was with me ever since I was a child. Do you have any idea the sheer amount of trouble this thing has caused me? Isn't empathy supposed to be a boon? Most of the time I did my best to ignore it, vainly hoping it would go away in time."

"Well, yes," Imaya agreed. "Empathy is usually depicted as a great gift to the person who has it. But there are plenty of reports of empaths whose powers are so strong or volatile that they are crippled by them instead. Considering some of the horror stories I've read about, your case is relatively mild. It could have been worse."

'It could have been worse' – that could easily serve as a summary of his entire life so far. Oh well – there had to be a way to rein in his errant empathic abilities somehow, and he had plenty of time to find it. The aranea probably knew how, though he suspected he wouldn't like what they would ask in return.

"Zorian?" Imaya asked after a few moment of silence. "I can see this is a somewhat sensitive topic for you, but can I ask you a question? Well, two questions really."

"Sure," agreed Zorian. She did end up helping him, even if he didn't imagine her help to play out the way it did, so the least he could do was satisfy her curiosity.

"I get the feeling that you didn't like the idea of being an empath, even before you knew what you do now," she said. "Why is that? Maybe I am projecting somewhat, but I can't imagine why you *wouldn't* want to possess an inborn magical ability. I hope you don't think you're a freak just because-"

"No, no, it's nothing like that," Zorian quickly assured. "I know a lot of civilian-born students react badly to anything that may make them... abnormal... but I'm not like that. No, the real rea-

son I didn't like the idea of being an empath is... far more stupid than that. Actually, I'm kind of embarrassed to even admit it, so can we just move on?"

"No," Imaya said, a smirk on her face. "This I definitely got to hear."

Zorian rolled his eyes. Served him right for admitting it was embarrassing. Oh well, it's not like she'd remember this conversation once the loop reset.

"All right, but you can't tell this to anyone, okay?"

Imaya mimicked sealing her mouth shut.

"It's because empathy is usually portrayed as a *feminine* ability, one reserved for girls and girly men," admitted Zorian.

"Ahhh," nodded Imaya. "Of course a boy would be bothered by something like that..."

"I'm not sexist or anything," Zorian hastily added. "But I already receive a lot of comments about my supposed lack of masculinity, and they're annoying enough as it is. I really don't want to see how bad they would get if they had this sort of 'proof'."

His family was the worst offender in that regard, especially his father, but he would keep that little tidbit to himself.

"I won't tell anyone," Imaya said. "And if it makes you feel any better, there is no evidence that empathy manifests itself more often in women than it does in men."

"I figured," Zorian said. "Very few magical abilities are gender specific, unless they're artificially designed to be that way."

"And I also think those people have no idea what they're talking about," Imaya said with a supposedly innocent smile that had a hint of mischievousness behind it. "I think you're a very handsome young man who will someday make some girl very happy indeed."

"T-thanks. What was the other question you wanted to ask, again?" said Zorian, trying to change the subject to something less embarrassing. She had her fun, no need to torture him further.

"I assume you will try to develop your ability further?" Imaya asked. Zorian nodded. "In that case, I'd like you to keep me informed about your progress. I find stuff like this incredibly interesting."

Zorian agreed, though it was essentially an empty promise. She would remember none of this after the next restart. Their conversation done, Imaya returned to her household chores and Zorian went back to his room to plan his visit to the aranea. He really didn't want to find out what the matriarch would do to him if he didn't show up soon.



"Well, this is it," Zorian said out loud, standing in front of the entrance to the sewers. The matriarch didn't tell him where exactly in the sewers she hoped to meet with him, but he knew where he had met the spiders the last time he had been down there, so he intended to start from there. "The point of no return. I once again offer you the chance to turn back. You don't have to risk your life with me, Kael."

He gave a pointed look to the morlock following after him, trying to use his newly found (newly recognized?) empathic abilities to gauge the other boy's mood. Sadly, the boy's emotions were too well controlled at the moment and his control over his empathy sucked. Regardless of how Kael truly felt about this trip, he was clearly determined to see it through. Why, Zorian didn't know. When he told Kael about the aranea matriarch's ambush and the resulting conversation, he did it because he wanted to have someone to bounce ideas from and Kael seemed like the best choice (he already knew about the time loop and he was clearly very intelligent), not because he had wanted Kael to come with him. Kael, on the other hand, insisted that coming alone on such a meeting was the height of idiocy and that Zorian needed a partner to cover him.

Zorian reluctantly agreed, not entirely comfortable with risking someone else's life in this thing, no matter how logical it was. Kael seemed amused that Zorian cared more about his safety than his own, considering that Kael would be restored to normal once the loop restarted and Zorian might not be, but Zorian's moral sense had yet to adapt to the implications of the time loop and he was horribly bothered by the idea of leading Kael to his death in the tunnels and leaving his daughter all alone in the world... even if it was only for a week or so.

"I told you to drop it," Kael sighed. "I'm definitely going with you. If nothing else, then so this 'aranea matriarch' and I can have a conversation about ethical uses of mind magic."

Oh right – Kael was still kind of bitter that the spider searched through his memories in her quest to piece together what Zorian's motives were.

Finally, they descended into the tunnels, Zorian leading the way. He chose his way carefully, occasionally leaving a magical trap behind them in the form of stone cubes covered in spell formula. If they had to flee, the traps should be able to surprise any pursuers by backtracking where the traps were. Most of them simply erected a forcefield to delay the attackers, but a couple had more... aggressive effects. At the very least it should force the pursuers to slow down in order to deal with the cubes and give them enough time to reach the surface.

Kael, meanwhile, was their anti-mentalist support. He had put a mind shield spell on himself, and would remain under the spell's effects constantly. If the meeting at any point turned sour, Kael would immediately cast the spell on Zorian as well. Kael seemed sure that the spiders had a method of communicating with humans other than telepathy and suggested that they both use the spell right from the start, but Zorian knew he had to keep his mind 'open' if he wanted these talks to be in any way productive. His

instincts, which Zorian now recognized as his uncontrolled empathic abilities, were telling him that aranea placed great significance on mind-to-mind communication. Shutting them out completely would be seen as an insult, even if they did happen to have alternative methods of communicating.

As they approached the spot where Zorian had first met the aranea during his romp through the sewers with Taiven and her group, he felt a telepathic contact brush against his mind. Like the first time he had met the sentient spiders, this one was cruder, more forceful than the feather-light touch the matriarch had displayed during her 'visit' to Imaya's home.

A stream of psychedelic images and alien emotions hit his mind like a sledge hammer, causing him to stumble back in shock. Kael immediately shifted into defensive posture but Zorian signaled him to stand down. He was pretty sure at this point that the aranea he was in contact with had no hostile intentions. Apparently the minds of humans and aranea were different enough that telepathic communication was difficult, and this particular one never learned how to do it correctly.

As suddenly as it came, the 'communication' stopped. The presence remained, however, and Zorian soon felt another aranea connect with him, using the first one as a sort of telepathic relay.

[Ah, so you've managed to find us in the end,] the distinctive mental voice of the matriarch spoke in his mind. [Good, I was beginning to fear I should have left instructions on how to find us. Stay where you are, please, I will be with you shortly.]

"She's coming," said Zorian to Kael, who nodded gravely.

They didn't have to wait long. The matriarch soon skittered into view, flanked by two other aranea guards. The fact that he was able to pick out the matriarch among the three aranea, despite the fact that all three of them were fairly identical to his eyes, was probably just another proof that he really was empathic. Things

like these made him wonder just why he had needed a talking spider to point it out to him before figuring it out.

[I originally intended this to be a private talk between just the two of us,] the matriarch spoke to his mind. [But since you saw fit to bring a guard, I decided to do likewise. Oh well, at least you didn't shut me out of your mind like your friend did, so you're still better than most humans I converse with.]

"Kael isn't here just as a guard," Zorian said, speaking out loud for Kael's benefit. "He is involved in this thing as surely as you are, and I'd like him to participate fully in the discussion. Do you perhaps have a way to communicate vocally for his benefit?"

The matriarch seemed to consider it for a moment before she suddenly started waving four of her front legs in front of her, tracing some complex gesture in the air. Zorian tried for a moment to decipher what she was trying to communicate before he realized she wasn't trying to talk to him.

She was casting a spell.

"There," a feminine voice declared from the direction of the matriarch, though her mandibles didn't move at all. "This is the aranea equivalent of the 'magic mouth' spell that you are no doubt familiar with. It's just a sonic illusion, but it should be enough."

Huh. So they did have more than just mind magic in their arsenal.

"I thank you for your consideration," Kael said guardedly, obviously threatened by the spiders but trying to stay polite.

"Far from me to refuse such a simple request," the matriarch said guardedly. She was obviously a little suspicious about Kael herself, probably because his mind was protected behind a mind shield spell. The spell made him immune to her abilities, but it also seemed to paint him as a threat to the aranea.

"Please, child," the matriarch scoffed. Zorian heard the words with his flesh and blood ears, but he also felt them broadcasted

to his mind – she might be vocalizing her words for Kael's benefit, but she clearly wasn't going to give up communicating with Zorian 'the proper way'. "I could get past your silly human mind magic any time I wanted to. No, the reason I'm bothered by his mind ward is that it blocks me off from his mind completely. How am I supposed to trust him if he won't even let me read his emotions and surface thoughts? It's *rude*."

Zorian's mind boggled at the mindset that considered putting your surface thoughts up for scrutiny as being basic courtesy, but he supposed that's species differences for you. Kael didn't appear to be as understanding.

"Rude!?" he demanded, indignant at the accusation. "You think you have a right to just barge into people's minds as you please, no permission given or asked, and you call *me* rude!? You spied on my personal memories, damn it, I have every reason to protect myself!"

The matriarch sent him a telepathic equivalent of a sigh, though no sound was vocalized for Kael's benefit. "So did I," she said calmly. "Your friend was a possible enemy that I needed to know more about, and you were one of the weak points I could target in order to get the needed information. Your mind was completely unprotected, after all."

"So why didn't you sift through Zorian's memories, then? Wouldn't that be quicker and more relevant to your quest?" Kael asked.

"Hey!" Zorian protested.

"I have limited myself to skimming his surface thoughts as a courtesy, because he is Open," the matriarch said. "Among Aranea there is an unofficial custom to ask for permission before delving deeper into the minds of non-enemy psychics, regardless of species."

Kael narrowed his eyes. "And if a person isn't... '*psychic*'?"

"Flickerminds are fair game," the aranea matriarch said dismissively.

"All right, let's stop trying to piss each other off now and get back to business!" said Zorian with a clap of his hands, hoping to halt the argument before it got out of hand. "We were talking about the time loop and how you can help me with that. Before we get to that, though, I really have to ask – when you say I'm 'open', are you referring to my empathy?"

Kael gave him a surprised look at that, since Zorian never told him anything about being empathic.

"Being Open implies being empathic, but they are not the same thing. Empathy is just one of the powers available to you, and a bit of a low-hanging fruit at that – that's why you can use it, despite being completely untrained in the psychic arts. Openness often manifests itself as a low, uncontrolled empathy in the beginning, coupled with a gift for divinations and an occasional prophetic dream."

"I... what?" fumbled Zorian, trying to wrap his head around this new information. Just when he had thought he had things a little figured out, something like this happened. What the hell is being 'open' or 'psychic', then? Was she saying he was a full-blown telepath or something?

"You could be that with enough training, yes," confirmed the matriarch. "I can teach you more about it... provided we come to some kind of mutually acceptable agreement about this time loop business."

"And what exactly do you want from Zorian in that regard?" asked Kael suspiciously.

"Why, my dear Kael, the same thing *you* want from him as well," the matriarch said with a hint of mockery. "I want in on this time loop."

For a moment Zorian wondered what she was talking about, but then his eyes widened as he understood what she meant.

"You want to keep your memories with each restart? To loop around with me and Zach?" asked Zorian incredulously.

Kael shifted uncomfortably in his spot, refusing to look at him in the eye, while the aranea matriarch stared straight back at him without a hint of shame on her face.

"I... I guess I can see why you would want that," said Zorian hesitantly. "I mean, I'm not too happy about my situation, but even I can see that I'm benefiting massively from it. But you seem to have gotten the wrong idea – both of you." He glanced at Kael, but the morlock was still avoiding his eyes. He probably thought Zorian would be angry at him for wanting to 'take advantage of him', but Zorian wasn't really angry. Just confused. "The thing is, I don't know how to bring anyone into this loop. I don't even know how the details of how I got sucked into it, much less how to replicate it. I *can't* bring you into it."

"We didn't get the wrong idea, Zorian," Kael sighed. "We're not stupid. We know you can't do it now. We know you won't be able to do it by the time this time loop ends." He gave the matriarch a weak glare. "Or at least *I* know. Maybe the great aranea matriarch knows something this poor flickermind doesn't."

"I agree with the morlock," the matriarch said, refusing to rise to Kael's provocation. "It is highly implausible that you'd be able to bring us into the time loop as you are now."

"You've completely lost me at this point," Zorian complained. "What *do* you want, then?"

"My idea was to store memory packets in your mind, allowing your soul to ferry them when the time resets itself," the matriarch said nonchalantly. "It's not quite as good as having your entire soul sent back, but it would be good enough for my purposes."

"And I would agree to that... why?" asked Zorian suspiciously. That sounded like it would require some serious messing with his mind. Far more than he was comfortable with, in any case.

"I'm sure I can find something to tempt you with," the matriarch said, punctuating her message with a mental shrug. "You need information about the loop that I have. You want to learn how to control your empathy. You need my help in countering the invaders. Need I go on?"

Zorian sighed and turned to Kael instead of answering her.

"I wanted to connect you with some people and have you figure out, with their help, how your connection with Zach works. Then you could apply that knowledge to bring me into the time loop," said Kael. "It would probably take quite a few restarts, and I don't have anything nearly as tempting as our esteemed matriarch over there, but on the other hand it is something that will definitely help you learn more about this time loop in the process."

Left unsaid was that those people Kael wanted to connect him with were probably all necromancers and that having them mess around with his soul was every bit as dangerous as letting the aranea screw around with his mind, and possibly more so.

"I see," sighed Zorian. "Well, I'll set aside Kael's proposal for now, since that's not what we came here to discuss."

"That's fine with me," Kael said quickly. "I still have a lot to think about in that regard."

"Right," said Zorian. "Then let's move on to the details of the matriarch's proposal. Just out of curiosity, do you have a name? If we're going to do business, especially so sensitive, I'd like to know who exactly I'm talking to."

The matriarch didn't answer verbally. Instead, she sent a short burst of telepathy containing the same sort of psychedelic jumble of images and concepts that the less-skilled aranea bombarded him with in the initial greeting. Thankfully, this particular burst wasn't painful, just confusing – probably because it was so relatively short. After mentally dissecting the chaotic message in his head, he realized this was the name he asked for. Translating the concepts into

something appropriate for human communication proved a bit of a challenge, however.

"Spear of Resolve Striking Straight at the Heart of the Matter?" questioned Zorian curiously.

"As good an approximation of my real name as any," said the matriarch. "And yes, I know that's too unwieldy to use in human conversation. Your language is very crude, so it's hard to translate aranea names into it without ending up with such overdramatic-sounding drivel. You can just continue calling me 'matriarch' and I won't hold it against you."

Kael snorted derisively at the matriarch's swipe against human speech, but didn't say anything. Zorian, for his part, was considering how to proceed.

"Alright then," said Zorian. "You told me that there is a reason why you took the time loop seriously. Why don't you tell us what you mean by that."

Before the matriarch could answer, a loud roar pierced through the relative silence of the tunnel, quickly followed by several more similar ones. Color drained out of Zorian's face as he realized the identity of the creatures that produced the roar.

A band of war trolls were coming their way.

Chapter Eighteen

THE PACT IS SEALED

He should have known, really – every time he got even slightly closer to getting to the bottom of this mess, some complication sprang up to hamper his progress. It was uncanny. He was half-tempted to conclude the (as of yet unconfirmed) third time-traveler was messing with him, but he would have expected something far more decisive than a pack of war trolls if that were the case.

...and now that he thought about it, it was kind of scary how radically his perspective must have shifted during the last year if he started considering troll war bands a nuisance rather than an existential threat.

[Not this again,] the aranea matriarch complained telepathically. [How do those things keep finding us? I had the whole web warding against divinations and everything...]

Zorian filed in the back of his mind the fact that this wasn't the first time the matriarch encountered the war trolls, but at the moment he didn't really have enough time to consider that little tidbit in any appreciable detail. He exchanged a knowing look with Kael, and then they both turned around and started running in the direction they came from. Zorian motioned for the aranea to follow

after them, and received a thought of assent from the matriarch in turn.

[We can't outrun them,] the matriarch noted as they ran. [Especially us aranea – aside from short bursts of speed, we're actually a lot slower than humans.]

[It's fine,] Zorian thought, certain that the aranea would pick up on it. [Me and Kael prepared a couple of surprises for pursuers behind us. They should slow the trolls down enough for us to reach the surface.]

[Ah. An insurance against me in case the talks turned sour?] the matriarch surmised. [You hid it well from my surface scans. I would have been caught totally off-guard if I had truly planned to double-cross you. Then again, I don't think I could have caught up to you if you decided to run anyway, so it was mostly a wasted effort. Or would have been, had there been no war trolls.]

[Information on aranea running speed is a tad hard to come by in human books,] Zorian thought irritably, slowing down to let the aranea overtake him. They were just about to pass the first trap and he didn't want to seal the aranea on the other side of the forcefield along with the trolls. [Can't you use your mind magic to pacify those things?]

The war trolls rounded a corner in a tightly-packed mass of green flesh, howling like lunatics and waving their huge swords and maces around like they were twigs, but Zorian was ready at that point. He sent a pulse of mana into the pair of nearby cubes covered with sigils and a sheet of force sealed the corridor. It wouldn't last long if a bunch of trolls kept beating at it, but he never counted on it being an insurmountable obstacle in the first place.

[Sadly, whoever is controlling them has learned to shield their minds against us after the first few conflicts,] the matriarch said. [It's not foolproof, but we won't be able to pick their defenses apart before they smash us into pulp.]

There was a terrible racket behind them, and Zorian chanced a glance back to the barrier to see what was happening. The sight that greeted him brought a pleased smile to his lips – the trolls had apparently failed to arrest their momentum properly and ended up crashing head-first into the barrier. Probably because the relatively narrow corridor didn't allow the trolls to advance in a single line and the ones in the back didn't let the ones in the front break up the mad charge. Or maybe they just didn't recognize the forcefield for what it was? No matter, the point was that they were currently all tangled on the floor in a great big confused mass, and would take some time to reorganize. That should give them enough of a lead to escape cleanly, even with the slowpoke aranea weighing them down.

Just to make sure he activated the next two barrier traps as well, but the two cubes holding explosive traps he simply scooped up and took with him. They were weapons of desperation, truth be told, and he wasn't sure if he could activate them without blowing himself up along with the target. Besides, he was pretty sure they didn't have enough power to seriously damage a troll, being designed to handle much squishier targets.

Zorian was worried about how they were going to smuggle a trio of giant spiders past the entrance guards, but he needn't have worried – the aranea seemed to be able to edit other people's senses in real time, effectively erasing their presence to the victim. Zorian had to admit he hadn't thought the aranea's mind magic was quite so... *subtle*. It would appear he was still taking them far too lightly.

But anyway, they were back on the surface and totally safe. Huh. He hadn't expected the whole thing to end so... favorably. When he realized a pack of trolls was coming after them, he fully expected he was heading for an early restart. It seemed good things *did* happen to good people occasionally. Still, as happy as he was at his current fortune, his talk with the aranea wasn't finished yet,

so the four of them quickly relocated themselves in a deserted alley to continue their conversation.

"We should be safe enough to talk here," the matriarch said in her magically-assisted voice. "I can't sense the presence of any minds that don't belong here. Not even those blasted cranium rats."

"The what?" asked Zorian.

"Another psychic creature we've recently come to share this city with," the matriarch groused. "They look much like regular rats, except the top of their head looks like it has been sawn off, leaving their brains visible."

"Oh," Zorian said. "I actually saw something like that once, back in my original live-through of this month. I never went down that street in any of the subsequent restarts, though."

"Probably for the best," the matriarch said. "It is likely they are working for the invasion forces. They only appeared recently and the trolls started harassing us when we tried to exterminate them."

"Are the rats intelligent?" asked Kael. "You seem to be implying they're some kind of spies, yes?"

"They are psychic, like us," the matriarch said. "Their minds are telepathically linked to one another, forming a collective intelligence. Individually, they are little more than particularly cunning rats, but the more of them group together, the smarter they get. And the stronger their telepathic abilities become. They're small enough to get anywhere and the death of any particular rat is inconsequential. Each one acts as a relay for the full power and intelligence of the entire swarm. They're almost perfect spies, better than even us aranea. As I said, we tried to get rid of them before they could muscle in on our territory... but we failed to account for the fact they weren't working alone."

"Crap," Zorian said. "With those things running around the city, it's no wonder the invaders are so well informed. They could

be pulling information straight out of people's minds without anybody realizing it. All they need is to find one person that is privy to sensitive information and whose mind is unprotected, and they can blow a hole in the whole system."

"Yes," the matriarch confirmed. "Aranea can do something similar, but not nearly to the same extent. We're too big to move as freely through human settlements as cranium rats do, and our individual members are not as expendable as individual cranium rats. They can get into many places where we can't, especially warded ones – giant spiders trip defensive wards in ways that a couple of funny-looking rats do not."

Zorian frowned as he suddenly realized something. With these cranium rats on the loose in the city and working with the invaders, there was no way the invasion organizers remained ignorant of the time loop in every single restart. Zorian himself had not advertised his situation much, but Zach did. Sometimes very visibly and explicitly, if Zach hadn't been speaking in hyperbole when Zorian talked to him. So whoever was controlling the cranium rats knew about Zach being a time traveler in at least some of the restarts... and never did anything about it. Zorian found that difficult to explain. Did they just refuse to believe what their agents on the ground were telling them? That sounded uncharacteristically sloppy considering how well the invaders seemed to be organized otherwise.

"An interesting point," the matriarch said, breaking him out of his thoughts. "I'm beginning to understand why you're so reluctant to deal openly with this Zach. But we're getting distracted here, dancing around the real issue. You heard my offer, Zorian. I have been very generous about my information thus far, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to put my foot down now. I want a straight answer – will you let me send a memory packet through you or not?"

Zorian sighed. What a difficult question. He wanted – no, *needed* – what the matriarch was offering... but he really didn't trust her with this. And really, how could he? Mind magic was only a hair's breadth better than soul magic in terms of abuse potential, and that was only because mind magic had well-established counters whereas soul magic did not.

"You're asking a lot," Zorian complained.

"I offer a lot," the matriarch countered. "And besides, I'm taking as big of a risk here as you do. I have no guarantee that you will actually track me down in each restart and alert me to the memories I stored inside your mind. What stops you from playing along for a few restarts, until you've gotten everything you wanted from me, and then meticulously avoiding contact with me for the rest of the time loop? Nothing. I have taken a leap of faith and decided to trust you. Is it so wrong to expect a similar commitment from you in turn?"

A short silence descended on the scene as Zorian digested her words in his head. He supposed there was some merit in what she was saying, though he wasn't quite buying the idea that she was risking as much as he was. His risk was more final and immediate than hers.

Oh well. No pain, no gain.

"Fine," he said. "I agree to your terms."



"You are a braver man than I," Kael told him as they slowly walked back to Imaya's place.

Zorian absent-mindedly rubbed his forehead instead of giving him a proper answer. He didn't feel noticeably different after the aranea was finished with the procedure, to be honest. Kael was worried about possible dormant command spells that the matriarch may have implanted along with the memory packet, but...

"I actually had a reason to think it might not be as dangerous as it sounded," Zorian finally said.

"Oh?" Kael prompted.

"Yeah. I researched the limitations of mind magic before we went to talk to the matriarch, both the classical spellcasting type and the telepathic abilities of magical creatures known to use them. I even asked Ilsa and our combat magic instructor for advice. I probably made them really suspicious of what the hell I'm doing but whatever. Anyway, everyone seems to agree that even expert mind mages can't just rewrite someone's brain on a whim, or in a stealthy manner. It takes a great deal of time and you basically have to knock the victim unconscious or they will be fully aware of what you're trying to do to them and fight it with everything they got – physically and mentally. If the matriarch tried to do something truly terrible to me, we would have known so quickly enough."

"I'm not really sure I could have done much for you, even if I noticed the deal had gone bad," Kael said. "I do have some modest combat skills, but I doubt they'd be enough to fight off three giant spiders that are all within jumping distance of me."

"It doesn't matter," said Zorian, reaching into his pocket to retrieve one of his two unspent explosive cubes. He held the stone cube in his palm so Kael could see it. "All I had to do was send a pulse of mana into these and both me and the matriarch would have ended up in pieces. I very much doubt the matriarch could have incapacitated me faster than I can pulse my mana."

"Suicide?" Kael asked, sounding surprised. He shook his head. "I stand by what I said. You are a braver man than I."

"As Zach once told me, the time loop skews your perspective on dying," said Zorian, putting the cube back in his pocket. Now that he thought about it, his impromptu security system reminded him of the similar system that protected Zach from the lich's soul meld spell. He should probably start carrying something like this

all the time, just in case. Something way lighter and less noticeable than two big stone cubes, though.

"It's still possible she used something less comprehensive than a full personality rewrite on you, though," Kael said after a few seconds.

"I know," Zorian said. "But you heard what she said at the end. The memory packet should last for a year, at minimum. I plan to avoid the aranea in the next several restarts while I look for a way to examine my mind for such things. Even if the magical expertise is beyond me, I'm sure I can find an expert to hire so they can take a look at me."

"Ah. Good idea," Kael nodded. "Of course, that means it will be a while before you can question the matriarch again. She did say she wasn't saying anything until you deliver the memories to her reborn self in the next restart."

"An acceptable delay," Zorian shrugged. It wasn't like he had nothing to do while he waited, and Zach had indicated he would be spending the next several restarts in Cyoria as well. Hell, even in this particular restart he had to see what Haslush would do about the invasion and what Zorian could do to help him. If he ended up staying in Cyoria during the summer festival at all, that is. He wasn't sure he wanted to do that, all things considered. "So... do you want to tell me your master plan for getting yourself into this time loop now or later?"

"Later," Kael grumbled. "I haven't even ironed out all the details in my head yet. Stupid spider and her big mandibles..."

"I'm pretty sure her speech didn't involve mandibles in any way, actually," Zorian said. "It was a pure sound illusion."

"Really? Wasn't my mind shield spell supposed to protect me from mind effects like illusions, even if they're beneficial?" asked Kael, frowning in confusion.

"The matriarch's spell wasn't targeting your mind. It created

actual sound waves,” said Zorian.

“But then it’s a sound spell, not an illusion no?” Kael stated more than asked.

“Officially, any spell that creates ‘fake’ scenery is an illusion, regardless of the means it uses to do so. Many illusions are made primarily out of actual light and sound, but they’re still illusions.”

“That’s... surprisingly imprecise,” Kael said.

“I understand it’s because a lot of actual structured spells from illusionary disciplines combine mental illusions with... well, let’s call them physical ones. Theoretically, you could separate the two into different categories, and many tried, but in the end the Eldemar mage guild decided to just admit defeat and lump them together.”

“How surprisingly practical of the Guild, then,” Kael said. “I guess even they get an attack of common sense from time to time.”

Zorian said nothing. He didn’t need empathy to deduce that his morlock companion had a bit of a grudge against the Guild for some reason. Personally, Zorian thought the mage guild was doing a pretty good job overall, but he wasn’t so impressed with them that he would defend them in front of others.

The rest of the walk passed in relative silence.



As the start of the summer festival approached, Zorian became more and more certain that Haslush wasn’t going to do much about the invasion. He’s wasn’t sure whether the man had decided Zorian’s ‘suspicions’ were merely a rumor or whether he was ordered to drop the issue, but he no longer seemed very interested in the whole matter. For Zorian, this was a sign that he should take Kirielle and get out of the city before the invasion starts – he had no interest in getting murdered by the invaders again, and even less in having Kirielle die alongside of him.

He would have to see whether he could talk Kael and Imaya into leaving with them.

But although the date was fast approaching, such problems weren't a pressing concern yet. Currently, he just wanted to have something to eat and lie down a little. Kirithishli had given him some truly mind-numbing tasks to perform today, and he wasn't in the mood for plotting. Conveniently, the moment he walked into the house he was assaulted by the smell of food wafting from the kitchen. Imaya's insistence on keeping her informed of his comings and goings was somewhat annoying, but Zorian had to admit it was convenient how she timed her meals to match his and Kael's schedule.

He entered the kitchen and was immediately tackled by Kirielle.

"Brother, I hurt my hand!" she wailed, waving her hand in front of his face. "Hurry, you have to heal it!"

Zorian snatched her wrist to stop her from moving her hand so much and inspected the 'grievous injury'. It was a shallow cut – a scratch really – that would probably heal on its own by the end of the day. Out of the corner of his eyes he could see Imaya trying not to laugh.

Zorian suppressed the urge to sigh. He knew his family would make fun of him if they knew he was an empath, but he honestly didn't expect Kirielle to descend to this level. She *knew* he wasn't a healer, association between empathy and the healing arts notwithstanding. Though considering his excellent mana shaping skills, he would probably make a good healer with enough training... something to consider, at least.

Schooling his face into a serious expression, he slowly turned Kirielle's 'injured' hand this way or that, pretending to study it in detail. Finally, after a thoughtful hum, he looked Kirielle straight in the eye.

"I'm afraid there's nothing to be done, Miss. We will have to cut it off," he concluded gravely. He then turned towards Kana, who was sitting at the table but studiously watching the entire exchange, and gave her a deep, meaningful look. "Fetch the saw."

Kana nodded seriously at him and motioned to leave the table, only to get stopped by a laughing Imaya who assured her that he was 'just joking'. Zorian was pretty sure the little girl understood that all too well and was just playing along. Did they even *have* a saw in the house?

In any case, Kirielle wrenched her wrist out of his grasp at his declaration and pouted at him.

"Jerk," she declared, sticking her tongue out at him.

The meal was relatively quiet, except for occasional outbursts from Kirielle. But that was Kirielle for you – she was a loud person by nature, though Zorian was pleased to say she did have calm periods from time to time. Mostly when she was reading or drawing. It still surprised him a little every time he saw her do that, since it seemed rather out of character for someone like Kirielle to be so absorbed into a book or a drawing. Doubly so because he knew from personal experience that mother and father didn't think much of hobbies like that and tried to discourage them as much as possible.

After the meal, Zorian retreated back to his room, Kirielle following after him. Zorian didn't feel in the mood to chase her off and let her, but she seemed to be in a fairly agreeable mood today and left him largely at peace. He was currently sitting cross-legged while practicing his shaping skills, while Kirielle was lying on her stomach and drawing something on the floor, a small pile of papers scattered around her. Eventually, though, her pen stopped moving and she spent the next several minutes nervously chewing on the tip of it. Zorian was versed well enough in her tics by now to know his peace and quiet would end soon after.

"Zorian?" she suddenly asked.

"Yeah?" he sighed.

"Why do you study so hard?" she asked, giving him a curious look. "Even though nothing really matters in this time loop you're stuck in, you still keep working all the time. Don't you want to have fun from time to time?"

"You're wrong," Zorian said. "First of all, everything matters. You are what you do, and if I were to start doing stupid things just because there is seemingly no consequence for them, those actions would eventually come to define me. Secondly... I actually find studying fun. Well, maybe not all of it, but you get the idea." There was a short silence, but Kirielle seemed reluctant to continue the conversation, even though she clearly wanted to say something. Zorian decided to help her out. "Why do you ask? Is there something you would rather be doing?"

Kirielle's eyes darted between him and the pile of drawings on the floor several times, before she finally reached a decision. She scooped up the papers into a neat stack and promptly plopped into Zorian's lap.

"Can you look at my drawings and tell me what you think?" she asked excitedly.

Oh. Well that wasn't too bad. He never paid much attention to her drawings, especially since she tended to hide them whenever he tried to get a better look, but from what he had glimpsed they were pretty good. Hell, he was feeling in a good mood so he wouldn't even mock her... too... much...

Damn.

Zorian watched and listened in silence and Kirielle animatedly showed off the fruits of her labor, explaining what the drawings represented. Not that she needed to do so, because the drawings were frighteningly realistic. She wasn't just good – she was freakin' amazing. Zorian could swear he was looking at drawings of a professional artist rather than some childish drawings of his lit-

tle sister. One of the drawings was a very detailed scene of Cyoria's cityscape that was so chock full of little details that Zorian was shocked Kirielle actually had the patience to put them down to paper, never mind draw them properly.

"Kirielle, those are absolutely amazing," he said honestly. He had intended to make a few jabs at her skill at first, but he honestly couldn't see anything remotely worth mocking in these. "Why on earth is mother not bragging to everyone about having a budding little artist for a daughter?"

Kirielle shifted uncomfortably in his lap. "Mother doesn't approve of me drawing. She won't buy me any supplies and she yells at me whenever she catches me doing that."

Zorian gave her a baffled look. What? Why on earth would she do that? Mother was close-minded and status-obsessed, but not actively malicious or anything. He picked up Kirielle's stack of drawings and leafed through it again, stopping at a very nice portrait of Byrn, the boy he and Kirielle interacted with on the train to Cyoria. Kirielle had never even seen the boy after that day, yet she was able to create a very faithful rendition of him, presumably by working from memory alone.

"Wait," he said suddenly. "Is that why you keep stealing my notebooks and writing supplies?"

"Ah! I thought you didn't even notice," she admitted. "Since you never complained about it to mother. Thanks for that, by the way."

Well, he never said anything because he thought mother wouldn't do anything about it, even if she knew. But hey, all was well that ended well, and he certainly wasn't going to tell Kirielle the truth and destroy whatever gratitude he just earned...

"What about the books, then? I suppose she disapproved of those too?" Zorian guessed.

"Yeah," Kirielle said, clutching her drawings close to her chest.

"She won't buy me any. She says a lady shouldn't waste time with such things."

That he actually expected, truth be told. Mother didn't like it when *he* spent his time reading, so he imagined she would be none too happy to see her darling daughter picking up such a hobby. Still didn't explain why she didn't want Kirielle to draw, though.

"Well, that's mother for you," said Zorian. She seemed to be getting rather upset, and Zorian could totally understand. It would appear her situation had more similarities to his own than he had ever dreamed about. "Don't worry about it. It was the same with me at first. She'll lay off once she sees she can't bully you into submission."

"It's not the same!" Kirielle suddenly snapped at him.

Now what?

"Kiri..."

"You don't get it! It's not the same because you're away from home most of the year and she can't do anything to you while you're away! You and Daimen and Fortov are here, learning magic and doing whatever you want, *and I'll never get to do that!*" She buried her head in Zorian's chest, her tiny little fingers digging painfully into his arms. "It's not the same because I'm a *girl*..."

Zorian wrapped his arms around Kirielle, rocking her gently to calm her down while he digested what she was telling him. Finally, a realization hit him. Traditionalists in Cirin often held a view that educating female children was a waste of time and money. Hell, some of them even went against the law and refused to send their daughters into elementary school to learn how to read and write! It didn't help that mage academies tended to be rather expensive, even lower quality ones...

"They aren't going to send you to a mage academy..." Zorian concluded out loud.

Kirielle shook her head, her face still buried in his chest.

"They say I don't need it," she said, sniffing sadly. "They already have a marriage arranged for me for when I turn 15."

"Well isn't that nice for them," said Zorian coldly. "You know what, Kiri? You're right. It's not the same. I had to defy mother and father all by myself... you, on the other hand, have *me*."

Kirielle peeled her face from his chest and gave him a searching look.

"You never wanted to help me before," she accused. "Every time I asked you to teach me magic you blew me off."

"I didn't know what you were dealing with," Zorian shrugged. "I thought you were just impatient and didn't want to waste my time on something you were going to learn in due time anyway. But rest assured, if mother and father don't change their minds over the years, you will always have a teacher in me."

She stared at him for a few seconds before she snatched one of his arms by the wrist and gripped it in an oath-making position.

"Promise?" she asked.

Zorian squeezed her hand tighter, eliciting a yelp from her.

"Promise," he confirmed.



Two days before the summer festival, Kael finally laid out his plan to Zorian. It was a lot less concrete than the matriarch's one, and basically involved talking to a number of individuals that Kael thought might know something about soul magic or time travel. None of them were in Cyoria, though, and would require Zorian to basically blow off school in order to travel across the country (and in some cases even across borders). The morlock also hinted that he knew a couple of individuals living in the Great Northern Forest, but he admitted it might be a bad idea to visit those until he could actually defend himself properly. Zorian memorized the

names and locations, but it would be a while until he could visit any of them.

The end of the restart was totally uneventful – He, Kirielle, Kael and Kana boarded the train heading out of Cyoria on the night of the festival and spent the last remaining hours playing card games to pass the time. Imaya refused to go with them, which was fairly unsurprising, giving the suddenness of their request and the sketchy nature of their warnings.

And then, like always, Zorian woke up in Cirin, Kirielle wishing him a good morning. He didn't take her with him this time, which turned out to be a good idea, as Zach did indeed come to class in that particular restart. The other time traveler tried to strike up a conversation with him, but Zorian was determined to avoid him and gave him a cold shoulder. After a few days, Zach seemed to admit defeat and gave up, but Zorian could see that the other boy was watching him way more closely than he did most people. Zorian's freedom to act as he saw fit was consequently somewhat limited, and he mostly amused himself with honing his shaping skills, combat magic, divinations, and spell formula. Taiven was not informed of the 'rumors' behind giant telepathic spiders in the sewers, as he didn't want to meet the matriarch just yet.

An entire restart passed in this fashion. And the next one. And the next. In total, it took six restarts before Zach stopped approaching him at the start of each restart and otherwise pay attention to him. Despite this, Zorian was pleased with what he had accomplished.

He had spent three of the six restarts learning from the ever-enthusiastic Nora Boole (the other three restarts were spent learning from Haslush) and had gotten skilled enough at spell formula to create a lighter, more inconspicuous version of his explosive suicide switch. It was still a cube, though a much smaller one made of a combination of wood and stone – he made two of them in each

restart now and attached them to his key so they would appear as an ornament.

He had also found a mage specializing in mind magic and had him inspect his mind for implanted compulsions and other nasty surprises. Sadly, the man was rather baffled by the memory packet and couldn't confirm it only contained memories. He did confirm, however, that it was currently dormant, and also that no other magical effect was currently active in his mind. If there was some kind of trap in the memory packet, it had yet to activate.

The seventh restart saw Zach still in class, but he appeared to have finally given up on Zorian as a lost cause. It was time to get down to business.

TANGLED WEBS

One thing Zorian found interesting about the restarts was that small, seemingly inconsequential choices exerted incredible influence on what happened in the restart. Conversely, actions that he felt should throw everything out of whack often tended to have muted, or even non-existent effects. Case in point, the last time he had gone into the sewers to meet the matriarch, convincing Ilsa to grant him an access permit to enter the sewers had been trivial. Thus, when Zorian marched into Ilsa's office a few days after the beginning of classes, after he realized Zach had decided to give up on befriending him in this particular restart, he expected the request to be easily granted.

He was wrong. No matter how much he reasoned and pleaded, Ilsa refused to allow a newly-minted mage like him to risk his life in the underworld. He tried to demonstrate his (at this point rather advanced) combat magic skills, but Ilsa wasn't interested and simply shooed him out of her office. It took nearly an hour for Zorian to calm down and realize what the difference was.

Last time he came with Kael. A self-taught genius mage who was also a single parent and had probably dealt with danger before in his life. If Kael thought Zorian was ready to go down into the tunnels beneath the city and was willing to accompany him to boot

to make sure he was safe, then that was good enough for Ilsa. This time he came alone, though. No Kael, no permit.

Not that Zorian was going to be deterred by such a minor setback, of course. He knew at least one person who already had a permit to go down there and might be persuaded to help him.

"Roach, I hate you. You do know that, right?"

Zorian released a long-suffering sigh, opting to keep an eye on the tunnel in front of him instead of turning around to look at Taiven. He didn't need to turn around to know she was making faces at him. "No, Taiven, I don't. After all, you only told me so five times already. Maybe I'll remember it if you say it a few times more?"

"I just don't get it," Taiven complained, ignoring his sarcasm. "You refused to follow me down here when I asked you, saying it's too dangerous. And then you come back to me a few days later, asking me to take you into the tunnels."

Yes, and he was very much regretting it. Why couldn't she have waited by the entrance like he had asked her to? He still didn't know how he was going to explain aranea to her when they found the damn spiders. Hopefully the aranea would be savvy enough to hide in the shadows while he talked to them telepathically – kind of a hassle, but should be enough to arrange a proper meeting in the future somewhere more accessible.

"I mean, were you trying to piss me off?" Taiven continued, undeterred by his lack of response. "Because I'm feeling pretty angry right now, let me tell you..."

"Taiven, please," Zorian pleaded. "I said I was sorry! How many times do I have to apologize? You of all people should understand, considering how many times you pulled stuff like this on *me*."

"Not quite like this," Taiven grumbled. "At least tell me where we're going."

"I actually don't know," admitted Zorian. He was relying on one of the aranea scouts inadvertently contacting him by trying to read his mind, since he had no real idea where their home territory was. "I'll know it when I see it, though."

"Zorian, I swear, if this is your idea of a prank-"

"I'm totally serious," Zorian assured her. "I'm pretty sure we're getting close, it shouldn't take too-"

An alien presence skittered across the surface of his mind, withdrawing immediately when it realized its intrusion was detected. Its telepathic touch wasn't as subtle as that of the matriarch, but Zorian definitely received an aranea feel from it.

"Wait!" he protested, hoping that the aranea hadn't physically fled already. "I want to talk to you, aranea! I have important information for your matriarch!"

"Zorian, what the hell are you talking about?" Taiven asked, thoroughly baffled at his actions. "And who are you talking to, anyway? There is no one here."

Zorian said nothing, choosing to wait in silence for a while. Seconds passed in utter silence as Zorian patiently waited for a response from the spider. Taiven seemed to be torn between feeling irritation at his behavior and agitation at the potentially dangerous situation. Eventually, the aranea decided to re-initiate contact...

...by stepping into the open right in front of him and Taiven.

Taiven gasped in shock at the appearance of the huge hairy spider and immediately moved to draw her spell rod, only for Zorian to snatch her by her wrist and motion her to stand down. She gave him a baffled look before glancing at the spider in front of them. The aranea stood motionless, observing them silently with its huge pitch black eyes but not making any threatening gestures. Taiven seemed to realize that the spider was no threat at the moment and relaxed, moving her hand away from the spell rod attached to her hip.

"Zorian..." she began, radiating a mixture of anger and worry at him.

"I'll explain later, I promise," Zorian said with a sigh before turning to deal with the aranea. "And you! Couldn't you have been a little more discreet? Why couldn't you have stayed in the shadows and contacted me telepathically?"

The aranea reconnected to his mind and sent a burst of amusement at him. [If you wanted to speak to me telepathically, why haven't you called out to me telepathically to begin with? Aren't you psychic yourself?]

Zorian grimaced. If only it was that easy. Finding information about mind magic from his fellow mages was like pulling teeth, since the mage guild took a very dim view on mind magic of any sort, no matter how benign. Nobody could tell him what being 'psychic' meant, much less teach him how to telepathically contact someone. He did track down a spell that allowed a mage to establish a telepathic connection with someone, but the spell was painfully crude – it worked only on other humans, the target had to be willing and able to lower their spell resistance, and the link only allowed word communication devoid of emotional and other connotations.

[I am untrained,] admitted Zorian. [I don't know how to contact someone telepathically. I only know how to piggyback answers on a connection someone else made.]

He wondered about that, actually. Nobody taught him how to do that, yet the concept seemed to come naturally to him. Is this what it meant to be 'psychic'? Perhaps being psychic simply meant he was some sort of instinctive mind mage with inborn skills in the field.

[That's so sad,] the aranea said. [You are incomplete. But I suppose it could always be worse. You could be a flickermind like your friend there.]

Zorian glanced at Taiven, suppressing a snort of amusement. It was a good thing he was talking to the aranea telepathically, because he could just imagine how Taiven would react if someone called her a 'flickermind'.

"What?" Taiven asked, apparently having noticed his look.

"Nothing," Zorian mumbled, shaking his head. [Miss aranea, I- err, you are a miss, right?]

It was hard to tell, but he was pretty sure the aranea he was talking to had a 'female feel' to her. Plus, the aranea were led by a matriarch, so it would make sense for outsiders like him to mostly meet the female members of the species.

[All aranea are female,] the spider said.

[What, really?] Zorian asked. [How on earth does that work? Do you just divide like microbes or spontaneously get pregnant or what?]

[Nothing that exotic. It's just that our species is extremely sexually dimorphic, and the males are both smaller in stature and pretty much subsentient. We don't consider them real aranea,] the spider explained. [If you talk to one of us and they're smart enough to talk back, they're female. The males would probably attack you in lieu of conversation, though you're unlikely to ever meet one unless you somehow gain access to one of our settlements.]

Zorian digested that information for a few moments and then decided not to ask any further questions on the topic. It was interesting, but not really relevant at the moment, and he didn't know how long he had before Taiven snapped from the pressure and started throwing around spells and demanding answers. She wasn't exactly a paragon of patience.

[I'm sorry to be inconsiderate but I really need to speak to the >matriarch<.] Zorian said, doing his best to reproduce and send the weird aranea 'spear of resolve' concept that the matriarch said was her name instead of calling her 'the matriarch'. Hopefully this

would help convince the aranea to take him seriously when he told them about memory packets from another timeline.

[I have been listening to your conversation with >Watchful Eyes That Miss Nothing of Importance< for a while now, Zorian Kazinski,] the familiar presence of the matriarch announced.

Having the ability to throw your mind to any location inhabited by one of your subordinates must be really convenient.

[It is,] confirmed the matriarch. [Now. How about you introduce yourself and tell me how you know my real name? Then we can move on to this important information you have for me...]

[I am Zorian Kazinski, mage in training,] Zorian said. [And the reason I know your real name is that you told it to me yourself... right before you shoved a memory packet into my mind and told me to give it to you later.]

[I... don't remember that,] the matriarch said hesitantly.

[I know,] Zorian said. [If you had been able to retain the memory of that encounter you would not have bothered with putting the memory packet inside my mind.]

[That's quite a claim,] the matriarch said after a short silence. [How do I know that you're telling the truth? This could be a trap. You could be related to the people that have been sending trolls at us all this time.]

[Honestly, I have no idea how to prove the truth of my words to you,] Zorian said. [Your other self was sure you would have a way to prove the authenticity of the memory packet, even without additional proof, and didn't tell me anything I could convince you with.]

[I see,] the matriarch said. She was silent for a few seconds as she thought it over. [Give me access to your mind so I can see this memory packet for myself.]

[Of course,] Zorian said, offering no resistance when the matriarch delved deeper into his mind. He turned to his compan-

ion, who seemed to be at the end of her wits as she watched his silent staredown with the giant spider. "Taiven, I'm communicating with the spider telepathically. Everything should be fine, but if I fall to the floor and start screaming in the next few minutes, feel free to blast it to oblivion."

He still had his suicide cubes with him, but it never hurt to have precautions. Taiven immediately nodded at his words and Zorian saw the aranea in front of him twitch her legs uncomfortably at the implied death threat. The matriarch said nothing, too absorbed in her work.

Several minutes later, the matriarch's presence retreated from his mind.

[I... I need to think about this,] the matriarch said in a daze. [Come back in three days and we'll talk.]

[Wait!] protested Zorian. [I need a way to get down here without going through any of the official entrances. Otherwise I will need to bring Taiven here every time I want to come down here, and I'm not sure she'll want to talk to me after this.]

Zorian was immediately blasted with a mental image of the local section of the tunnel system, along with 8 different ways to access it from the surface without going through any check points. Wow, people weren't kidding when they said the local underworld had more holes than a sponge. In any case, that was apparently the end of his conversation with the aranea, because the spider in front of him promptly leaped into the darkness and disappeared, leaving him alone with Taiven.

He cast a weary glance at said girl, only to flinch at the frown she was giving him.

"Okay, now that the spider is gone, I guess you can explain to me what on earth I just took part in. Start talking," she commanded.

Stupid aranea and their indiscretion... what the hell was he

going to tell Taiven now? Hmm...

"Before we get to that I would like to point out that if you had waited for me at the entrance like I asked you to-"

"Zorian!"

"Just saying," said Zorian lightly. "Okay, here's the thing. I'm an empath. Do you know what that means?"

"Not... really..." Taiven said slowly.

"It means I can sense other people's emotions," said Zorian. "And sadly, the ability is currently an instinctive ability. I have no conscious control over it, and it often causes problems for me, so I have been looking for help in mastering it. Sadly, I have found no one willing to help me on the human side, so I... broadened my horizons. The spider you saw was an aranea – a sentient, telepathic species of spiders that I hoped to talk into teaching me how to control my powers."

Taiven stared at him for a few moments, opening her mouth at one point only to simply close it soon afterwards. "And what did they say?" she finally asked.

"They'll think about it," Zorian shrugged.

Taiven shook her head in disbelief and started walking toward the exit, motioning him to follow.

"Let's get out of here, monster charmer," she said. "We should discuss things somewhere else. Somewhere I can sit down and have a drink."

He followed.



True to her words, Taiven led him into an open-air tavern so they could sit down and relax while they talked. Well, so *she* could sit down and relax – Zorian didn't find the experience all that fun, especially since she made him pay for her drinks out of his own

pocket. Strangely enough, Taiven accepted most of his explanation without complaints, finding his decision to seek help from a species of monstrous spiders 'ballsy' rather than reckless and stupid, but things degraded from there. She was displeased that he had originally planned to meet with the aranea without backup and wanted to know whether he had done things like that before, and who had watched his back if he had. That kick-started a heated argument about the wisdom and necessity of 'going solo' and his ability to fight his way out should things ever go sour. Zorian honestly didn't know whether she was upset because he was putting himself in danger, or that he hadn't invited her along with him.

Probably the latter, since she quickly started insisting he should take her with him next time he went into the sewers to meet the aranea matriarch. She'd only get in the way and try to get him to spill his secrets to her, so he refused. Taiven didn't like that at all, but seemed to realize nothing would be gained by pressing the issue directly. Instead she switched tracks and suggested she should help him develop his combat magic. Zorian knew this was a trap – that she simply wanted to wipe the floor with him in a 'friendly spar' in order to show him how overmatched he was against a serious opponent (and thus be more amenable to take her along like she asked) – but he agreed anyway. He was curious how long he would last against her, and he had nothing to lose except perhaps his pride.

That was how he found himself facing Taiven in her family training hall, fingering his rod of magic missiles and trying to decide how to approach this... practice spar. The training hall was, according to Taiven, heavily warded to protect people inside from spell damage, but usage of lethal spells was still not recommended. Sadly, while the ban on lethal spells was totally sensible for a spar, it completely eliminated a lot of his arsenal. He never really put much thought towards battles that weren't the 'kill or be killed' sort,

so his spell choices tended towards the destructive end of the scale.

"I see you invested into a spell rod," Taiven said with a confident smile. "Must have cost you quite a few pieces."

Left unsaid (but heard loud and clear) was the implication that the money was wasted. Zorian had no chance in hell of overwhelming Taiven's defenses with magic missiles, and they both knew it. That's why he didn't even intend to try – getting into a battle of attrition with someone who had bigger mana reserves than he did was a fool's game. The prominently displayed spell rod was a deception, intended to give Taiven the wrong idea about his opening moves. His real ace in the hole was the shielding bracelet hidden under his right sleeve.

"I made it myself," Zorian said. "So it didn't cost me anything."

"Really?" Taiven said, surprised. "I had no idea you were that good at spell formula. I mean, I knew you were interested in them, but..."

"You have your talent for combat and I have mine," Zorian said smugly. He was quite pleased with himself for getting so good at spell formula – not only was this something he had been interested in since before the time loop, it was also something that could easily ensure his financial independence once he found a way out of the time loop. Spell formula were widely known to be a difficult field to master, and experts in the field were well paid for their services. Zorian was already good enough that he could start taking commissions today if he was so inclined, and would only get better as he went through the restarts.

"Whatever. In the end, you are overmatched even in the equipment department, despite your fancy self-made spell rod," said Taiven, stretching her hand to the side of her and causing a staff mounted on the nearby wall to fly straight into her palm. He knew it was a spell staff even before Taiven channeled a burst of mana into it and caused a series of glowing yellow lines to light

up across its surface.

"Show-off," he said. He was definitely learning how to do that himself one of these days.

"Ready?" Taiven asked, pointing the staff threateningly towards him.

"Ready," confirmed Zorian, twirling the spell rod in his hand.

Taiven reacted immediately, sending a small missile swarm consisting of 5 magic missiles at him. She was fast, far faster than him, and Zorian could see in her face that she considered herself already victorious.

'You are way too presumptuous, Taiven,' he thought, raising the hand that held the spell rod in order to erect a shield in front of him while throwing a vial full of white liquid at her with his other hand.

The missile swarm crashed into Zorian's shield like a hammer. If Taiven had been facing old Zorian, the one that existed before the time loop, then this would have been the end – any shield he may have erected to defend himself would have been sloppily done and would have broken like glass under the onslaught. But she wasn't. She was facing Zorian the time traveler, who had spent quite a lot of time repeating this month. Almost two years, by his count.

In the great scheme of things, two years was not a huge amount of time. Nonetheless, that was still two years of continual combat magic practice, most of it focused on a handful of spells - including shield. His shield spell was nearly flawless. The plane of force was practically invisible when not under strain, and Zorian could overcharge it a great deal to strengthen it further.

The shield held. The missile swarm crashed against it ineffectually, causing the nigh-invisible surface to turn opaque under the strain but doing little else of note.

Before Taiven could collect her wits and try another attack,

Zorian sent a mana pulse at the vial flying towards her. The vial shattered in midair, as if crushed by some unseen fist, and a thick white smoke billowed forth from the spot as the liquid turned to gas.

The vial wasn't anything special, just a simple alchemical mixture that caused coughing fits in whomever inhaled it, but it was enough to incapacitate Taiven, who stumbled out of the smoke dazed and off guard. Zorian mercilessly used her moment of weakness to send a smasher straight into her torso, hoping that was the end of the fight but half-expecting Taiven to throw a shield at the last second to save herself.

Something, perhaps his empathy, warned him to dodge when Taiven suddenly thrust her staff towards the incoming missile (and by extension, him). It was a good thing he did, because she didn't cast a shield – she launched a massive battering ram of force that batted his attack aside like a snowflake and continued towards him unimpeded. Sadly, his dodge was only partial, and while he avoided the main thrust of the attack he was still caught in the outer area of effect. The attack sent him spinning like a rag doll and he soon found himself crashing head-first into the cold, unforgiving floor of the training hall. It was probably only because of the cushioning wards in the room that he didn't end up with a cracked head or a concussion at the end of it.

Since Taiven seemed to be more interested in coughing her lungs out than trying to finish the fight, he remained on the floor for a while, waiting for his head to stop spinning. Apparently he made the coughing gas a bit stronger than he intended. He laboriously climbed back to his feet and walked towards the recovering Taiven.

"You have a very strange definition of non-lethal," he told her.

"Serves you right, you *cough* cheater!" she growled.

"I got you good though, didn't I?" Zorian smiled.

She huffed and swung her staff at him lightly, obviously expecting him to dodge the slow-moving object. In the interest of showing off, Zorian erected a shield instead, causing the staff to bounce off and wrench itself out of her hand.

Taiven looked at the shield curiously and gave it a couple of good hard knocks. The plane of force didn't even turn opaque, much less give way to her hits.

"What the hell is that shield of yours made of, anyway?" Taiven asked. "It took 5 missiles without breaking and it looks... different. It's almost entirely transparent; I can see it only because I'm standing so close to you at the moment. Back when we were fighting, I didn't even see it until my attack hit. I thought you were trying to shield yourself with your hand or something at first."

"It's just a shield spell, just greatly overcharged and superbly executed," said Zorian. "I spent a lot of time practicing that spell."

"Still wouldn't have helped you without that stupid trick you pulled," Taiven scoffed. "This was supposed to be a spell battle, dammit!"

"You said you wanted to see how I fight," Zorian shrugged. "By the way, how did you know where to fire that attack of yours? You had your eyes shut pretty tight from what I could see."

"Oh. That's just a little trick one of my teachers taught me," Taiven said. "I doubt it would help you much, though – it's pretty wasteful in terms of mana usage."

"What do you mean?" Zorian asked.

"Well, it's a pretty simple move that involves expelling a large quantity of mana and saturating the area around you with it. You can then sort of sense your surroundings through the resulting mana cloud. The information you gain is very rudimentary, but you can easily spot concentrated mana constructs like that magic missile you threw at me. I actually didn't know where you were, even with the aid of the mana cloud, but I figured that if I aimed in

the direction from which the attack came from I'd probably catch you as well."

That sounded... awfully familiar. Zorian was pretty sure he used the exact same thing for his secret unlocking trick, except that he focused more on using the mana cloud as an extension of his tactile sense rather than perceiving mana sources. Of course there was quite the difference in scale from flooding a lock with his mana to saturating the entire greater area around him. He simply couldn't afford to be that wasteful with his mana.

However...

"Taiven," he began, "let's say for a moment that I saturate a large-ish bubble of air around my head with this method. Would I be able to sense mana-charged marbles within that volume with this method?"

Taiven blinked and gave him a curious look. "I... suppose. You'd probably have to spend some time mastering the skill to get a cloud sensitive enough to detect such low-powered sources, though."

"But it would be easier than trying to sense mana-charged marbles with my inborn mana sense alone, right?" Zorian pressed.

"Way easier," Taiven confirmed. "Actually, just about any method would have been easier than *that*. Gods, you'd have to be, I don't know, archmage-level good or something to sense a mana source that weak with no spells or other aids."

Zorian suddenly felt incredibly stupid. Of course Xvim's task seemed impossibly difficult – he was doing it wrong! Xvim probably expected him to use a method like this to sense the marbles. The asshole just didn't bother giving him proper instructions on how to go about doing it. Or any sort of instructions, for that matter.

Gods, he hated that man.



Following an argument about who won their little spar (Zorian claimed it was a draw, Taiven claimed she totally won in the end), Taiven insisted on more fights to resolve the issue, and Zorian saw no reason to refuse. He lost all subsequent fights, of course – Taiven was strong enough to simply overpower him if she so chose and he no longer had the element of surprise on his side. Still, he felt he had done well, since Taiven actually had to work to bring him down. Even she admitted that if he caught his opponent off-guard and was ruthless enough in his opening moves he could bring down even professional battlemages, though she warned that he could easily get in legal trouble that way. The mage guild looked very dimly on people who escalated fighting into the lethal realm, even in self-defense.

And anyway, finding out what exactly Xvim expected of him made the whole thing worth it all on its own. Most of the skill was already familiar to him, so it only took a few hours until he was able to create a diffuse mana cloud around his head. Granted, he couldn't really feel mana sources as such, but a marble was a physical object as well. Thus, when Friday came around and Xvim unveiled his oh-so-clever training method to him, Zorian calmly identified where the marbles were going as they zipped around (and occasionally at) his head. Xvim wasn't impressed, of course. He simply started throwing a quick succession of marbles at him and demanded that he sort them by magnitude of mana emissions. Which he couldn't do, of course, since he was sensing them by more rudimentary means. Oh well, he wasn't too concerned – now that he knew what to do, he fully expected to master the skill properly soon enough. Possibly by the end of the restart, unless Zach decided to tackle another dragon or something similarly insane.

Fortunately, Zach's primary interest at the moment was trying

to organize some kind of 'mother of all parties' that involved inviting the entire class to his mansion during the summer festival. Being aware of the time loop, Zorian was one of the few people who understood what Zach was doing. He was trying to get as many students as possible out of harm's way without having to explain anything to them. Zorian had no idea what Zach planned to do with all those people when the attack started, or how he intended to deal with Ilsa and her insistence that everyone must attend the school dance.

3 days went by, and Zorian was back in the sewers. Finding aranea proved very easy, since they were expecting him this time. Any doubts about whether or not he was going to be taken seriously were wiped out when the forward scout he met took him to a familiar figure. The matriarch had decided to talk to him in person, rather than simply project her mind through one of her subordinates.

[Well, I have had time to digest the memories my... 'other self sent me,] the matriarch began. [The story is... not as implausible as you might think, and the memories contained some pretty damning proof. I suppose we should 'swap stories' now, no? Of your experiences, I only know the basics you told your friends, and you know precious little of why I'm not scoffing at the idea of time travel.]

[I suppose that would make sense...] Zorian said carefully.

[But you want me to go first,] the matriarch surmised. [Very well. First thing you should know is that my web has been in a conflict with your so called 'invaders' for several months now. They were an infuriating, but manageable opponent... up until a week ago, when they suddenly developed a disturbing amount of precognition about our tactics and abilities. They had counters for secret skills that have been passed on from matriarch to matriarch for generations and have never been used within living memory up

until that moment. They had counters for personal abilities that were unique to a single aranea. They even seemed to know how we were going to react in response to their increased threat and aggressive moves. In short, the amount of insight they possessed about us was downright implausible. Believe it or not, time travel was seriously discussed as a possible method they were using to obtain their information.]

[Not divinations?] Zorian asked.

[We know divinations, child,] the matriarch said. [If there is a field of magic beside the mind arts that we excel at, it is that. It is good that you mention divinations, though, because they hold a piece of the puzzle as well. You see, our web routinely tries to forecast the future with divination, with varying amount of success – highly disruptive events tend to make any future forecasts useless. What do you think happened when we tried to forecast the future during the past week?]

[It didn't work?] guessed Zorian.

[Oh it worked. It gave wildly different results every time we repeated the forecast, no matter how little time passed between one forecast to the next, but it worked. So long as we didn't try to extend the forecast beyond the day of the summer festival. Beyond that date, the forecast returns a blank. Each and every time. It is as if everything beyond that date simply ceases to exist.]

Zorian swallowed heavily. He had often wondered what happened to everything when the time loop restarted itself, but had ultimately dismissed the question as unknowable. He didn't know whether to be relieved that he had no need to worry about leaving a soulless corpse in some alternate reality or disturbed that everything was literally being deleted when the time loop reset.

[I'm surprised I hadn't heard about that,] he remarked. [You'd think that some of the human oracles would have noticed something like that.]

[You underestimate the difficulty of future forecasting,] the matriarch said. [It takes quite a bit of skill to read the future, and the process is time consuming and tedious. It doesn't help that the results are often useless... or worse, misleading. And even if you do bother to forecast the future, odds are that you're only doing it for few days at the time, since the predictions get more and more unreliable the further you try to extend the predictions. I hear complaints that such forecasts are a waste of time all the time from my fellow aranea, and our oracles can actually achieve a small measure of accuracy in their predictions. Still, I imagine you're right – there are probably human organizations that have run the forecasts and encountered the same thing, but are keeping quiet for a variety of reasons. Nobody likes a doomsayer... well, nobody of any authority, in any case. It would be nice to have independent confirmation of our findings, but I suspect few diviners would feel comfortable with sharing their secrets with a bunch of giant spiders. Perhaps if a certain young mage with an interest in divinations were to talk to them?]

[I'll see what I can do,] said Zorian.

[I'll give you a list of names,] the matriarch said. [Now how about you give us some details about the time loop and your experiences in it?]

Zorian gave them a basic rundown of the situation, leaving out many of the details he considered irrelevant and a tad too personal. The matriarch had only given him the bare bones version of their story as well, so he didn't feel too bad about that.

[That bond between you and Zach is really inconvenient,] the matriarch remarked. [I don't blame you for not taking a chance with it, but are you sure you can't talk to Zach without triggering it? Who knows what useful things the boy knows about this whole thing? Surely if you inform him of your fears he will agree to keep his distance.]

Zorian wasn't nearly so sure. He knew Zach meant well, but he always did have problems with patience and self-control, and none of his previous encounters with the boy convinced him he'd changed all that much in that regard. Zach would have probably found another time traveler immensely fascinating and kept pushing at the boundaries until the soul bond either activated fully or was shown to be harmless.

[I'm surprised you haven't already ripped the knowledge from his mind,] Zorian remarked. [Isn't he a... err, '*flickermind*'?]

[He isn't psychic, but he does have some skill in shielding his mind,] the matriarch said, not at all ashamed to admit she had already tried to steal his memories. [Not well, but enough that I can't do more than read his surface thoughts. Now stop dodging the question.]

Zorian sighed. [Everything I found out about soul bonds suggests that there probably isn't any bond between me and Zach. Soul bonds tend to be really obvious to even basic detection spells. My divination instructor in one of the previous restarts showed me a spell for detecting soul bonds and I used it in school a few times – every student with a familiar is clearly connected to their partner, and the two soul-bonded twins are also clearly bonded to each other. There is absolutely no link between me and Zach that I can see. There is no way an accidental side-effect of an offensive soul mutilation spell has such sophisticated effects when even properly created soul bonds light up easily on detection spells.]

[Curious,] the matriarch said. [What is it, if not a soul bond, though?]

[Kael thinks that when the soul merge was terminated by our deaths, the link between us was *cut* rather than carefully untangled. As a consequence, a piece of Zach's soul ended up fused to mine, and the reverse is probably true for Zach. The control function of the time loop probably got confused at that point, and rather than

decide which one of us is the real Zach decided to simply loop both of us.]

[That would explain why Zach was absent during the first few restarts, and why he was so very sick when he finally did show up,] the matriarch said. [You probably both spent a number of restarts in a coma while your souls healed and integrated all the foreign bits, but he probably drew the short end of the straw when the spell was cut and ended up with far more soul damage than you.]

[It would,] agreed Zorian. [And honestly, it's the most plausible explanation I've got.]

[So why don't you want to talk to Zach, then?] the matriarch asked. [Oh, I see... the third time traveler.]

[Yes. It's pretty obvious at this point that there is at least one more person inside the time loop besides me and Zach. That someone is aiding the invaders and has gods know how big of a lead on me in terms of time spent in the time loop, so I definitely don't want to catch their attention. And they know of Zach. I mean, they have to – he really isn't all that secretive about his status as a time traveler and his activities. But they aren't doing anything about it. Zach is clearly trying to fight the invaders, so why leave him unmolested?]

[Because his actions don't matter in the long run,] the matriarch guessed. [From what you told me, he's trying to become strong enough to personally contest the entire invasion force. There is not much chance of that happening, even if he has all the time in the world to prepare.]

[That, and he's possibly already been neutralized,] Zorian said. [I'm pretty sure that Zach is the key figure in this time travel business - the original time traveler. He has too much potential in terms of money, family legacy, mana reserves and so on – he could benefit from the whole time loop setup better than virtually anyone else, and I don't think it's accidental. Furthermore, if I am

indeed in this time loop because I have a piece of Zach's soul fused to mine, that means it's him the time loop recognizes as the legitimate focus of the spell. The thing is, his past actions indicate ignorance of any sort of purpose or master plan, as if he had simply been dumped into the loop with no warning or information.]

[You think his memories have been edited,] surmised the aranea.

[I think Zach entrusted his secret to the wrong person,] Zorian said. [They couldn't just get rid of Zach – as I said, he is the key to this spell – but they could eliminate him as a threat. Shift his attention to harmless directions and such. But I'm not Zach. I am not integral to this time loop in any way, and can be disposed of at whim. If I talk to Zach, and he's being watched, or if Zach is unable to keep his mouth shut in front of the wrong people, I could end up being... deleted.]

[Well...] the matriarch said. [You're certainly one paranoid human. Then again, that might be the only reason why you're still in possession of your entire memory, so maybe I shouldn't talk. You do realize you're going to have to talk to Zach at some point, right?]

[Hopefully not before I identify the third time traveler,] Zorian said.

[Then we should make it a priority to track him down,] the matriarch said.

[How?] Zorian asked. [I don't even know where to start. It could be anyone.]

[Considering you said Zach managed to kill old Oganj single-handedly, it is clearly not 'anyone'.]

[He wasn't always that strong, though,] Zorian pointed out. [In the first few restarts, any decent mage could have overpowered him, even some of our classmates. For that matter, it could be a matter of backstabbing rather than losing in combat – someone

could have drugged him or lured him into a heavily warded trap area.]

[Even a classmate, you say?] the matriarch asked speculatively. [That's interesting. Didn't you say Zach is fairly obsessed with learning more about the rest of your class? He would probably think nothing of sharing a secret with one of them, especially since they're 'just' students... How well do you know them as a whole? Are any of them acting strange?]

[I'm... not really very close to any of them,] Zorian admitted. [I don't think I would know if they started to behave strange, so long as they didn't go completely out of character. I can think of a few that I'm sure aren't time travelers but...]

[Try to investigate,] the matriarch said. [It would be terribly embarrassing if it turns out the third one was hiding in plain sight all along, no? Try to see if you can connect any of them with the invaders as well.]

The matriarch gave Zorian a list of human diviners that might know more about the irregularities related to future forecasting and they both agreed to meet in another three days. Zorian was a bit of annoyed that the topic of his empathy and getting it under control never came up but he supposed the matriarch wanted to see how useful to them he was before investing their time to teach him their (possibly secret) mind arts.

It was nice having someone on his side in this whole tangled mess. He just hoped he wasn't making the same mistake with the aranea that Zach did with the person behind the invasion.

Chapter Twenty

A MATTER OF FAITH

Zorian didn't like temples. Partially it was due to his bad experiences with them as a child, but mostly due to his inability to understand the reverence with which the priesthood spoke of the vanished gods they were supposed to be venerating. Virtually every story he had read or heard about the age of gods made the divinities sound like gigantic jerks, so why would anyone want them *back*? Nobody could ever give him a satisfactory answer to that question, least of all his parents, who were religious only so long as the neighbors were watching.

The temple in front of which he was standing at the moment did nothing to dispel that unease. The large, dome-like building on the outskirts of Cyoria was larger and far more imposing than any other temple Zorian had previously been in, despite being described as one of the smaller ones in Cyoria. Still, the aranea matriarch had claimed this temple housed the best (human) future forecaster in the city, so his unease would have to be set aside for the sake of accomplishing the mission.

He hesitantly stepped towards the heavy wooden doors that served as an entrance to the temple, warily glancing at the huge stone angels that flanked the doorway. Lifelike and grim-faced, the angels appeared to gaze down on him as he approached, judging

him and finding him lacking. Try as he might, Zorian couldn't completely dismiss his unease with the statues, since there was a very real possibility they were guardian golems or some other sort of security. He was just about to open the door and walk inside when he noticed a series of images carved into the door and paused to study them.

Although the carvings on the door were fairly stylized and disjointed, he recognized instantly what they were about. They formed a crude sort of comic, depicting a familiar story of how the world was created according to Ikosians (and by extension, most religions drawing their traditions from them). According to Ikosians, the world was originally a swirling, shapeless chaos, inhabited only by the 7 primordial dragons. One day, the gods descended from the higher planes of existence and killed all of them save one. This last one they refashioned into the material world that humans now inhabit, turning her body into dirt and stone, her blood into water, her breath into air and her fire into magic. The vast networks of tunnels stretching beneath the surface of the world are dragon veins, now empty of blood that had been turned into the seas but still flooded with magic emanating from the Heart of the World – the fiery, still-beating heart of the primordial dragon that rests somewhere deep underground. Far from being content with her fate, the Dragon Below still rages against her bounds, giving birth to natural disasters like volcanoes and earthquakes. Unable to strike back against the gods themselves, the dragon takes her anger out on their favored creations – humans – by utilizing her heart, the one thing the gods have not seen fit to take away from her. Pieces of it continually flake off from the main mass, giving birth to horrifying monsters whenever they hit the ground, at which point said monsters begin their ascent to the surface to terrorize mankind...

And so on. Zorian didn't believe there was much truth in the

old story, but the whole thing was pretty horrifying if one took it at face value. With gods like that, it was no wonder the Old Faiths were steadily losing converts to new religions that popped up after the gods disappeared.

"Can I help you with something, young man?"

Zorian wrenched himself from his musings to look at the man who spoke to him. He found himself facing a young, green-haired man in priestly robes. The man's relaxed posture and friendly smile set Zorian at ease, but he couldn't help but wonder about that green hair. As far as Zorian knew, the only people who naturally had green hair were members of House Reid, and it seemed rather out of character for one of them to go into clergy. That particular house was infamous for their links to crime syndicates.

"Maybe," allowed Zorian. "I am Zorian Kazinski, mage in training. I was wondering whether Priestess Kylae was around and willing to talk to me? Oh, and sorry about worrying you. I suppose I had been staring at the entrance a little too long."

"Junior Priest Batak," the man introduced himself. "And don't worry, a lot of people are intimidated by the gates. It's why I like to greet newcomers personally like this. As for Kylae... well, she is currently in the middle of a ritual, but if you're willing to wait an hour or so I'm sure she'll be happy to hear you out."

"Sure," Zorian agreed. This was far better than he expected, to be honest – he half-expected the man to put him through some kind of religious test before allowing him to see the head priestess. Waiting an hour or two was a minor price to pay really. "Err, so should I come back later or...?"

"Nonsense," the man scoffed. "Come inside and I'll make us something to drink while we wait. It'll be nice to have someone new to chat with for a change. We get so few visitors these days..."

Uh oh, it seemed that he might still end up being subjected to

a test, only this one in the form of 'casual' conversation instead of something overt.

"Slow week?" Zorian asked as they entered the temple. The interior was pleasantly cool and fairly dark, with rays of multicolored light streaming down from several high-placed stained glass windows, as well as totally empty. He was grateful for the lack of crowds, but it was unusual to see a temple completely deserted like this.

"I wish," Batak sighed. He led Zorian through rows and rows of wooden benches that filled the temple's main hall, his steps echoing hauntingly behind him. "More like a slow decade. The aftermath of the Weeping has not been kind to this place."

"What do you mean?" Zorian asked. "What does the Weeping have to do with this place?"

Batak gave him a judging glance before sighing heavily. "Though the gods have gone silent, the priesthood has never been completely powerless. Most priests have some skill with magic, and higher ranks can usually call upon the aid of angels and other lesser spiritual entities, but our real claim to authority came from various hidden mysteries that were entrusted to us before the gods departed to the unknown. Over time a lot of those were stolen or otherwise lost, but the one thing where we were always unmatched was the healing arts. As such, when the Weeping Plague started spreading across the lands like wildfire, we were expected to do something about it. Sadly, not only were we as powerless against it as anyone else, our close contact with the infected quickly resulted in massive casualties within our ranks. With the subsequent shortage of qualified priests, peripheral temples like this one were all but abandoned, both by believers and by the Holy Triumvirate."

Zorian looked around him, but failed to see any evidence of decay in the interior of the temple. The temple was clean and

intact, and the altar – made out of white marble and framed with silk or some other expensive cloth – looked practically brand new. Plenty of stone statues were scattered throughout the building, seamlessly melding into the walls or support beams, and most of the remaining unadorned space was taken up by wooden panels that had various religious imagery carved into their surface, much like the main doors. In short, it was an absurdly luxurious building by the standards of rural temples such as the one in Cirin, and better maintained to boot. Zorian was almost afraid to ask what Cyoria's main temple looked like if this one was not considered important enough to keep running.

Batak led him to a small, unassuming door next to the altar and ushered him to what was apparently a more informal setting. Rather than being a classical office, it was instead a combination of a kitchen and a living room, far messier than and not nearly as lifeless as the main temple had been. Batak immediately started preparing some tea and started peppering him with questions. The questions were fairly standard – who he was, what he did, where he was from, who his family was, that sort of stuff – so Zorian felt comfortable answering them honestly. Strangely enough, Batak didn't ask him a single question about his religiosity, something Zorian was glad for. Zorian, in turn, asked a couple of questions about Batak and Kylae, trying to understand what they were even doing here if the temple was abandoned.

Batak was all too happy to enlighten him. Apparently the church leadership didn't feel comfortable with simply demolishing the temple... or worse, leaving it to the mercy of the elements and looters. A perfectly understandable sentiment, in Zorian's opinion – not only would it be a shame to consign such a majestic building to oblivion, it would also be a blatant admission of weakness from the church. In the end, Batak and Kylae were assigned to the temple, ostensibly to keep the temple running but

in reality more to keep it presentable and ward off thieves and squatters.

Finally, after he finished his cup of tea, Batak finally decided he had danced around the issue long enough.

"So," said Batak. "You never did tell me why you're here, mister Kazinski. Do you think you could perhaps tell me what you need to speak with Kylae about or is this too sensitive for the ears of a mere junior priest?"

Zorian thought about it for a second before deciding it probably wouldn't hurt to tell the man why he came. Future forecasting wasn't illegal or anything, after all.

"Well..." began Zorian. "For a start, I heard that Priestess Kylae is skilled at forecasting the future through divinations."

Batak stiffened slightly, but quickly forced himself to relax. His smile did slip off his face, however.

"She is," he said. "It is a difficult field to practice and I doubt anyone could claim mastery of it in any real sense, but she is as close to an expert as you're likely ever going to get."

"But there are other people who dabble in it regardless, one of which has sent me to speak with Kylae about her findings," said Zorian, privately enjoying the mental image of the aranea matriarch hissing at him for calling her a 'dabbler' in the field. "Some of the results she had gotten out of her predictions have been very... irregular."

All pretenses of good cheer had left Batak's face by the time he finished talking. Silence stretched into uncomfortable seconds. Zorian was starting to wonder if talking about the topic was somehow taboo or if he had otherwise insulted the man somehow when the junior priest spoke again.

"And these... irregularities... when exactly do they appear? How far did your mysterious backer project her predictions before they went haywire?"

It was at this point that Zorian realized: Batak already knew. He was no more a mere junior priest than Zorian was just an innocent messenger.

"There is only one real irregularity, and it appears on the day of the summer festival. Specifically, the prediction returns a blank beyond that date... almost as if the whole world disappears after that point. But you already knew that, didn't you?" asked Zorian rhetorically.

Instead of answering him, Batak spat out a very unpriestly curse and started pacing around the cramped room in agitation.

"I'll take that as a yes," Zorian sighed.

Batak stopped pacing to give him a wary look. After a few moments, the priest visibly forced himself to relax.

"I'm sorry," said Batak, "I didn't mean to be rude, it's just... well, it's probably best if I go and fetch Kylae now so we can discuss this together."

"Isn't she doing a ritual at the moment?" Zorian pointed out curiously. He knew it was a very bad idea to stop magical rituals halfway through, but maybe the ritual Kylae was performing was purely religious in nature?

"Well, sort of," Batak said sheepishly. "I don't think she'll be terribly bothered if I interrupt her. Not for this, in any case. Please wait here while I go get her."

As Zorian watched Batak hurriedly leave, he couldn't help but wonder why Batak was so spooked out by the termination date they uncovered. Zorian was certainly spooked, but that was because he knew exactly what was causing it, but to Batak and Kylae it shouldn't look terribly unusual. Much like soul-related magics, the field of future prediction was very poorly understood, and strange never-encountered events probably weren't unheard of. Zorian sincerely hoped that Batak's agitation meant they knew something important about the anomaly that he and aranea matriarch had

missed.

It wasn't long before Batak came back with a middle aged woman back in tow. Zorian's first thought was that she was surprisingly young for a high priestess, but he supposed with the manpower shortage among the priesthood they couldn't afford to be too picky about such things. For her part, the priestess gave him a long, searching look upon entering the room before giving him a strained smile and sitting down next to Batak, so that both of them were facing him.

"Hello mister Kazinski," she said. "I am Kylae Kuosi, the high priestess of this temple. I hear you've wanted to speak to me. Specifically, that you wanted to speak to me about future prediction?"

"About the termination date on the day of the summer festival, yes," Zorian confirmed.

A short exchange followed where they both confirmed they were indeed talking about the same thing and then the priestess leaned back on her chair and gave Batak a mild glare.

"I told you it was not a mistake," she said.

"And I told you it wasn't you who was the problem," Batak shot back. "I guess we were both right."

Kylae sighed before refocusing on Zorian. "I don't suppose you could introduce me to your master so I can discuss this directly with her? Not that I have anything against you but you just don't have the necessary expertise and all your information is by necessity second-hand..."

"Sorry," Zorian said. "I'm afraid my 'master' definitely wishes to stay hidden. I agree she could help you better in person, but this is how things are at the moment."

And it was vanishingly unlikely that would change any time soon. According to current church dogma, aranea were classified as monsters – servants of the Dragon Below, to be precise – and

therefore not to be dealt with. Kylae and Batak seemed fairly liberal as priests go, but probably not that liberal. Admitting he was speaking on behalf of a giant sentient spider would have led to him being forcibly expelled from the temple at best.

"If I may ask, though, why has this gotten you so spooked?" Zorian asked curiously. "I mean, I know why me and my, ah, master are concerned, but why do you have a problem with it?"

The priestess looked at him curiously. "And why *are* you concerned, if I may ask?"

"Trade?" offered Zorian, suppressing a smile in favor of a most innocent expression he could manage. Hook, line and sinker.

The priestess shared a silent look with Batak, somehow communicating without words with her fellow priest. Apparently they knew each other quite well if they could manage that. Maybe they were lovers? If Zorian remembered correctly, priests were forbidden to have relationships with each other, and thus had to look for romantic options outside the church hierarchy, but it wouldn't be the first time such rules were ignored. In any case, after a few seconds they seemed to reach a decision and turned again towards him.

"We will share our concerns with you, but only if you go first," the priestess said. "And be warned – I can tell when people lie to me. It is a supernatural ability and has never failed me before, so please don't waste my time with lies and half-truths."

Well. That was kind of inconvenient. Zorian didn't detect any attempt at barging into his mind, so whatever ability she had probably wasn't mind-based in nature. Was she instinctively divining the truth of his statements? Peering into his soul? He supposed she *could* be bluffing, but he somehow doubted it.

In the end he decided to take a risk. He fired off a couple of divinations to make sure they weren't scried and that there were no cranium rats around and then started to speak when they returned

negative.

"Let's see if this will be a sufficient price for your help, then," Zorian sighed. "The reason we're concerned is that there is a well-funded, well-organized group of terrorists planning to take advantage of the summer festival to cause trouble. Some parts of their plan – like their usage of artillery spells and war trolls smuggled through the Dungeon – was fairly pedestrian. But there is a more exotic component to their plans – one that wreaks havoc with future prediction by its very nature."

There was a brief moment of silence as the two priests stared at him incredulously.

"That... is not what I expected to hear," the priestess said. "Gods and Goddesses, this is way above my pay grade. I... don't think I want to know more, to be honest. I don't want to get involved into such things."

"Probably for the best," Zorian agreed.

"If that is indeed the true cause of the irregularity, though, then my own reasons to panic about it are largely misplaced," the priestess mused.

"I'd still like to hear about it, if it's not a problem," Zorian said.

"It's about the angels," Batak interjected. "Ever since the gods have gone silent, angels have sort of taken their place. They can't grant magical powers to the priesthood or work miracles the way gods could, but they can be summoned in order to provide advice or give aid with their considerable personal abilities."

"And what did they say about the anomaly that got you so spooked?" Zorian asked curiously.

"That's the thing," the priestess sighed. "We can't ask them because no one has been able to summon them since about a week ago. We've been in contact with churches as far as Koth, and they report the same thing – even the most approachable of celestials are ignoring us. Hell, I've even heard rumors that demon worshippers

cannot contact their vile masters any more. It is as if something has cut the entire material plane off from the spiritual realms.”

Zorian swallowed heavily. A week ago... the start of the time loop obviously.

”Quite disturbing, isn’t it?” said Kylae. ”Coupled with the time-line simply cutting off a few weeks from now, well, I must admit it had really gotten me spooked. Finding out the two are basically unrelated certainly makes me rest easier.”

There was further conversation after this, but none of it was terribly productive. He promised Batak and Kylae to be discreet about their troubles with contacting the spirit world and left.

Unlike the priestess, Zorian didn’t feel like the conversation had eased his worries.



Following his visit to the temple, Zorian decided to sit down in one of the many restaurants scattered throughout the city and consider this new information with a bit of food and drink. There was no doubt in his mind that the severing of the link between the spiritual planes and the material one was caused by the time loop, but what that meant was less clear. Was the material plane the only one experiencing the time loop, isolated from everything else within some kind of ’time bubble’? The fact that his current time-line seemed to literally end when the time loop restarted strongly suggested this. Apparently the spell wasn’t snatching up a bunch of souls and putting them into their past bodies like he initially assumed – it was literally rewinding time itself in the targeted area while leaving a couple of souls intact in the process. No wonder the spell was so easily transmissible – compared to reverting everything one month into the past, the cost of looping an additional soul or two was probably utterly inconsequential.

And that, if true, was very disturbing. That was not human magic. A hundred or so mages in possession of a mana well and a whole lot of time to prepare could affect a medium-sized country at most. The time loop must have enveloped the whole continent, *at least*, for the boundary to have not been noticed after a day or two. News spread fast these days. And frankly, Zorian had a hunch the time loop enveloped the entire planet. This was like something straight out of the age of gods... but if higher beings were involved, why was the time loop allowed to go off its intended course so severely?

His musings were interrupted by the scraping of a nearby chair. Someone had decided to join him.

"Oh," he said. "It's you."

"Is that the way to greet a friend, Roach?" Taiven complained. Zorian rolled his eyes at her.

"Hi, Taiven," he said blandly. "Fancy seeing you here. I mean, this place is pretty far from your usual haunts. It's almost as if you decided to track me down to this place..."

"That's because I did," Taiven said. "What are you doing on the edge of the city, anyway?"

"I was visiting a temple nearby," Zorian answered. "Lovely architecture."

"You, visiting temples?" Taiven scoffed. Zorian said nothing. "Fine, be that way. I won't pry. In case you're wondering, I'm here because I asked around to see if I could find a human empath that could help you control your powers."

"You did?" asked Zorian, suddenly a lot more alert and enthusiastic about this conversation.

Taiven smiled sheepishly. "I kind of did find someone willing to help you, but I'm not sure whether it's something you're willing to go for. The woman in question is a healer in one of Cyoria's

big hospitals and she's only willing to teach you if you agree to an apprentice contract with her and become a full-blown healer."

Zorian clacked his tongue in disappointment. He did intend to learn the basics of magical healing at some point in the future, but that was a long way off. Learning medicine wasn't something you do in your spare time and would doubtlessly require him to dedicate most of the restart on mastering that one field. He had too many things on his plate as it was.

"No, that doesn't work for me at all," Zorian sighed. "I have nothing against healers but that's not the career I'm aiming for."

"Yeah, I kind of figured," Taiven said. "It really would be kind of a shame to let all that work you sank into spell formulas go to waste. I guess the spiders are still your best bet, huh?"

"Yeah," agreed Zorian. "Although... to tell the truth, they have been dragging their many feet in regard to teaching me. Maybe if they thought I actually had valid alternatives to their help they'd hurry up a little? What was the healer's name, anyway?"

Taiven narrowed her eyes. "You've been down there alone again?"

Uh oh.

"Maaaaaybe..."

She reached out across the table and cuffed him in the shoulder. It hurt.

"Zorian, you moron," she complained. "I told you not to do these things alone! Even if you trust the freaky giant spiders that much – and I don't really think you should – there are other things down there! Not matter how capable you are, it's always smart to have another set of hands and eyes with you. Unless you think I couldn't keep up with you?"

"I don't think that at all," Zorian said. "I just didn't want to be a bother and..."

"I already said I don't mind helping," Taiven cut him off. "You can't use that as an excuse."

"...and the Aranea are kind of prejudiced against non-psychic people," finished Zorian.

"Non-what?" asked Taiven incredulously.

"Psychic. People who are like me and them. I don't quite have a comprehensive explanation what being psychic entails, but it seems to be some kind of instinctive affinity for mind magic. That's where my empathy apparently comes from – the aranea claim it's a weak form of mind reading, and that I could actually do more once they actually deign to teach me."

Taiven seemed at a loss for words for a moment.

"You're reading my mind?" she finally said. "I didn't give you permission to do that!"

"I'm only getting vague impressions of your emotions, and not even that consistently," said Zorian with a long suffering sigh. "Besides, that's why I'm meeting with the aranea – to learn how to not do that unless I want to. How did you think empathy works, anyway?"

"I guess I didn't," admitted Taiven. "But we're getting off track – why does me not being psychic matter to your new spidery friends?"

"How should I know? Prejudices rarely make much sense."

"Well go ahead and ask them the next time you see them!" Taiven said. "Because if you can't give me a proper answer the next time I ask, I'm going down there to ask them myself, with or without your permission. It's total bullshit!"



Aside from his visit to the temple, none of the other future forecasters were in any way helpful to Zorian. A fair number of

them didn't even want to talk to him, and those that did hadn't made long-term predictions and hadn't noticed anything strange. Well, one of them did *claim* to have done so and found nothing of note, but he was an obvious fraud and spent most of the talk trying to get Zorian to part with his money in exchange for a 'more detailed reading of the future'.

So Zorian turned to the matter of his classmates and the possibility that one of them was the third time traveler. Zorian didn't think there was much chance of that, but better safe than sorry. Besides, it was a good way to look for clues as far as he was concerned, and he had been thinking of getting to know his classmates better anyway.

Including him, there were exactly 20 people in Zorian's class – 12 girls and 8 boys. Of those, there were three people he was almost certain weren't the third time traveler – Akoja, Benisek and Kael. The first two because he actually knew what their normal behavior and personality were before the time loop and had interacted extensively enough with the both of them in various restarts to judge them unchanged, and Kael because of the events that took place in the previous restart. Trying to write down everything he knew about the rest, he quickly found two classmates that were very suspicious: Tinami Aoep and Estin Grier.

Noble House Aoep had a very shady reputation. The House began its existence during the Witch Wars, when one of the major witch clans agreed to defect to the Ikosians' side if they were given the status of a formal House in return. The Ikosians, ever pragmatic, agreed. No doubt they thought they could milk the renegades for their magical secrets and then quietly sideline them until they could be officially removed, but that never happened. Instead, the Aoep rose through the ranks of the Ikosian political system, leaving a trail of broken rivals in their wake, until they eventually stood on top as one of the more prestigious Noble Houses in

all Altazia. This extreme success wasn't a result of *just* being very competent politicians, though – Aoape were rumored to practice all sorts of dark, forbidden magic stemming from their witchy roots. Necromancy. Demon summoning. *Mind magic*.

Of course, this was all just a rumor. Certainly no one who valued their life and career would ever suggest that Tinami Aoape, the first-born daughter of the current head of Aoape household, was practicing forbidden magics. Perish the thought. And in fact, the girl was painfully shy and withdrawn and in general looked like she wouldn't hurt a fly.

That didn't prove anything, though. Beware of the quiet ones and all that. If there was one person in the class who had easy access to magics that could screw Zach over and hijack the time loop for their own ends, it was probably Tinami. Even better, her withdrawn nature would ensure that very few people knew her enough to realize she was acting strangely unless she did something totally crazy.

Estin Grier, the second suspect, was primarily suspicious because of where he came from. He and his family had immigrated to Altazia from Ulqua'an Ibasa – the infamous Island of the Exiles. Since the island was populated mostly by mages exiled there in the wake of the Necromancer's War, that made Estin the second person who could plausibly have access to forbidden magics without too much trouble.

Also, Zorian was fairly certain that the mages leading the invasion force came primarily from Ulqua'an Ibasa. The island was one of the few places where one could find enough necromancers and war trolls to explain the numbers of them present at the invasion. It was also the last recorded home of Quatach-Ichl – the lich general that fought the Old Alliance in the Necromancer's War and whose physical description matched almost exactly with the lich that had so thoroughly trounced Zach in that fateful battle where

Zorian was dragged into the time loop.

Of course, those two were only the obvious suspects, and the third time traveler, if indeed present among his classmates, was no doubt far more cunningly hidden. Realizing he didn't know enough about people in his class to really make a judgment, Zorian decided to seek the aid of the one person who could no doubt tell him something about everyone.

"Hello Benisek," Zorian said, sitting next to the chubby, talkative boy. "Can I ask you to do me a favor?"

"Sure," Benisek said. "What do you need?"

"I need basic information about everyone in our class. What's the latest gossip about them and so forth."



[Well, that is certainly an interesting turn of events,] the matriarch remarked. [A confirmation of the cut-off point in the time line and another clue as to the true nature of this time loop is far more than I had hoped for. I must admit I hadn't actually expected you to find anything useful among human diviners, but there you go. I don't suppose you have anything on your classmates yet?]

[Not really,] Zorian responded. [I'm only starting with the investigation. Truthfully, this is bound to be a task spanning numerous restarts, so you shouldn't expect quick results.]

[Yes, of course. Well, I have nothing else to add so unless you have any additional questions we can meet each other next week to check on each other's progress?]

[Actually, I have two questions,] said Zorian.

[Ask away, then.]

[First question: Can you explain to me what exactly you mean by 'flickermind' and why you disdain them so much?] Zorian asked. [You keep saying that word and it sounded terribly insulting and bigoted.]

The matriarch twitched her legs, emitting some complex emotion that Zorian couldn't decode with his limited empathic abilities. That tended to happen a lot, actually, since the aranea were so thoroughly different from humans in both body and mind.

[I apologize if we offend,] she finally said. [It had been quite a while since we had a real, sustained contact with a human, and there are bound to be misunderstandings and points of contention.]

[I notice you didn't actually answer my question,] pointed out Zorian.

[It is like you suspect: a flickermind is a creature that isn't psychic like you and me. I'm sure they can be wonderful people, but I – as well as most of my fellow aranea – find it hard to truly take them seriously. It's like meeting a society of people that are born blind... they can obviously manage without sight, but you'd probably still consider them fundamentally crippled.]

[You never did tell me what being psychic entails, you know?] Zorian pointed out.

[Everything, from the smallest grain of sand to the very gods themselves is connected through the great invisible web that suffuses all creation,] the matriarch said. [Psychic people are open to these connections, and contact the minds of others, or even the universe itself, to perform what you humans call magic.]

[That explanation sounds... almost religious,] said Zorian.

[The great invisible web does feature prominently in our spirituality,] the matriarch admitted. [What was the other question you wanted to ask me about?]

[Ah, yes. I had found a human empath that might be willing to teach me some of her skills. I wanted to ask you for your opinion-]

[No!] the matriarch interrupted. [That's a terrible idea! Your human empaths are bad teachers! Their 'training' consists of nothing but showing people how to shut off their link to the Great Web

and keep it closed most of the time! They brainwash their students into believing that sensing emotions is all there is to their powers and that the rest of the mind arts are immoral! They make a mockery of the great gift!]

Zorian blinked in shock. He had intended to produce a reaction by broaching the topic in question, but he had no idea the matriarch would be affected this strongly! Anger and outrage simply *poured* off the matriarch, making it clear that she cared about this issue very, very much. For the first time since his first encounter with her, he remembered that she was actually quite a terrifying creature.

[That's a lot stronger denunciation than I expected,] Zorian admitted, forcing himself to remain calm. [Care to suggest an alternative, then? I really want to get this ability under control.]

[Have I not promised to help you with that?] the matriarch asked.

[And then you ignored the issue completely,] Zorian answered.

[I thought you needed time to come to terms with it. You didn't exactly act thrilled when I first informed you of your gifts. Maybe if you hadn't waited six months before contacting me we would have been on the same wavelength?]

Ouch.

[But no matter,] the matriarch said, [this whole argument is pointless. If you want to learn how to use your gift effectively, I'll be happy to help. Come back tomorrow at this time and we can begin with your lessons.]

She turned to leave before pausing and sending him one final parting burst of communication.

[And then, once you experience the Great Web in its full glory, you can go to that human empath and see for yourself who is right.]

WHEEL OF FORTUNE

In the tunnels beneath Cyoria, Zorian sat cross-legged with his eyes closed, trying to sense the minds of nearby aranea with his own. That was the task he had been given by the matriarch as his first lesson, and it reminded him uncomfortably of Xvim's mana sensing exercise.

It wasn't going too well. That was another thing it shared with Xvim's bullshit lessons.

[It has only been 3 days,] the disembodied voice of the matriarch admonished him. [You've barely even started. Don't be impatient.]

"There's got to be a better way of learning this," Zorian complained. This kind of trial and error method was something he could have done without her help. As far as he could see, the only way the matriarch was really helping at the moment was by being an experienced practitioner ready to step in if something went wrong. Which, now that he thought about it, was quite valuable when messing around with something like mind magic. Or any magic, for that matter.

[That, and there is also the little fact that it's easier to sense and contact Open minds than those of... non-psychics,] the matriarch remarked, fumbling a little towards the end. [I somehow doubt

you would find many Open individuals to practice on back on the surface. Fewer still would be willing to let you connect to them. Anyway. I realize that these initial stages are tedious and boring, but they are necessary. And if I have not explained things satisfactorily, I apologize, but I do not know how to do it any better. This ability is not something I learnt, it is something I *do*. Aranea learn how to do this as very young children, much like human children learn how to walk and talk. Can you explain to someone who has been paralyzed all their life how to move their legs?]

Zorian frowned. So he wasn't even able to master telepathic baby skills? Wonderful. Just wonderful. Taking a deep breath to calm himself, he tried to consider the task in front of him and how to solve it. Yes, yes, the matriarch insisted he should just keep trying until he eventually succeeded by sheer weight of effort, but he was a mage damn it! Mages did things smarter, not harder.

Being psychic meant being a natural mind mage. For all that the matriarch kept bringing in her weird aranea spirituality into it, that's what it all boiled down to. A psychic could read thoughts and emotions, trawl through people's memories, hijack their senses and motor control, communicate with them telepathically and gods know what else, but all of it was mind related. Even the matriarch admitted that aranea used modified human magic for things like her speech spell and the rest of their non-mentalist magical arsenal.

Divinations were the key, he felt. If psychic powers were mind-based, why did they also enhance divinations?

[Not all divinations,] the matriarch remarked from the sidelines, apparently following his train of thought. [Only the ones that put information directly into your mind. The Gift helps you interpret the results of such spells more easily, and since most high-level divinations pour at least a part of the information straight into your mind... well, you can imagine how useful that can be.]

Suddenly, something clicked in Zorian's mind. According to the books he read about the mind arts in the academy library, spells that were meant to read people's thoughts were not terribly difficult *in principle*. The problem was that the result was totally incomprehensible to most users, unless they spent years training themselves how to interpret the results. Spells that aimed to establish telepathic communication also suffered this problem, though to a lesser extent – so long as the people in question spoke the same language, they could at least exchange verbal communication in such a fashion. In other words, human mind spells were remarkably like a divination that tried to simply dump its output into the mind of the caster... which wasn't something most mages were equipped to handle.

Taking it all together, it seemed obvious to Zorian that one of the defining powers of a psychic was their ability to make sense of information entering the mind directly – whether it was other people's thoughts or something more exotic like divination results. The immediately interesting part was that it was a *passive* skill. Using it wasn't something he had to specifically activate, it was a state of being, so if he wanted to sense the minds of nearby aranea perhaps he should stop trying to push his power out towards his surroundings and concentrate inward. He took a deep breath, visualized the results as motes of light around him and then just... opened his mind.

Blazing suns erupted all around him, including a couple in places where he hadn't expected there would be any aranea to begin with. Apparently the matriarch brought more guards with her than she had openly displayed to him.

[Your first success,] the matriarch remarked, her telepathic probe breaking his concentration and causing the entire vision to burst like a dream. [Well done. Things should go a lot faster from now on. I'd congratulate you on your fast progress, but I have to be

honest and admit I have no idea how fast humans usually progress in this.]

"Perhaps things would have gone faster if you had actually told me I was doing things wrong," Zorian said with annoyance. "Why didn't you tell me I was supposed to concentrate inward instead of outward?"

[I did; it's not my fault if you dismissed it as pointless aranean superstition,] the matriarch said airily. [And I actually didn't know that the problem lay there in particular. I suppose my tendency to respond to your thoughts makes you think I can understand them in totality, yes? The truth is less impressive, I'm afraid. Telepaths like you and me labor under many of the same limitations that plague human mind magic, it's just that we advance much faster in the field and don't need a structured spell to use our abilities. Unless you structure your thoughts into actual speech, the most I get from you from my surface scans is a very fuzzy image of your current emotional state and your general intentions. This is doubly true because you're human and I'm an aranea, two radically different species that don't even share the same general body plan, much less mentality.]

"Huh, so language and species *do* matter to a psychic," Zorian remarked. "I was wondering about that."

[It's usually not a big problem, since most creatures tend to think in words when they engage in conscious thought,] the matriarch said. [So long as two creatures speak the same language, they can freely engage in telepathic conversation, no matter how different their underlying thoughts. If they *don't* share a language... well, admittedly, not all is lost. Psychics *can* potentially communicate with completely alien minds. It involves structuring your thoughts into general concepts that are hopefully broad enough to be understood by the recipient but not so broad as to be meaningless. Unfortunately, this method is very crude and tends to be both

painful and disorienting to the target. I believe you experienced it already when you met one of the less human-savvy araneas in one of the previous restarts.]

"So it's not just because you're more powerful that you speak with me so easily?" asked Zorian.

[No. I took the time to learn human language, mentality and culture. As did a number of other aranea that occasionally interact with humans. However, our web is extensive enough that most aranea can remain largely ignorant of human ways while they go on about their business, which is why most of my guards are silent around you. Trust me, they aren't usually this withdrawn, but if they tried to talk to you they'd just give you a headache.]

"Does that mean that mental attacks are easier than communication?" Zorian asked curiously. "I mean, if botched telepathic communication is practically a mental assault to begin with, it shouldn't take much to simply fry a creature's brain and be done with it."

[It's called a 'mind blast', and it's the simplest telepathic attack there is,] the matriarch said. [It's also the simplest one to defend against. You should really stop worrying about me attacking you. Aren't the explosives you constantly carry in your pocket enough to reassure you?]

"They help," Zorian said. "But in this particular case I wasn't alluding to the possibility of hostilities between us. I was just curious."

[Well, good. Anyway, we should get back to developing your mind sense before we get too off-track,] the matriarch said. [You made your first successful stab at it, but it is far too shaky to be useable at the moment. You need to be able to sense minds around you instantly, without having to sit still with your eyes closed and preferably while doing something else entirely.]

Zorian sighed. He was definitely getting flashbacks to Xvim

on this.



The rest of the month was fairly unremarkable and mostly spent on honing the mind sense and trying to sense the intensity of magic sources through a mana cloud. Though the matriarch refused to teach him anything until he got his mind sense (relatively) mastered, he already noticed her lessons gave him some rudimentary control over his empathy – enough that he could keep it shut with enough concentration, but not enough to focus it on specific people or otherwise refine it. That alone made the lessons useful, since it should make social events infinitely more bearable for him.

And speaking of social events, Zach had been increasingly pushy about bringing him to his summer festival party. After the boy kept bugging him a few times, Zorian relented. Yes, it would bring him uncomfortably close to the other time traveler for the evening, but he was curious about how his empathy suppression would fare in a live situation and also how Zach's mansion looked from the inside. Besides, he was trying to get to know his classmates better, and this was a good opportunity to chat up some of them without looking completely out of character.

"Is it really okay for me to come with you?" Taiven asked as she walked beside him.

"For the last time Taiven, *yes*. Zach made it clear that the more people we invite along with us the better," Zorian said. Not surprising if you knew what Zach was trying to achieve. "Look, if you don't want to come—"

"Oh no, I totally do. It's not every day you get a chance to attend a party at the Noveda mansion. It's just that I find it a bit strange, that's all. I'm kind of surprised you agreed to come, though – isn't this sort of thing an anathema to you?"

"It's either this or attending the official dance organized by the academy," Zorian said. "My only real choice is to pick my poison."

"Ah, I see," Taiven nodded. "I guess that in that case this does appear to be a better option."

Zorian glanced at Taiven from the corner of his eye, feeling slightly guilty. The truth was that his main reason for inviting her along was to personally see how she would fare against the invaders. He knew she was a lot better than him at combat magic, but probably not all that much better, and he wanted a comparison point that wasn't as ridiculous as Zach or an experienced battlemage like Kyron.

Then again, this was Taiven - she probably ended up fighting the invaders in every restart anyway, just not where he could see her. At least this time she would have the advantage of fighting alongside a combatant of Zach's caliber.

They barely knocked on the door before Zach came along and ushered them inside. He probably knew they were coming the moment they stepped through the outer gate, now that Zorian thought about it - it would make sense to have some kind of detection field woven into the ward scheme that protected this place.

"I'm glad you decided to come," Zach told him as he led them towards the dining hall, where the party was apparently supposed to take place. "Considering how you behaved towards me lately, I half-expected you to ignore your promise to come and stay in your room."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Zorian said curtly. For one thing, Zach hadn't even bothered him all that much in this particular restart. Was the other time traveler trying to bait him into unmasking himself or had he simply spent so much time in this time loop that he was having trouble sorting events according to which time loop they happened in?

"Uh, what's going on here?" Taiven asked, looking between

them uncertainly. "Is there something I should know or..."

Zach glanced towards her before turning towards Zorian and giving him a thumbs up. "New girl, huh? Man, you have a new one every time I see you. I wouldn't have pegged you as that kind of guy."

"What?" asked Zorian and Taiven simultaneously.

Zorian was honestly baffled for a moment, but then realized what Zach was mixing up his restarts again. Akoja, Ibery and Taiven: Zach had seen him with all three of them in various restarts. But that... that was totally different! None of them were even interested in him!

"Zorian is a man-whore?" Taiven asked in a worryingly calm voice.

"I am not!" Zorian denied hotly before focusing his anger at an amused-looking Zach. "And you! Stop spreading stupid rumors about me! I know for a fact you've never seen me with a girl until this evening! And you wonder why I've been avoiding you this whole month..."

Zach winced. "Sorry, sorry, I was just messing with you. Don't worry, I'm sure your girlfriend won't leave you over a couple of stupid remarks by yours truly. Or if she does, she was never worth bothering with in the first place."

"Oh really?" Taiven said. "You don't think he'd be devastated to lose a girlfriend as powerful, smart and sexy as-"

"Taiven, don't you start too," sighed Zorian. "Zach, she's not my girlfriend. She's just a friend."

"Who happens to be female," Zach said, wiggling his eyebrows.

"Yes," Zorian said, gnashing his teeth in irritation.

"Ah well, at least you already have a girl to dance with for the evening," said Zach lightly.

Zorian kind of doubted that. Taiven was a very attractive girl, with a nice athletic figure and the face of an angel, and she liked

men who were similarly gifted in the appearance department. Chances were high that Taiven would find someone else to dance with once they hit the crowd. Zach maybe, if the way she was checking out his backside was any indication.

"You know, this place is pretty empty," Taiven whispered to Zorian as they walked. "I know he's the last of his House and all, but I can't even see any servants milling around the place."

"Most of the servants were dismissed from service by my guardian while I was still a small child," Zach said. It did not surprise Zorian that he'd heard her – Taiven was very poor at whispering. "Since my parents died while I was still a baby, he had free reign to do what he felt was necessary to keep House Noveda standing until I was old enough to take over. As part of that, most of the maintenance staff and other contractors were found to be unnecessary and fired."

"And you don't agree with his actions?" Zorian guessed. He could definitely detect an undercurrent of hostility when Zach talked about his guardian, which fit in with the fact that he regularly brutalized the man at the beginning of a lot of restarts.

Zach gave him a curious look before sighing.

"Let's just say he and I have our disagreements and leave it at that," Zach said.

"You know, I never did find out what happened to your family," Taiven said. "How come you ended up being the last of your House?"

Zorian punched Taiven in the shoulder for asking such a question of their host, and punctuated it with a firm glare when she shot him a scandalized look. He wasn't sure what she was scandalized about, though – did she really not realize how inappropriate her question was, or was she just surprised it was him hitting *her* for once instead of the usual Taiven-on-Zorian violence?

"Oh leave her alone, she's just being upfront about her

curiosity,” said Zach. Somehow he knew what had transpired, even though he had his back turned to them when it happened. “I kind of like her attitude, to be honest.”

“Figures,” Zorian grunted. Now that he thought about it, Taiven and Zach both had the same devil-may-care attitude about things, so *maybe* it hadn’t been the best idea to have them meet each other...

And with that, Zach launched into a protracted explanation of the Noveda House’s downfall... most of which Zorian completely ignored in favor of studying various paintings and portraits along the way. Truth be told, Zorian had already tracked down all information about Zach and House Noveda that he could get his hands on, so very little of what Zach was saying was new to him.

While tragic, Zach’s story was by no means unique, and could be boiled down to two main causes: Splinter Wars and the Weeping.

The Old Alliance was a complicated construct, a patchwork empire made out of a multitude of bickering, semi-independent states that only sometimes listened to orders coming from Eldemar, but for all its faults it was quite successful at suppressing outright warfare between its member states. Armed conflict was rare and highly limited in scale, especially since the Alliance had no major outside enemies to defend against. Thus, when the Old Alliance shattered and its component states started mobilizing their forces for war, it was the first time in nearly a century that actual war would be waged in the region. And it would be a bucket of cold water straight into the face of every battlemage in Altazia, for it would be the first time ever that firearms were used in warfare on a mass scale.

Firearms were known to Altazia for centuries at this point, but they were not held in very high regard by the generals and decision makers of Eldemar and other powerful countries. Initial attempts

to make use of them had shown them to be unwieldy and almost as dangerous to the user as they were to the target. Artillery mages were a lot more mobile and effective than any cannon, and the less said about hand-held firearms the better. Still, enough people remained interested in them that the technology never died and gradually improved as time went by. However, even after naval powers started arming their ships with cannons, even when a couple of mercenary groups began using rifles successfully, handheld firearms were still ultimately seen as a dead end. There was nothing that riflemen could do that a properly trained archer couldn't do better, and bows and arrows were a lot easier to enhance with magic than rifles and their ammunition. The one advantage rifles had over alternatives was that they required almost no training before they could be used effectively, and countries of the Old Alliance had no use for barely trained conscripts.

Until the Splinter Wars, that is. With the dissolution of the Old Alliance, every state suddenly scrambled to arm itself for the coming conflict, and having a passable army immediately was more important than having a proper one a decade from now. Smaller countries, inherently unable to compete with the likes of Eldemar when it came to magical might, invested particularly heavily into firearms as an alternative to combat magic. Eldemar, being one of the few countries with a fully functional traditional army, felt no need to play around with these 'commoners' toys'.

No one really expected firearms to be as devastatingly effective as they ended up being. Even the countries that made heavy use of them expected them to do little except stall the advance of classical armies and perhaps motivate them to look elsewhere for easier prey. Instead, massed rifleman armies absolutely savaged traditional ones, catching established powers completely off-guard. Instead of larger powers gobbling up every minor power and city-state around them and then duking it out among them-

selves (the outcome everyone had been expecting), the larger powers ended up weakening themselves instead, often splintering into their component parts as their internal enemies smelled weakness. Although nations eventually adapted their forces and battle doctrines to firearms technology, the damage had been done, and every subsequent Splinter War only made Altazia's political fragmentation worse.

This was especially true because the Splinter Wars caused immense casualties to the mage Houses that were the intellectual and political elite of Altazia's nations. The reason was simple – being a battlemage was a highly prestigious occupation and many Houses used their military involvement as a way to gather influence and reputation, which they then used as leverage in furthering their political and mercantile interests. With the advent of the Splinter Wars, the demand for battlemages only increased, causing many more mages to enlist in the various armies in search for glory and wealth. This backfired spectacularly as casualties began to mount. Unfamiliar with the strengths and limitations of firearms, and often outright dismissive of them, many mages fell prey to snipers, artillery strikes and massed rifle fire. Many noble houses were thoroughly crippled by the losses they sustained, House Noveda being one of them.

House Noveda had been fundamentally a military house, even if they were active in a lot of other fields as well. According to Zach, House leadership considered military service to build character, and every male member was expected to serve at least a few years in their youth. Quite a lot of female members enlisted as well. Very closely connected to the Eldemar royal family and very traditionalist in attitude, the Noveda supported Eldemar's military ambitions whole-heartedly, conscripting every available battle-ready member into the war effort. All this meant that when Eldemar began the Splinter Wars by launching a massive, multi-pronged as-

sault on its smaller neighbors, House Noveda members were right there at the forefront of the offensive.

And they paid dearly for it.

Still, while House Noveda was heavily diminished in the immediate aftermath of the Splinter War, they were not yet done for. Given a few more decades, the House could have recovered somewhat and reclaimed its former glory and political influence. Sadly, that's when the Weeping came and ruined everything.

Nobody knew where the Weeping came from. It simply started to spread among the soldiers one day, a deadly, incurable disease that struck down everyone who contracted it, heedless of age, health or even magic. Once a person contracted it, their death was all but certain – they would first collapse into fever and delirium, then become blind, and then start to leak blood out of their eyes before finally expiring. Regular healers were useless, no magic could cure it, and even the church and its lost mysteries of the gods failed to halt its spread. In the end, nobody could do anything except wait for the disease to burn itself out, which it eventually did. As mysteriously as it appeared, the Weeping disappeared after blazing across the entire continent.

The exact number of deaths from the Weeping was still debated, but most writers agreed that somewhere between 8 and 10 percent of Altazia's population perished in the epidemic. Some groups suffered more, while others were completely unscathed, seemingly without rhyme or reason. Zorian's family was completely untouched, for instance – both of his parents and all of his siblings survived the epidemic completely unscathed, which made them all very, very lucky. Conversely, Zach lost absolutely everyone to the Weeping. The few Noveda that survived the Splinter Wars all contracted the sickness and died, leaving a hollowed-out shell of a House whose only surviving member was a small child, too young to even care for himself.

"...which is how the whole sad story ends," finished Zach. "If nothing else, the Weeping finally put an end to the Splinter Wars. But that's enough of such depressing topics. We're here!"

Indeed they were, and boy was Zorian happy for his rudimentary control over his empathy – Zach's chosen meeting hall was a lot smaller than the academy dancing hall and the mood was a lot more informal and unrestrained, making crowds denser and rowdier. This would have been pure hell in his normal state.

Just as he was contemplating the best way to go mingle with the other students (hopefully giving him an opportunity to dig for personal information while they chatted), the choice was taken from him. Taiven also wanted to mingle, though her reasons were almost certainly more benign than his own, and she decided that the best way to do that was to have Zorian introduce her. Convenient.

After talking to a couple of people he was reasonably familiar with and knew he could talk to, mostly Kael and Benisek, Zorian moved onto people that seemed like they wouldn't mind getting interrupted. Of course, in a group of this size, it was silly to expect it would only be them approaching others.

"Alright, who else do you know here?" Taiven asked.

"Well, that tall, green-haired girl having a heated argument with those two guys is Kopriva Reid."

"Wait, she's *that* Reid?" Taiven asked. "One of those gangsters goes to the same class as you do?"

"Why, Taiven, are you suggesting that House Reid has something to do with organized crime?" Zorian asked with a small smile. "That's quite a serious accusation, you know. Nothing was ever proven, after all."

"Whatever. The bottom point is that I'm not going anywhere near the gangster princess. Anyone else?"

Zorian scanned the crowd again. To be honest, he always

found Kopriva to be a pleasant enough person to talk to, at least in the small number of times they actually interacted. She was a bit blunt and had a habit of swearing like a sailor when things didn't go her way, but she never did anything... well, gangster-y. A small group of girls glancing his way suddenly caught his eye.

"See that group of five girls over there?" he said to Taiven. "That would be Jade, Neolu, Maya, Kiana and Elsie."

"They look... giggly," said Taiven with a sour expression. "Pass."

"Oh it's too late for that," said Zorian. "See how they're glancing in our direction? They've already noticed us and are debating how best to approach and interrogate us."

"Zorian, don't tempt fate," Taiven warned him.

"It's not tempting fate, it's knowing your enemy. They just saw one of their classmates walking around with a girl they know nothing about – there is no way those five would let that go without investigating," said Zorian, even as the group of girls he spoke of shared a nod and marched over in their direction. "See, what did I tell you? They're already coming this way."

Taiven gave him a quiet groan, but then quickly schooled her face into a pleasant façade as the girls approached. Zorian understood her perfectly – he wasn't particularly looking forward to the upcoming conversation, but he knew it was coming the moment he had entered the room so he was prepared for it. And, while he didn't really think any of those 5 was the third time traveler, he had promised to himself he wouldn't skip over any candidates without giving them at least a cursory scrutiny.

This was going to be a long evening.



True to his prediction, once the introductions were done and the actual dancing had started, Taiven found herself some tall,

handsome older student and left him to find someone else on his own. Whatever, he didn't like dancing anyway. He promptly used his expert skills at avoiding attention to retreat to the periphery of the dancing throng, seeking some out of the way corner where no one would bother him. He quickly noticed he wasn't the only one who had that idea. Tinami Aohe seemed to have already found one such corner and was... looking pretty awkward, actually. Ho-hum. Somehow he doubted she *really* wanted to be left alone, with a face like that.

"Hello, Tinami," he greeted, causing her to jerk in shock at being addressed.

"Um..." she fumbled. "Zorian, right?"

"That's me," confirmed Zorian. "Care for a dance?"

"Oh. Oh! But didn't you already come with a girlfriend? Won't she mind?" Tinami asked.

Zorian pointed towards the spot where Taiven was dancing with her partner. "Also, Taiven is just a friend, not a girlfriend."

"Ah," she said, fidgeting uncomfortably. Zorian wordlessly offered his hand to her. "Um, okay then..." she said, grabbing Zorian's offered hand with surprising forcefulness and dutifully following him onto the dance floor.

In the next 30 minutes, Zorian tried to engage Tinami in conversation with only mild success, and he suspected it was only because of these highly specific circumstances she was willing to open up even a little to him. She really was a very shy girl, and he somehow doubted she was secretly the third time traveler pretending. Her awkwardness seemed quite real, and surely a time traveler as old as Zach would have grown out of that by now?

"So as a hobby, you raise... spiders?" asked Zorian curiously.

"Tarantulas," she corrected insistently. "But, um, I kind of like spiders of all sorts. I know it's weird, but..."

"Nonsense," countered Zorian good-naturally. What could possibly be weird about a shy, delicate-looking girl breeding big, hairy arachnids the size of a human hand? "Spiders are really quite amazing creatures. Though I prefer jumping spiders myself – those two giant eyes at the front somehow make them more human-like and relatable for me."

Tinami gave him an incredulous look before frowning. "You're making fun of me," she accused.

"Nope," Zorian countered with an easy smile. "In fact, there is a particularly large colony of jumping spiders that I visit on a regular basis. It's amazing what you can learn by observing the natural world."

Tinami narrowed her eyes at him and launched into a series of increasingly esoteric questions about spiders. Since Zorian had spent a great deal of time investigating various spider species as part of his research into aranea, he actually knew how to answer most of her questions. He then tried to turn the tables on her by asking her about magical varieties of larger, more monstrous varieties of spiders, gambling that her interest mainly extended to the smaller, 'cuddlier' breeds. He gambled wrong. Not only did she know more about spider monsters than he did, she also knew a great deal about monster species that only looked like a spider (such as various kinds of spider demons), and about monsters with spider-derived traits.

He wondered what would happen if he introduced her to the aranea, and decided he would definitely do so in one of the restarts. It was bound to be amusing, if nothing else.

"I see it didn't take you long to find a new girl once your lovely date for the evening left you," Zach said behind him, causing him to jerk in surprise. He glared at the boy in response, wondering why he didn't sense him coming – he usually always... oh, right, he'd shut off his mind for the evening so the combined feelings of the

throng wouldn't overwhelm him. The fact he managed to keep it closed with no conscious effort while being absorbed into his conversation with Tinami was an encouraging sign for his developing mental abilities.

"Why are you here, Zach?" Zorian sighed.

"I'm the host," Zach said. "It's my job to check up on the guests and see if they're having any issues with the service and what not. Though in this case I just wondered if you wanted to see the fireworks or not."

Oh yes, Zorian definitely wanted to see the fireworks and immediately said so. Thus, he and Tinami joined a sizeable group of people in the garden where they would have an unobstructed view of the sky. Zorian paid more attention to Zach than to the sky, though. If the matriarch's plan went along as planned, Zach was bound to have an interesting reaction.

Zorian had shied away from acting against the invaders, and not just because he was too weak to contribute much. The fact was that trying to sabotage the invasion was bound to get the attention of the third time traveler leading it, and Zorian didn't want to advertise his existence. So instead, he limited himself to gathering information about the invaders and waiting until he was strong enough to survive hostile attention. The aranea had no intention of doing the same, however – the invasion forces seemed to spend most of the month leading up to the invasion wiping out the aranea as a coherent force, and the matriarch had no intention of sitting on critical information for the sake of deception. Fortunately, there was no way for the invasion leaders to connect the aranea to Zorian, and the matriarch agreed with him that he shouldn't get involved, arguing that he was far too useful as a scout and memory carrier to risk revealing himself recklessly.

So three days ago, he and the matriarch sat down to discuss a plan of action. Zorian had observed the progress of the invasion

from various points in the city during the last few restarts, and he was convinced that the best and easiest way of derailing the invasion was to prevent the initial artillery barrage that preceded the invasion proper. This was especially true because he knew exactly where they were firing from – triangulating the location of their firing positions was absolutely trivial when you were tracking a brightly shining projectile moving relatively slowly across the sky. Unfortunately, he never managed to get close to one of those firing points to see what kind of defenses they had, since he was killed both times he attempted the feat. The matriarch agreed that assaulting those positions before they could fire was likely to be the best way to strike a critical blow to the invaders, and the plan was put in motion.

The fireworks started... and not a single artillery spell accompanied them. The look of increasing bafflement on Zach's face was priceless.

"What's wrong, Zach?" Zorian asked innocently. "You act like you've never seen fireworks before."

"Err, no, I mean I did, it's just... never mind," Zach sighed.

Zorian shrugged and turned to Tinami, offering her a hand. "What do you think of going back inside for another dance?"

"Um, yes!" she agreed enthusiastically. "Let's!"

Slowly, the people got tired of exploding lights in the sky and streamed back inside, leaving a frowning Zach staring alone at the sky.



Zorian's good mood was short lived. While the invaders were indeed hard-hit by the lack of their initial bombardment, the invasion wasn't called off, and they appeared to have made Zach's mansion one of their primary targets, probably because that's where

Zach was and they were specifically targeting him. Perhaps if the students had witnessed the artillery spells hitting the city, Zach could have used that to assume control and organize some kind of proper defense, but as it was the attack caught them all completely unprepared. Not even Zach, with all his mighty magic, could stop the flood of invaders gaining entry into the mansion, after which several groups of students were isolated from the main group containing Zach. Zorian was in one of those.

He, Tinami, Taiven, Briam and four other students he didn't know had ended up barricading themselves in one of few untouched rooms in the mansion, desperately trying to keep the invading forces at bay. The four unknown students were almost entirely useless, but the other three were worth their weight in gold. Briam had summoned his trusty fire drake to his side the moment he realized they were under attack, Taiven knew how to cast some kind of incredibly destructive fire vortex that actually made the invaders reluctant to continue their attack for 10 whole minutes, and Tinami... well, she was clearly no stranger to fighting and behaved completely differently in a combat situation than she did in normal interaction. She didn't know any fire spells, but she did know how to fire some kind of purple beams that caused even the biggest of war trolls to collapse on the ground screaming. The beams did no obvious damage, so he assumed they were simply pain spells, but that was useful enough on its own – Tinami didn't spam those beams mindlessly, instead concentrating on causing pileups, breaking up charges and interrupting enemy spellcasters.

"Zorian, I really hope you'll be done soon, because this position is rapidly becoming untenable," Taiven shouted.

Zorian ignored her, carefully inscribing the last set of explosive runes on the walls of the corridor behind them. You didn't rush this sort of task, unless you fancied blowing yourself up before the

enemies even got to you. A minute later he finished the set and rose to his feet, his knees cracking painfully from the long period he spent crouching.

"Done!" he shouted. "Everyone retreat through the corridor!"

Just as Briam, Taiven and Tinami covered him while he set up the explosive runes, he now focused on covering them while they fled deeper into the mansion. Technically one of the unknown boys helped him in this endeavor, but he wasn't very good at it – his only offensive spell was magic missile and he was firing them at the war trolls charging on them (who could soak such hits easily and keep going) instead of at the robed mages supporting them (who were a lot more vulnerable and had to concentrate on spellcasting). Zorian, aware that he didn't have the mana reserves to tank the entire enemy assault force, decided to take out the mages out of the equation first. Thus, he raised the spell rod he smuggled into the mansion and fired a weak disintegration beam towards them. He didn't aim at the mages themselves – that wouldn't have done much – but at the floor in front of them, which had no spell resistance to protect it. The beam gouged a jagged line in the floor sending billowing, irritating clouds of dust in the air. That should at least mess up their aiming.

He then turned his attention to the rapidly approaching war trolls. There were very few tricks he could do to stop a war troll charge, and none of them could be done on a moment's notice. Thus, he decided to simply sacrifice a good portion of his mana reserves and hit them with an overpowered flamethrower.

It didn't kill them – Zorian's flamethrower wasn't strong enough, and these particular war trolls seemed to be particularly tough ones, brought to deal with them after Taiven cast that flaming vortex spell – but it broke their charge, and Zorian used that momentary reprieve to conjure another cloud of dust with his spell rod and fled down the corridor after the rest of the

students. The other boy had broken his position and run ages ago, the useless coward, so he really hoped their confusion would last long enough for him to gain some distance. He wasn't fast enough to outrun a war troll.

A furious screech erupted around him, and he could suddenly hear one of the war trolls rapidly gaining on him. Damn it, he hated dying.

A sinister purple beam suddenly cut through the air next to his head, hitting the war troll behind him. The monster screeched again, this time in pain, and collapsed to the floor. Zorian gouged another line in the floor with his spell rod, cloaking the corridor in more dust, and then he was inside their newest sanctuary.

"Thanks," he said, breathing heavily.

"Um, you're welcome," Tinami said, fiddling with the silver amulet she was wearing and watching the dust cloud covering the corridor for any sign of movement. The amulet seemed to be the spell formula she was using to cast the purple beams.

"Here they come," Briam said.

"Remember the plan," Taiven said. "Let them all advance into the corridor before triggering the explosive runes."

"What if they notice the trap?" one of the unknown girls asked.

"Then at least they'll be hesitant to push forward so insistently," Taiven said.

They didn't bother closing the door – that would just result in them being pelted by wooden splinters and shrapnel when the mages forcibly broke down the door. They had lost two students before they learned that lesson.

Sure enough, there was a barrage of concussive beams and battering rams preceding the war troll charge. After Briam and Taiven repelled the initial charge with a fairly anemic defense, the mages moved into the corridor to provide support, sensing that victory was near. That's when Zorian released a mana pulse to-

wards the nearest cluster of explosive runes and the entire corridor collapsed in a deafening explosion. A huge plume of dust and gravel rushed into the tiny room they currently occupied, but Taiven was ready and immediately created a large-ish bubble of clear air to stop them from choking to death.

"Well," Taiven coughed, having been too slow to shield them all from all of the dust that was obscuring the room. "That should stop the attacks for a while. Still, we have a bit of a problem. This room is a dead end. The only exit is this corridor and the window to the outside."

"The outside is swarming with enemies," Zorian said.

"We don't have much choice, though, do we?" Briam asked rhetorically. "We can't stay here."

"How are we going to get down?" one of the unknown girls asked. "We're on the second floor, we can't just jump out of the window."

"Hmm... alright, how many of you know how to cast the floating disc spell?" asked Taiven raising her own hand.

Zorian was the only one who raised his own hand to match.

"Ugh. Fine, that will have to do, I suppose. Okay Zorian, I'm going to go first and get these four dead-weights down and you follow after me with those two."

"Hey!" one of the dead-weights complained.

"Sorry, but I call it like I see it," Taiven said pitilessly. "Let's go, before even more of these assholes converge on our position to see what the explosion was all about."

And so Zorian created a large floating disc of force outside the window and jumped on it, closely followed by Briam and Tinami. At first it seemed like everything would go flawlessly – there were no enemies waiting for them at the bottom, Taiven had successfully touched down, and his disk was not giving any indication of failing under the combined weight of people standing on it. Then

a flock of iron beaks suddenly appeared from around the corner and Zorian swore angrily.

There was really nothing he could do to deal with a flock of iron beaks, and Briam and Tinami weren't much better. There were about 50 of them, so even if he could snipe a couple off the sky it wouldn't mean a thing. Tinami probably couldn't make that pain beam of hers home in on a target, and iron beaks were very agile flyers. As for Briam, his attack options seemed to be strictly limited to his fire drake, and there was no reason for the flock to approach close enough to be caught in its fire breath when they could just rain their iron feathers on them from distance.

He fired off a homing piercer anyway, and noticed out of the corner of his eye that Taiven had launched a small swarm of 7 homing magic missiles. Eight iron beaks fell, but it was a drop in the bucket, and then it was the iron beaks' turn. The air in front of them blurred, and a cloud of glittering feathers was launched at them.

Faced with the choice of trying to tank several hundred magical iron feathers and trying to survive a fairly dangerous fall, Zorian knew which one he wanted to chance. He immediately dismissed the floating disc and all three of them promptly plunged towards the ground.

This would probably be the end of this particular restart – knowing his luck, he was going to break his neck when he hit the ground – but on the bright side he managed to evade the deadly feathers! As he tumbled through the air, his eyes briefly met with those of Briam's fire drake, and he couldn't help but think it was glaring at him. It was hard to tell when that thing was angry, though, since it always looked pretty pissed off to Zorian.

Suddenly, just before they were about to hit the ground, their fall was halted and they touched down on the ground as gently as a feather. Before Zorian could ask what happened, a huge swarm

of flaming missiles erupted from somewhere behind him, annihilating the entire iron beak flock.

"You know, Zorian," Zach said behind him, "sometimes I wonder if you have a death wish. How do you get yourself into these kind of situations? You're almost as bad as me!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," mumbled Zorian, climbing to his feet and helping Briam and Tinami rise as well. Strangely enough, they didn't seem angry at him for what he'd done. Shaken by the experience, but not angry. Maybe they didn't know he dismissed the disk on purpose?

"Well then, I'm glad to see another group of survivors, but we should really get going," Zach said. "It's not safe staying out in the open like this. Come, I know a place where we'll be reasonably safe."

Zorian looked around him. A surprising number of students had survived the attack and were dutifully following after Zach. Actually, they probably survived precisely because they were following after Zach. In any case, Zorian and his group decided there was no harm in joining the group – it's not like they had a better idea anyway.

They didn't get far before the attackers returned in force. Zorian heard Zach swearing something about bad luck and scoffed. This was no bad luck – the attackers were clearly tracking his movements and targeting him directly. Did Zach even take any precautions to make sure it took something more than a couple of easy divinations to track him down? Knowing Zach, probably not.

But Zorian had other things to worry about, because while Zach was occupied with another flock of iron beaks, a giant brown worm erupted from the ground and started wreaking havoc right in the middle of the student throng. Zorian had only met those things four times so far in the various restarts, and he already hated them – they could move through earth

almost as if it was water, and their hide was utterly impervious to physical force. They weren't particularly vulnerable to fire, either. Zorian watched impotently as the worm single-handedly shattered student formations, sending them scattering in panic so they could be picked off one by one by the winter wolves circling the throng.

Tinami apparently didn't want to just watch. She fired one of her purple beams at the worm and finally achieved some results. Namely, she got the worm to scream out in pain before immediately swinging its toothy maw in her direction, its murderous attention now firmly focused on her. Uh oh.

With a roar that promised revenge, the worm dived back into the ground. Zorian immediately closed his eyes and tried to block out the sounds of battle, focusing on his mind sense, trying to track its movements. It wasn't too hard – even if the worm wasn't psychic, it was the only mind that was below ground, and thus easy to pick out from all the rest. He opened his mind, keeping track of the worm's mind as it swam underground. Tinami seemed rooted to the spot, aware that she couldn't separate too far from the group lest she be picked off like the rest of the students that made that mistake... and therefore couldn't really escape the worm.

Just before the worm was about to surface, Zorian wrenched Tinami to the side and dropped an explosive cube where she was just a fraction of a second before. The worm erupted from the spot only a moment afterwards, its toothy maw snapping shut around the clump of earth... as well as the explosive cube. Even as it swung its head in their direction, Zorian activated the cube and the worm shuddered and started screeching and thrashing like mad before violently vomiting some of its pulped innards. Tinami was hit by its tail as it thrashed around and was thrown to the outer periphery of the battlefield, where she lay unmoving. Zorian quickly ran up to her and was relieved to see she was still breathing and had no

obvious wounds. He shifted his attention back towards the worm, hoping that it had finally died while he had not been paying attention to it.

The worm swayed in the air as if drunk, and for one sweet moment Zorian thought he'd won... but then the worm swung its toothy maw straight towards him and roared out a challenge. This time it didn't bother to dive into the ground, stretching out to an impressive length far faster than a creature of such size should be able to.

He didn't die. The worm stopped a hair's breadth away from his face, straining against some invisible bonds before suddenly turning to the side and biting down on the winter wolf that had been trying to sneak up on him while he was distracted.

[I was just in time, I see,] the voice of the matriarch spoke into his mind, and then she physically appeared, jumping out of the shadow of a nearby tree like it was the most normal thing in the world.

"Thanks," Zorian said. "But I'm not sure why you're here. I thought we agreed there should be as little contact as possible between us during the invasion."

[I decided that updating your memory packet with the information we found out today is more important.]

Zorian sighed and glanced around. Everyone was too busy fighting for their life to pay much attention to them, and it wasn't like the aranea was easy to spot in the gloom of the night.

"Make it quick," Zorian said, and the matriarch immediately set to work. Anything that tried to sneak up to them was dealt with by the giant worm, which was apparently still under the matriarch's control.

And then, after five minutes, she was gone again, and Zorian picked up Tinami and tried to rejoin Zach again, but he had barely made five steps before a jagged red beam filled his vision, plunging

his world into darkness.

COMPLICATIONS

Zorian woke up in his bed in Cirin, Kirielle wishing him a good morning in that charming manner of hers. He was annoyed both at himself for not paying more attention to his surroundings and at the unknown attacker that did him in. It figured that he would survive all those close calls and near-death situations, only to get killed by a simple sneak attack.

He passed the train ride sketching magic item blueprints in his notebook. Most of them were trivial things, like plates that kept the temperature of a meal constant or explosive traps that triggered on their own when certain conditions had been met, but he was toying with the idea of designing a practice dummy. He had found a combination of alteration spells that should allow him to construct a dummy out of wooden scraps and soil, but making the animation core was no simple task. And then, even if he managed that, he would have to design a warding scheme to etch into the dummy's surface, lest it disintegrate when he started hurling spells at it... possibly in an explosive manner, showering him with wooden splinters and shrapnel. He should probably also add at least a weak self-repair function, to prevent the dummy from falling apart from micro-fractures and such...

He didn't expect to finish this project in the current restart.

In any case, this time Zorian didn't wait much before contacting the aranea. Upon entering his room, he spent an hour crafting a rod of magic missiles for basic self-defense and then promptly marched off in the direction of the nearest Dungeon entrance.

Unlike his previous attempts to look for aranea, he wasn't simply walking around, waiting to stumble upon their scouts – he was trying to sense their minds with his brand new mind sense. Sadly, he sensed nothing except an occasional rat and-

He stopped, sensing a mind of unusual strength from one of the rats ahead. He mentally ordered his floating light to intensify for a moment and was rewarded with a disquieting sight of a rat missing the top of his head.

For a full second, Zorian and the cranium rat stood still and watched one another in indecision, trying to decide on a course of action. Then – gently, hesitantly – the rat extended a telepathic probe at him, trying to worm into his mind. For one small moment, Zorian considered trying to take it on telepathically, but then discarded the thought as stupid and risky. He was completely untrained in telepathic combat, and that one rat was merely a conduit for the entire cranium rat collective. So instead he drew his brand new spell rod and fired a magic missile at it.

The moment he reached for his spell rod, the rat immediately dropped its telepathic probe and tried to run. It was too slow. The bolt of concussive force slammed into the tiny creature with a loud crack, pulverizing its bones and crushing it into paste.

Well, so much for that. Zorian extended his mind sense as far as he could, trying to sense the rest of the collective, but found nothing. Either this one was an isolated scout or the rest had some method of hiding from his scans.

By the time he had decided to move on, the pulped body of the cranium rat was already being enveloped by a green, translucent mass of crawling gel. The oozes that patrolled these walled-off

sections of the dungeon were artificially engineered to be less dangerous and aggressive than their wild counterparts, but Zorian was never a fan of tempting fate and did his best to side-step the things as he moved past them. Acid burns were hard to heal, even with magic.

When he finally did find the aranea, the meeting was pretty disappointing. The aranea he met was one of those that didn't know how to talk to humans, so it took him 10 minutes of telepathic pantomime that left him with a raging headache, and once the matriarch finally showed up she basically told him to get lost for a few days until she came to terms with the contents of the memory packet.

Not an unexpected turn of events, but he had been hoping that the matriarch had refined her memory packet into something that could convince her past-self a bit faster than last time. The matriarch was a bit pushy and conceited, but it was nice to talk to someone about the time loop. Also, the truth was that there was little he could do to unravel the mystery of the time loop without aranea help other than steadily gathering magical skills and keeping his eyes open.

As he walked back to his room to sleep off his newly-acquired headache, he tried to think of a way to advance faster in his magical studies. He needed a teacher. One willing to teach him spells most instructors would consider too dangerous for the likes of a freshly certified student. Who did he know that would... oh.

That just might work.



The next day, when Taiven came to recruit him into her little sewer expedition she found him practicing combat spells on one of the Academy training grounds instead of sleeping in his room.

He could have easily warded himself against her divination spells at this point, but having her track him down was part of the plan: he was hoping to recruit her as a sparring partner, and possibly teacher.

He had always thought he had gotten over Taiven's (oblivious) rejection of him, but apparently there was still some lingering resentment remaining because he noticed something very important in the previous restart. Something he should have noticed way sooner, had he not been unconsciously ignoring her and pushing her away. Taiven was not at all opposed to helping him out, especially if the help was somehow related to combat. Why was he insisting on learning combat magic alone, without an instructor, when he was friends with someone who specialized in that very field of magic?

So here he was, carefully casting magic missiles at the target in front of him, trying to make them as mana efficient as possible. He was hoping that Taiven would offer to help on her own when she saw him practicing, and he wasn't disappointed. She did, however, attach a condition to her offer.

"So, in conclusion, I get a month of instruction from you, free of charge, in exchange for joining you on this sewer run of yours?" Zorian asked.

"Yup!" Taiven said happily, looking very satisfied with herself. Zorian could guess why – she just found a way to pressure him into accompanying her, and all it took was promising to do something she was inclined to do anyway.

"I suppose that's okay," said Zorian, mentally considering how he should approach this. He could, of course, simply trail after them and let them fumble around for a while – it's what Taiven expected him to do, and he was pretty sure the aranea wouldn't 'attack' while he was present. However, after some thought, he decided to go for a different path. "I have a request though. I am on

speaking terms with a colony of sentient spiders living in the sewers, and I have a sneaking suspicion they're the ones that supposedly took the watch. I'd like to try actually talking to them before you go in and start burning things."

Taiven gave him a curious look. "You are friends with a bunch of giant, sewer-dwelling spiders?"

"Pretty much," Zorian agreed with her. He would describe the aranea as acquaintances and allies of convenience instead of friends, but she didn't have to know that. "I trust you and your friends can keep that a secret? I'm sure you can see why spreading that around might cause problems for me and the spiders both."

"Don't worry, I'm not a tattletale," Taiven said dismissively. "And I've yet to see Grunt and Mumble engage in any kind of gossip, so your secret is safe with us, oh great monster charmer. You think they'll just hand us the watch if we ask?"

"If the client's story is not made up, then yes. I don't see what use they would have for a pocket watch. But anyway, I have a request for you before you run off to do your thing."

"Oh? And what's that?"

"Teach me a fire spell more destructive than flamethrower," Zorian said.

"How big are your mana reserves?" Taiven immediately asked, not at all disturbed by the request.

"Magnitude 12," Zorian said.

"Hmm, a little lower than I thought, but decent enough I guess," Taiven said. Zorian decided to keep quiet about the underwhelming nature of his natural reserves. "What kind of spells are you looking for, anyway?"

"Preferably something that can one-shot a troll," Zorian said.

Taiven looked at him like he was crazy. "What? Roach, you're far too green to go around picking fights with trolls. What the hell are you on?"

"Just humor me, Taiven," Zorian sighed. "Besides, this is pure self-defense – I won't be picking fights with anything."

"Hmph," Taiven shrugged. "Says a guy who goes around meeting giant spiders in the sewers in his free time. But alright, I guess if you're going to do stuff like that you'll need some stronger spells under your belt. I expect an explanation about that soon, though."

"After the summer festival," agreed Zorian smoothly.

"I'll hold you to that," Taiven said, poking him painfully in the chest. "Now, there are two spells that kind of fit your criteria, although they will only kill a troll if you can hit the troll in the face with them – fire bolt and incinerating ray. The bolt can home in on the target and is cheaper in terms of mana use. The ray is far more damaging, but also far more of a mana hog and you need to worry about your aim."

"Teach me both," said Zorian. The bolt seemed like something that would be more generally useful for someone like him, but he needed the raw power as well.

"You sure you have the shaping skills for this, Roach?" Taiven asked. "'Cause this kind of spell isn't going to fizzle out if you fail – it will blow up in your face."

Zorian snorted derisively. "Trust me, shaping skills are not something I'm lacking in," he said. He raised his arm into the air, palm pointed towards the earth, and willed some of the dust and dirt to rise towards it. The dry, loose material that covered the training ground slowly rose towards his hand in a diffuse pillar, coalescing into a rough sphere once they reached his palm.

Once he was satisfied with the size of the sphere, he pointed his palm towards one of the targets and willed the mass of dirt rapidly forward, catapulting it towards the target. Sadly, the impromptu construct was too structurally unsound and disintegrated into dust halfway towards the target, so some of the effect was ruined.

It didn't make the feat any less impressive to Taiven, though.

"Damn, that was impressive as hell," Taiven said. "How can you do that? I don't think *I* could do that... Lift a rock off the ground, sure, but diffuse material like soil? That's a pretty advanced exercise. Hmm, if your shaping skills are that good, I guess there are a few more spells I could teach you..."

Zorian smiled. This had definitely been a good idea.



During the next several days, while he waited for Taiven to gather her team for the journey into the city's sewers, Zorian got a crash course in combat magic from his friend. Taiven took a surprisingly broad approach to the topic, opting to teach him as many different spells as she could manage instead of having him practice a few until he had a firm hold over them. She claimed that he already had a core of spells he was properly proficient in, and that he needed variety and breadth of possible options more than he needed a new ace in the hole, but she later admitted she was testing him, trying to discover the limits of his shaping skills. Something she didn't end up finding – Zorian's shaping skills were better than hers; every spell she could cast, he could as well.

Not all of the spells she taught him were of the typical offensive sort he expected from her. Some of them, like the 'spider climb' spell that allowed him to cling to sheer walls and other stable surfaces, 'featherfall' that allowed him to survive high falls, or the various comfort spells that blunted temperature extremes and other environmental conditions, could be more properly classified as survival spells. Nonetheless, Taiven insisted that sometimes the environment itself was just as big of a danger to a mage as his living opponents, and that he needed to know these spells if he was going to waltz around the dungeon and similar places.

She was also fairly horrified by his lack of defensive spells. Not just a lack of any defensive barriers more substantive than

the basic shield, though she wasn't happy about that either – no, she was talking about wards. Wards were fairly useless once the fight started, since they were slow to cast, and few opponents would give a mage the time needed to cast them during a battle, but Taiven claimed they were absolutely essential for a mage who expected to get into a fight. So long as you weren't ambushed or otherwise surprised, and actually knew you were going to be in a fight soon, you could at least cast some basic wards to improve your spell resistance and counter some of more common spells. And if you actually knew something about your opponent's spell repertoire and specialties? Then you could really ruin their day with a few choice wards. This was the reason why humanity had been steadily encroaching on monster-held territory with every passing year – most magical creatures only had a handful of inborn magical tricks and abilities on their side and once you knew what they were you could devise a perfect counter for them in advance.

Unfortunately, you could only stack so many wards on top of each other before they started to interfere with each other and the whole edifice collapsed, and some of them inherently interfered with each other's operation, so knowing how to combine them effectively was a bit of a specialist skill. Taiven was not very proficient with wards herself, being more offensively focused, so he would need to find somebody else for anything except the basics.

However, most of the spells she taught him were various offensive and defensive energy projections, largely ones revolving around fire and force, but also some spells based on cold and electricity. Among other things, Zorian could now cast the ever-famous fireball spell... exactly twice before he ran out of mana. So not very useful, honestly, but Taiven claimed that any mage worth their name should be able to cast a fireball, and that the utility of such spells would naturally increase along with his

mana reserves.

"Actually, I'm curious... is there some way to speed up the growth of mana reserves?" asked Zorian. "I know that artificially increasing them has bad side-effects, but is there some kind of training method that would speed up natural growth?"

Taiven looked at him, looking apprehensive. "Technically, yes," admitted Taiven reluctantly. "It's as simple as using mana-intensive spells to constantly exhaust your reserves. It would kick the growth of your reserves into overdrive. However, that kind of unnatural growth would completely wreck your current shaping skills – your normal growth of reserves is so slow because your soul is making sure your control over mana doesn't slip. Wrecking your shaping skills just to speed up the growth of your reserves is really short-sighted, Roach. Please don't do it. I never would, and you know I'm not exactly the most responsible girl. Surely you can wait for a few years for them to grow on their own?"

Well he certainly wasn't pressed for time at the moment, Zorian had to admit. "I suppose that makes sense," he said. "I guess the reason why mana reserves plateau after a while is that there is only so much power a soul can safely handle. Increasing the cap artificially after that point messes up the mage's shaping skills with no hope of ever regaining them. No wonder everyone recommends against doing it – no matter how benign the enhancement process, the result is still more power and less control over it."

"There is always a trade-off between control and power," said Taiven. "It's just not apparent most of the time, since very few people try to develop their shaping skills to their limits. Many mages think that having more mana is always better, since you can always work harder on your shaping skills, but increasing your mana reserves without bad side effects is essentially impossible. It's not true, though. No matter how much time they spend honing

their shaping skills, people with huge mana reserves are outright incapable of performing some particularly finesse-focused spells – things like advanced mind magic, detailed illusions and complex alteration constructs.”

“Wait, you’re saying that I’ll lose the ability to cast finesse-based spells as my mana reserves increase?” asked Zorian in alarm.

“No, no, I’m talking about your *natural* mana reserves – your inborn capacity before you start to increase it through regular spell-casting. About magnitude. Most spells, even highly sophisticated ones, are designed for average mages – magnitude 8 to 12, in other words. You’re 12, so still comfortably within the intended range. Hell, I’ve heard of a one particular 15 magnitude mage that became a damn good illusionist, so even if you tip over a little it will hardly matter.”

Considering Zorian’s real magnitude was 8, he apparently had nothing to worry about. Still, it did make him wonder about Zach, who seemed to have magnitude in the low 60s. How did that kind of monstrous power factor in Taiven’s scheme?

“How about people with really high magnitude?” asked Zorian. “How high can you go before finesse-based spells become impossible?”

“I’ve never seen hard numbers, but I’d guess around magnitude 20 or so,” Taiven shrugged.

“How about the really high numbers?” Zorian asked. “Something like magnitude 60?”

Taiven blinked, seemingly baffled by the question. “Well, that would be downright inhuman!” she said finally. “Is that even possible? Anyway, I’m not sure whether that would even be a good thing, even for a battlemage like me. Anyone with such mana reserves would have to spend years longer than their peers just to gain a basic level of proficiency expected of a certified mage.

Maybe as much as a decade even, I don't know."

Zorian thought about what a relative failure Zach was before the time loop and frowned. He had thought that Zach had simply been a lazy slacker, but maybe there was more to it than that? Then again, he had a feeling Zach was a special case. Those inhuman mana reserves were just that – completely outside the human range. He found absolutely no records of people like that in any of the books, and most of the experts he asked flat out told him such people didn't exist outside of myths. Also, while Zach had been a crappy mage, he did succeed in getting certified so his huge mana reserves clearly weren't as crippling as they should have been.

Maybe it was a Noveda House bloodline? One that gave their family huge reserves without the crippling loss of control, perhaps. Of course, the Noveda publically claimed they had no bloodline, but it wouldn't be the first time a House had lied.

"I hesitate to even bring this up," Taiven said, breaking him out of his thoughts, "but if you're really desperate for a short term mana boost, you can always absorb ambient mana faster than you can assimilate it. I'm sure you're aware of the drawbacks, though..."

Zorian nodded. There were two main forms of mana available to the mage: his personal mana and the ambient one that emanated from the underworld. Personal mana was something that all things with a soul possessed in varying amounts, and it was attuned to the person producing it – it bent easily to its creator's will, and was innately more malleable and controllable than anything else they might use to power their magic, since it never resisted the caster's efforts to shape it. Ambient mana, on the other hand, was both harder to control and toxic to living beings. Not enough to kill a mage just for using it once, but any substantial, prolonged use resulted in sickness and insanity. The mages of old believed that ambient mana was tainted by the World Dragon's hate for humanity and shunned its use, but modern mages had discovered

a few tricks to making use of it. One was by using it to power items, which had no minds to corrupt or bodies to sicken. The other was to assimilate the ambient mana into their personal reserves, negating its toxic properties. While the process of assimilation was too slow to power actual spells, being able to regenerate personal reserves faster was useful enough that the skill spread far and wide. These days, every student of magic was taught how to do it along with the other basics of spellcasting.

"I'll get sick," Zorian said. "And possibly mad, if I keep using it constantly."

"Right," Taiven said. "Using raw mana on a regular basis is pretty stupid, but if you're in a real bind... well, it's better to spend a few days bedridden with a fever than end up dead."

"You've used it before," guessed Zorian.

Taiven gave him a surprised look, like it was unexpected he figured it out. "Uh, maybe once? Or twice?" She shifted her stance, looking uncomfortable. "But keep quiet about that, will you? Most combat mages have done it a couple of times in their life, but Guild inspectors don't accept 'everybody's doing it' as an excuse."

Zorian made a gesture over his mouth, indicating that his lips are sealed. It's not like she didn't know plenty of things to get him in trouble with, anyway.

"Let's just get back to the lesson, oh great teacher," Zorian said. "Since you're so intent on teaching me mana-intensive fire spells, how about that fire vortex I heard you can cast..."



When the time came, Taiven and her two friends let Zorian take point as he led them towards aranea territory. They had already tried and failed to divine the location of the watch, which wasn't terribly unusual if it really was taken by the aranea – the

aranaea had been engaged in a shadow war with the invaders for a while now, even before the time loop started, and their anti-divination wards were top-notch.

[We meet again, Zorian Kazinski,] the matriarch spoke telepathically to him. She was surrounded by 6 honor guards, though only 2 were actually visible while the other four hung from the ceiling while under some kind of invisibility spell. Zorian only knew they were there because he could sense their minds. [And once again you bring additional guests with you. Three of them this time. If this pattern continues, we'll have to find a more spacious area to house them all after a few more restarts.]

[Funny,] Zorian sent back. [But actually, this is the group I was a part of when I first met the aranea. We were looking for a watch supposedly in your possession then, same as we are now. Sounds familiar?]

"What's going on?" asked Taiven. She and her two friends were hanging in the back, looking apprehensively at the three spiders in front of them. "Why are you just staring at them?"

Before Zorian could say anything, the matriarch started waving her front four legs in the air for a while and then spoke.

"What's this about a watch I hear?" she asked, turning her two biggest, forward-facing eyes at Taiven.

It took a few minutes of explaining and clarifications, but in the end the matriarch finally seemed to remember the event in question.

"Oh, now I remember," she said. "Though the man in question certainly wasn't any kind of innocent passerby, and the 'watch' is no simple time-keeping device – he had assaulted our web with a couple of other thugs and ended up dropping his bauble when we chased them off."

[He's one of the invaders,] the matriarch told him telepathically, so only he could hear. [Or at least he works for them. You

say you saw him? Excellent, we finally have an entry point into the organization. A face, a name and face-to-face contact should be enough to divine where he lives... you know his name, don't you? Excellent. Hopefully he gave away his real one. Did you shake hands with him when you accepted the job? No? Try to shake hands with him when you give him the device. Maybe put a tracking spell on it if you know how...]

Somehow, the matriarch was able to participate in two separate conversations at once, speaking out loud to Taiven and her two friends as she spoke telepathically to Zorian. Zorian himself was not similarly blessed, and mostly tuned out her explanation to Taiven in order to absorb what she was telling him mentally. Finally, she seemed to realize this and cut her telepathic communication with him short, allowing him to pay attention to what she had been saying to Taiven.

"...so I'm not sure what the device is for, but it's clearly a magical item of some sort," the matriarch said out loud. "It's useless for us aranea, but we are well familiar with the concept of trade. We were hoping to trade it to some of our human contacts for something we can actually use, but since it's our dear friend Zorian that's asking for it, I guess we'll give it to you as a favor. I'm sure Zorian will make it up to us... eventually."

"Uhh..." fumbled Taiven, looking at him uncertainly. "Is... that okay, Roach? Are you...?"

"Yeah, I'm fine with that," Zorian shrugged. Although as far as he was concerned he didn't really owe any favors to the matriarch for this.

[I only said that for appearances sake,] the matriarch told him telepathically. [It would be weird if we just gave it up for no reason. Besides, as far as *I'm* concerned, you will repay my generosity by helping me track down your employer so we can wring him for information.]

"Fang of Victory will go and retrieve the bauble," the matriarch said out loud, causing one of the two visible honor guards to suddenly skitter off into the darkness. "I'd ask you to warn your employer against further aggression against us, but it's probably best if you keep quiet about talking to us."

"Why did he attack you anyway?" asked Taiven. "You seem nice enough to me."

"Most places will kill sentient monsters as a matter of course, if they find them within their borders," Grunt said. He and Mumble were both pretty quiet thus far, so it was a bit startling to hear him speak up all of the sudden. Taiven gave him a dirty look for his remark. "What? I'm just saying he didn't need a reason. Their presence would be offense enough for some people."

"It's a little more complex than that," the matriarch said. "Humans clash with other sentient races, that is true, but that's because most of them are highly territorial, murderous, view humans as food or all three. On occasions where that wasn't the case, humans have shown themselves willing to make exceptions and take a more... nuanced approach. There are several dragons that deal with humans in a peaceful manner, the lizardmen of Blantyrre have long been a trading partner for human nations, and many of the splinter states bordering the wilderness have made secret or not so secret pacts with various spirits and monster clans living within their nominal borders."

"You've thought about this a lot," Zorian remarked.

"Though not well known, we have been peacefully interacting with humanity for quite a long time now", the matriarch said. "The aranea have been living in the deeper levels of the dungeon for as long as this city has existed. When the foundations were being laid, several campaigns were launched into the local sections of the dungeon to clear out the threats lurking inside it. However, this power vacuum also allowed weaker races like aranea to move

into the place. The dungeon around the Hole is prime real estate for magical creatures of all breeds, as you probably know, and the competition was fierce. Fortunately, while we aranea lacked the brute strength or destructive magical abilities of some of our competitors, we were far more willing to cooperate with humans to our mutual benefit. We contacted some of the humans that were willing to cooperate with us and gave them information about our mutual enemies – their strengths and weaknesses, where they lived, the timing of their attacks and movements... everything they needed to wipe them out, or at least weaken them to the point where we could finish the job. Information gathering has always been our specialty.”

Zorian found himself fascinated by the story, and more than a little surprised that the matriarch was willing to say all this in front of Taiven and her friends. Then again, Zorian never told them that aranea were mind readers, so their minds were completely unshielded - the matriarch probably had a pretty good picture of how likely they were to cause trouble for her. And they weren't going to remember anything about this when this loop ended, either.

”Although giving information to humans helped us as well as them, we rarely did it for free – in return for our secrets, we demanded some of your own. Our human allies used the information we provided to make a name for themselves and further their careers, and in return they taught us some of your magic and helped us adapt it for our own use. Armed with our very own system of structured magic, the aranea grew in strength and versatility, solidifying their hold over this region and making the web that lived beneath Cyoria the most prestigious of aranean webs. The resulting prosperity caused their numbers to swell, and they sent a never-ending stream of colonists and breakaway webs to the surrounding region, where they proceeded to evict or subjugate every lesser aranean web they encountered. But although these aranea

left Cyoria in search of their own destiny, no place had the prestige or opportunities that Cyoria offered, and thus viewed their mother web with envy and resentment. Soon, a number of these breakaways banded together and, armed with the experience of fighting the lesser webs for territory, drove the original web out of their homeland. It would not be the last time Cyoria changed hands. The conquerors were soon evicted by another group of invaders, and this group was evicted by another, and then they were evicted by us. We are the fifth web to hold this place and while our position is secure at the moment, any sort of weakness could cause the neighboring webs to get... restless."

"Huh," Zorian said. "So if you were, hypothetically speaking, absolutely decimated by someone and had your numbers severely reduced?"

"Our neighbors would launch a few probing raids at the very least," the matriarch said. "But anyway, my point is that humans and aranea are not, nor have they ever been enemies. Well, barring some... isolated incidents. On both sides. In fact, it has been my explicit policy to encourage closer links between this web and humans living in Cyoria. I hope the day will come when aranea will be able to walk the street above in open daylight, just like any other citizen."

"And I suppose you hope the humans will defend you from outside threats, like any other citizens," Grunt said. "Like, say, from those rival 'webs' that want to take your territory?"

"I confess that possibility does factor rather heavily into my thinking," the matriarch admitted. "The city authorities would be a lot less inclined to stand by and watch if we had an established, formal relationship with them."

"So is this your recruiting pitch?" asked Taiven. "Are you trying to turn us into your agents?"

"More contacts is always good," the matriarch said. "But no,

I'm not trying to recruit you. I just sensed you were worried about Zorian's association with us and wanted to assuage your fears somewhat. Anyway, Fang of Victory is coming back with the bauble so we'll have to cut this short here. Talk to Zorian if you ever want to chat with us again."

Sure enough, the matriarch honor guard soon returned with the watch. Zorian half-expected her to return with the watch gripped in her fangs, but it actually came back carrying some kind of leather harness full of pouches across its body, one of which held the watch. For a moment Zorian wondered how they made that, what with them lacking hands and all, but then realized he was being a bit foolish. The matriarch had already said they traded with humans for a lot of things – this must be one of them.

They quickly said good bye to the aranea and were on their way back to their employer, prize in hand.

"I don't know what to think," Taiven said when they put some distance between themselves and the aranea. "They seemed nice enough, but it's a bit disquieting to find out we have an entire colony of these things living beneath the city, pulling their strings over gods know how many people."

"Yeah," agreed Mumble quietly. Zorian could definitely see why Taiven called him the way she did – he tended to talk really softly, making his speech very hard to understand sometimes. "Did you know Cyoria is kind of famous for its spider silk? The merchants who sell it are really cagy about where they get it in such quantities and have declared their source a trade secret. Most people think they have managed to create a spider species that can be farmed effectively and have a giant farm hidden somewhere, but I think it's pretty obvious now where they get it..."

Zorian mostly kept out of the conversation, alternating between listening to their conversation (when they were saying something interesting) and studying the device they retrieved

from the aranea (when they weren't). It was, as the matriarch said, a magical item of some sort – shaped like a pocket watch, but not one. The hands didn't move, and the screw that should have allowed a person to wind it was fused with the casing and seemed to be simply an ornamental bump put there to make the illusion superficially convincing. He tried to channel mana into it, but that didn't result in anything substantial – the device probably required the user to channel mana in a very specific manner. Many complex magical items did.

The lessons in divining the secrets of magical items that Haslush gave him really paid off here. Considering its purpose, the device yielded its purpose surprisingly easily – to put it bluntly, it was equipment for burglary. More specifically, it was a ward scanner, designed to guide and enhance divination spells meant to seek out weaknesses in complicated warding schemes so they could be broken or bypassed more easily. Their employer had probably been trying to identify a hole in aranean defenses.

Still, while the purpose of the device was readily apparent to his divination spells, its method of operation stubbornly remained a mystery. After several unsuccessful attempts to pry the casing open without damaging the device, he finally decided to try something... experimental. He extruded a mana cloud from his hands, the way he did when picking locks, and directed it to trickle into the device's insides through the gaps and misaligned seams. The resulting information was fuzzy, but told him that the insides were filled with brass gears and crystals. They were probably not meant to be pried open. How then...

Ah, so that was the trick! The hands of the clock weren't just static – they were nothing more than an image painted over a glass cover. Zorian pressed his finger against the glass cover and pushed it into the casing. There was a soft click from the inside, and when Zorian released the pressure the cover immediately flew open, re-

vealing a complicated interface full of dials and sigils. *Very* complicated interface... he wasn't going to figure this out in the hour or so they had until they reached the client.

He was so taking this thing apart to see how it worked in one of the future restarts.



Finishing the job was done without complications. Zorian opted not to put a tracking spell on the device, since he didn't know how sensitive the device was and didn't want to ruin it. That turned out to be a good choice, as the man immediately cast several diagnostic spells on the device once Zorian handed it over, one of which Zorian knew to be a spell designed to detect simple tracking spells. Once the transaction was done, Zorian insisted they shake hands, claiming it was traditional in his village to do so after a successful business deal. The man rolled his eyes and mumbled something about yokels, but humored him anyway. Mission accomplished.

After they all shared a drink in a nearby tavern (Taiven insisted and wouldn't hear no from anyone), the group separated. Zorian immediately descended to the sewers again and went back to the aranea.

[A ward reader, you say?] the matriarch asked. [It makes sense. He and his friends had been hanging out at the edge of our territory for a while, trying to stay hidden. I'm surprised he hired a bunch of students to get it, though.]

"Yeah, I'm not sure what he was thinking," Zorian said. "Seems like a stupid idea to me."

[We'll find out in a few days, if all goes well,] the matriarch said. [That said, there are other things we must discuss. I believe I told you in the previous restart that I happened upon some pretty important information.]

"You did," Zorian agreed. "I was wondering what that was about."

[It's about the invaders. First of all, your guess was right – they are indeed from Ulquaan Ibasia.]

"I knew it," Zorian scowled. "What was it? Are they out for revenge or is this just sheer opportunism?"

[A bit of both,] the matriarch said. [They resent you for their exile and they think you're weak, now that the Splinter Wars and The Weeping wiped out most of your battlemages. But that's not the important part. The important part concerns a question so basic I'm honestly not sure why neither of us thought of it. Namely, why exactly did the invasion think they could conquer Cyoria in the first place?]

Zorian opened his mouth to answer 'with the aid of the time loop, duh', but then quickly closed it again. According to the matriarch, this invasion had been in the works far before the start of the time loop. Clearly, someone associated with the invasion got brought into the time loop eventually and started feeding information to them to make the whole endeavor scarily effective, but what about before that? Without knowing exact locations of Cyoria's defenses, their initial bombardment would have been a lot less damaging than it was. Without knowing the Academy's exact ward scheme and how to bypass it, their assault at the place would be practically doomed from the start. And on top of all that, the matriarch claimed the aranea were successfully keeping the invaders out of Cyoria's underworld before the time loop. So really, the invasion never really had the chance to take control of the place.

"Perhaps they didn't," Zorian said. "Intend to conquer it, I mean. Cyoria is pretty important to Eldemar, but it's not the capital, nor its industrial heartland. It's the seat of Eldemar's Mage Guild and the home of the world's most prestigious mage academy, neither of which is likely to cooperate with the invaders. Most

likely, they just intended to do as much damage as possible. Keep Eldemar's magical might busy while they invade with the bulk of their forces elsewhere."

[You're very close,] the matriarch said. [They were indeed trying to cause as much damage to the city as possible, but it was to be much more than a simple distraction. Apparently, the date of the summer festival is very magically significant. It is the day of the year when the barriers between planes of existence are the weakest. In fact, the weakening starts exactly one month before the date, gradually reaching its peak on the day of the festival. And this year's summer festival is even more special than usual. I'm afraid that us aranea don't know much about astronomy, seeing as we live largely underground, but apparently this year's summer festival includes some kind of... 'planetary alignment'?]

Zorian took a deep breath, a shiver running down his spine. Of course! How could he have missed it till now? This year's planar alignment, signified by several planets aligning with their own, an event that took place once every 400 years or so. The last time such an event happened, a city of mages took advantage of it to teleport their entire city all the way from Miasina to the southern coast of Altazia, performing the largest feat of trans-continental teleportation to ever be recorded. If someone wanted to mess around with space and time on a grand scale, this was *the* time to do it.

"Yeah, that *would* explain a lot," Zorian finally said. "Like why the time loop was initiated now, of all times. But wait, how does that help them to do more damage to the city? Did they intend to teleport the city into the sea or something?"

[No. First of all, they intended to summon a large amount of high-level demons to help with the invasion. This was why they were willing to go through with the attack, despite their lack of success against us and their inability to do much to the academy and its wards. Demons, especially high-level ones, are virtually immune

to mental attacks and highly resistant to magic. The aranea would be massacred in no time at all, and the mages would be too busy fighting for their lives to help out the city's mundane defenders. Those same defenders would be up against trolls and fire elementals, who are immune to firearms, with winter wolves and iron beaks acting as support.]

"That... that's horrible," Zorian said after digesting that for a second. "Why aren't they doing that now?"

[They can't, remember? No summoning anything while in the time loop. The whole material plane has been cut off from the spiritual ones,] the matriarch reminded him.

"Oh yeah," Zorian said. "I guess that would throw a serious wrench in the works. I wonder if they actually went through with the invasion during the initial restart when they had no agent inside the time loop. They would have surely known their plan was doomed without demonic support."

[They probably would,] the matriarch said. [The demons were ultimately a distraction, same as the rest of their forces. The invasion leadership didn't actually think they were enough to do more than cripple Cyoria and they wanted it completely wiped off the map. No, the real target lies with the area around the Hole. While the defenders were busy fighting for their lives, a group of mages would secure the place and enact a grand summoning ritual.]

"Ugh," Zorian grunted. "Let me guess: a really big demon."

[No. They wanted to summon a primordial.]

Color instantly drained out of Zorian face. "What!? But... that would leave the whole city a lifeless crater! What about their own forces!?"

[Expendable,] the matriarch told him bluntly. [Everyone high enough to matter was ready to teleport away at the first hint that the summoning was successful, the rest were disposable pawns

that were never actually expected to survive. Besides, you'll notice that the actual invasion force is really light on human mages. Only a minimum of Ibasan mages was necessary to maintain some control over the various demons and monsters. And you're actually rather optimistic in your damage predictions. The Ibasan leadership hoped that being summoned with the help of the biggest mana well on the continent would give the primordial enough power to linger on this plane for weeks. If so, it would rampage across large swathes of Altazia before finally running out of power or until the Altazians managed to organize a group of mages big enough to banish it back to its realm. Then Ulquaan Ibas could just swoop in once it's gone and mop up the demoralized survivors.]

Zorian was honestly at a loss for words. On one hand, the plan was utterly crazy, and a large part of him wanted to say it would never work. Where did they even find a ritual to summon a goddamn primordial of all things? But still, he'd watched the invaders bulldoze through Cyoria's defenses far too many times to discount them like that. If they thought the plan could work, it probably could.

"Where did they find mages willing to do the summoning?" Zorian asked. "They must have known they'd be killed by the primordial's rampage before they can escape, being so close to it and all. And do you happen to know which primordial it was?"

[The summoning would be done by the Esoteric Order of the Celestial Dragon... probably known to you by the name 'Cult of the Dragon Below'. Apparently they are fully willing to die in order to summon one of the 'Great Mother's children'. Those of their members not involved with the summoning are helping the invasion forces as regular mage support or simple saboteurs, in case of more mundane members. Actually, now that I think about it, they are probably acting as the invaders' inside agents in general; we'll have to infiltrate their group deeper for more information. Any-

way, no, I don't know which primordial. Just that it was one of the land-bound ones – the Ibasans didn't want to risk it suddenly deciding it wanted to visit their little island and flying over.]

"I'll bet," Zorian said. "Of course, all this means we have a problem on our hands. No matter how formidable the invasion is while we're trapped inside the time loop, it will be even more fearsome outside of it. They will have additional demon support on top of everything they already have, and we'll have to spend some of our time thwarting the primordial summoning. I want to say those cultists are just totally crazy and couldn't summon a crippled imp, much less a thrice-damned primordial, but the possibility is just so catastrophic we can't afford to risk it."

[Yes, this indeed complicates the matter considerably,] the matriarch agreed. [My original plan was to keep thwarting the flow of the invasion until the third time traveler is forced to reveal themselves, either through sloppiness or frustration; lure them into an ambush and mindrape them into catatonia; find a perfect counter for an invasion over several restarts; and finally, find a way to break the time loop and deal with the invaders for real. The part about dealing with the third time traveler still seems workable, but finding a perfect counter will clearly be impossible with such a large variable missing while we're inside the time loop...]

Zorian was a tad queasy about how matter-of-factly the matriarch spoke of destroying a person's mind, but he had to admit he knew of no other way to deal with the third time traveler. The only other way involved destroying his soul, and that was arguably even more morally reprehensible. Plus, he didn't actually know how to destroy someone's soul. And hopefully never would.

"Right," Zorian sighed tiredly. "What a day. Do you have any other bombshells to throw at me?"

[Well... not as such, no. However, these recent developments mean that I will not have much time to teach you this month. For-

tunately, you are at the level where you don't really need a high-level user like me to guide you, so I have found you a suitable replacement. Zorian, say hello to Enthusiastic Seeker of Novelty.]

One of the aranea that had accompanied the matriarch, a rather small and twitchy individual that seemed to have trouble staying still, suddenly jumped down from the ceiling and landed in front of him.

[Hi! I am Enthusiastic Seeker of Novelty and I will totally be your teacher this month! I know you humans have trouble with our names so you can just call me Novelty. I don't mind!] She circled around him as she spoke to him telepathically, looking like some kind of weird puppy inviting him to play with her. [Anyway, when the matriarch asked for volunteers to teach you, I was like: 'this is your chance, Novelty'. I was totally game! They won't let me help with defense because I'm supposedly too young, but they told me you're a baby at this psychic stuff and I can totally take care of babies! And hey, you can teach me stuff too! I was always curious about you humans, like how you can walk on your hind legs without tipping over all the time or...]

Zorian tuned out her chatter in favor of giving the matriarch a glare.

[Does she come with an off button?] he asked telepathically.

The matriarch simply projected a mixture of amusement and satisfaction in response.

LIGHTING THE FUSE

On the surface, getting saddled with Novelty seemed like a recipe for endless frustration and annoyance – she was an impatient, impulsive chatterbox that seemed to have no concept of personal space, always hovering uncomfortably near him and poking him with her front legs. Zorian was not afraid of spiders, but that kind of close physical contact was just too much.

Basically, she was a spider version of Kirielle. And he only tolerated Kirielle's antics as much as he did because she was his little sister.

Despite this, Zorian was actually glad to have met her. Her personality certainly left a lot to be desired, and he often had to keep her focused on their lessons instead of going off on weird tangents about various topics, but she was still a wealth of information on both psionics and aranea. And unlike the matriarch, whose every explanation sounded like a thinly-veiled manipulation attempt to Zorian, Novelty didn't have a single deceptive bone in her body. Most of the time she said what she meant, and it was painfully obvious when she tried to shift the subject or fudged the truth. It was a refreshing change of pace from his previous interactions with the aranea.

Novelty remained blissfully unaware of his thoughts, too engrossed in her inspection of Zorian's alchemy equipment. That was another difference between Novelty and the matriarch – Novelty couldn't read his surface thoughts unless he structured his thoughts very slowly and clearly aimed them at her. It made him much more relaxed about her presence than he would have otherwise been.

[Humans build so many strange things,] Novelty declared after inspecting the glass vials by sight and touch. Zorian didn't know whether aranea were usually this fond of touching things and Novelty was simply unrestrained in her interactions with him or if the spider in front of him was simply a physical sort of girl, but Novelty certainly liked to touch the things she was studying. Annoyingly, this included him as well as random inanimate objects, but at least she seemed to have finally internalized the idea he didn't like her climbing into his lap by now. [How did you even make this? It's the same kind of transparent rock you use for those 'window' things, but I have no idea how you managed to carve it out in this kind of shape. And it's so smooth, too... I know those branching upper limbs of yours are better at manipulating things than our legs, but this is crazy. You know, the aranea once tried to keep human thralls to create things for us, but it was a huge hassle and it turned out it's much easier to just trade with humans for what we need. You humans don't seem to fare too well underground, and kidnapping humans always seemed to anger the rest of the human communities a lot, even when they weren't of the same clan or anything. And... uh, that was a really long time ago and we totally don't do stuff like that anymore and you should forget everything I said about that, okay?]

"Uh-huh," said Zorian dubiously before deciding not to pursue the issue. "For what it's worth, the transparent rock is called glass, and it's not really carved. It's made from sand, which is heated

until it turns molten and therefore malleable and then shaped by sticking long tubes into the resulting molten mass and blowing air into it.”

Novelty turned around to focus all of her eyes on him. [How, in the name of grandmother’s shriveled egg-sack, did it occur to one of you to do *that*? Do humans have some sort of magical stone sense or something?]

”Err, no,” said Zorian patiently. Explaining stuff like this to Novelty was annoying, but it made her much more willing to share things with him in turn, so he would labor on. ”Humans have always been mucking around with tools of various sorts. We’re pretty fragile in our natural forms, so building things is a matter of survival. We use crude tools to fashion better tools, and then those better tools to fashion more precise tools, and so on. I don’t really know how glassblowing came into existence, but it didn’t just magically pop into someone’s head all out of a sudden...”

[I don’t really think you can be considered fragile,] Novelty said dubiously. [You wield incredible magic, and you pretty much conquered the surface world with it.]

”Not all humans wield magic,” said Zorian. ”Only a small number of people are mages, and the number was even smaller the more you go back in time.”

[Most of your ‘tools’ sound a lot like magic to me, to be honest,] Novelty said. [You take rocks and stuff and perform complicated rituals on them to turn them into these wondrous creations that no amount of web-weaving can duplicate. It’s the part that fascinates me most about you humans – this weird building magic of yours. I was kind of hoping I could learn some of your secrets while I teach you, but it looks like that will be pretty difficult because, you know,] she waved her front legs in the air for emphasis, [I haven’t got these ‘hands’ you humans use for everything. Not that I’m giving up or anything! I’m definitely going to figure something out!]

"Well, you already told me you are learning to be a mage, so you could always resort to actual magic," said Zorian. "Fabrication spells are a thing, after all. Granted, you'd have to understand the properties of materials you're working with and the engineering principles of the things you're trying to create, but if you're serious about being a crafter that's pretty much a must anyway."

[I'll be honest and admit I have no idea what you just said,] Novelty said after a brief silence. [But I'm guessing you were trying to be encouraging so thanks!]

"Right," Zorian sighed. "We've gone on a tangent again. Let's focus on the lessons again."

[But those lessons are so boring!] Novelty complained. [You already know most of this stuff; it's just a matter of practicing, and you can't do that here, anyway. You are practicing, right?]

"Sure am," Zorian agreed. "I spend most of my classes trying to sense my classmates and other students in the building. Not like I get anything else useful out of classes these days. It's going pretty well, but I still have to concentrate pretty heavily to achieve any kind of range. I've also tried sensing their emotions, but that is still pretty hit and miss. Are you sure no one is going to detect me doing that? Because I'm going to land in pretty hot water if somebody detects me messing with people's minds."

[I keep telling you, no one is going to detect anything without invading your mind first,] Novelty assured him. [I totally went and asked other aranea about that, since you keep asking about it, and they confirmed it. Basically, sensing minds and basic empathy doesn't involve any delving into other people's minds. I know you don't believe in the Great Web and all, but imagine a kind of mental plane that permeates everything. Minds create ripples on this mental plane, like stones thrown into a pool of stagnant water, and those who are Open can use these ripples to locate other minds around them and divine some basic facts about them. Stuff

like species and their general mood.]

"Huh. That does make sense," Zorian said. "So sensing minds and empathy are really two aspects of a single ability – that being an ability to perceive this mental plane of yours and interpret the 'ripples' propagating through it? Do you know if mental shielding spells have an effect on this?"

[Oh, definitively,] confirmed Novelty. [The basic shielding spells that mages like to use will pretty much ruin your ability to use empathy on them. Too much interference. Detecting them, on the other hand, becomes even easier. Any mind-affecting spells make a mind 'noisier' to a psychic, even defensive ones. *Especially* defensive ones, now that I think of it. Well, except for that one infamous spell called 'Mind Blank' that actually causes a mind to disconnect from the Great Web, making a person completely undetectable to mind sensing and utterly immune to mind-affecting magic. Pretty terrifying stuff, that.]

Zorian knew of the spell she was talking about. Mind Blank was well known as a kind of 'ultimate defense' against mind magic, but the spell was infamous for causing psychological problems if miscast or used too extensively. A number of mages paranoid about people invading their minds had gone insane after leaving it permanently on, giving it a somewhat poor reputation among mages. There were other, less drastic protections that were sufficient in most cases.

"That's strange," Zorian said innocently. "The matriarch told me that no flimsy human magic could shield me against her if she was determined to get me, but here you're telling me there is a spell I could learn to make myself completely immune to psychic powers."

[Ah, well, you see...] Novelty fumbled. [She was actually right because, because those are totally different things, yes? A shield is one thing – we can totally batter it down or bypass it. If you take

yourself off the Great Web, though, it's like you aren't there at all! You first need to sense a mind to connect to it, and if you can't connect to it-]

"I get it," Zorian interrupted. "No telepathic link, no aranean mind magic. And you can't connect to something you can't sense telepathically. Hmm, clearly the creator of Mind Blank knew a thing or two about psychic powers – it sounds like the spell is designed specifically to defeat them."

[The idea isn't that revolutionary,] Novelty grumbled. [A sufficiently skilled psychic can disconnect from the Great Web with some effort. It's called 'going dark'. It's a pretty shady skill, though, mostly used by assassins, thieves and saboteurs. Anyway, the problem isn't just the Mind Blank – it's the fact that any mage powerful enough to cast it is also powerful enough to take on the entire aranean Web all on their lonesome. We have ways of dealing with people like that, but I totally can't tell you because the others would have me dismembered if I said anything about it – since, you know, secret defenses and stuff.]

"Right," Zorian said. He had no intention of creating problems at home for Novelty, so he wouldn't pursue that topic further. Their super-secret defense plans probably boiled down to 'collapse the entire tunnel on top of them', anyway. "So Mind Blank is a psychic skill translated into a spell. Not that surprising, I guess – mages love taking abilities of magical creatures and turning them into spells for their own use."

[Really?] Novelty asked. [But I thought human magic is so good that there is nothing you can learn from others. The matriarch is always talking about how amazing your magic is and how no one can match it...]

"No, that's completely wrong," Zorian said. "Mages of Ikosian tradition – which is virtually every mage you're going to encounter – are pretty much all about taking other people's magic and mak-

ing it your own. The entire system of structured magic is specifically designed to be expanded upon as needed. It's true that we rarely find something worth learning among other magical traditions these days, but that's mostly because we already stole and traded for everything that was worth taking."

[That's... not quite the story I was told,] Novelty admitted.

"Don't feel too bad – most humans also think our entire magical tradition sprang fully-formed in the early days of the Ikosian Empire," Zorian said. "But back to our conversation about mental defenses. You said an aranea could batter down or bypass defensive magic other than Mind Blank. Does that include you personally?"

[Of course! Who do you take me for?] Novelty protested. [If I couldn't fight telepathically, I'd have been devoured while still at the hatchery!]

Zorian blinked. "What, seriously? As in, actually get eaten or...?"

[Err, no, not *literally* eaten. We haven't let the hatchlings eat each other ever since... err, actually, let's not talk about that. It was just a figure of speech, that's the important bit. Anyway!] Novelty hastened to change the subject. [I don't know how it works among humans, but newborn aranea are confined to the hatchery during the first few months of their existence. There are usually a lot of us, and we're all cooped up in this tiny boring room with nothing to do but pester the caretakers for stories and pick fights amongst each other, and the caretakers don't like it when the hatchlings fight physically with each other. They are a lot more lenient about... *experimenting*... with our psychic powers, though. A bit of telepathic roughhousing is to be expected, so you pretty quickly learn the basics of defending your mind.]

Zorian tried to imagine the scenario Novelty just described and abandoned that train of thought with a shudder. He made a mental note to avoid being near aranean hatcheries at all costs, just in case

the issue ever popped up in the future.

"That's... interesting... but not quite what I was asking. I asked about countering defenses, not defending yourself," he said finally.

[You can't win a fight by only defending,] Novelty scoffed. [I don't really understand this weird divide between mental attacks and defenses you insist on. Striking back is a crucial part of any worthwhile defense. Even a weak counter-attack forces your opponent to spend some time and focus on their defenses and weakens their own attack.]

"I guess I keep forgetting that psychic powers aren't discrete spells, but more of a manifold manifestation of a single holistic ability," Zorian admitted. "Still, retaliation doesn't have to be mental – if I could stop your mental attacks long enough, I could just punch you or cast a spell on you to make you stop. Considering I know nothing about telepathic combat, that's probably the smartest option for me anyway. And that brings me to my proposition – I want to see how my magical defenses fare against your capabilities. I'm going to cast a few mind shields and you're going to do your best to take them apart. What do you say?"

[Honored matriarch gave me strict instructions about when I can progress with your lessons,] Novelty said hesitantly.

No doubt accompanied by strict instruction about what she wasn't allowed to teach him *at all*. Zorian was under no illusion that the aranea intended to teach him anything but a small fraction of their psychic skills. While the aranea seemed to worship their ability in some sense, and sought to encourage its spread among humanity, they clearly regarded most of it as a personal secret. Hell, some of the things the matriarch told him heavily implied they kept some things secret even from each other, never mind from outsiders. Not to mention it would be rather foolish of the matriarch to teach Zorian how to do some things, since he could promptly use those skills against her interests. For instance,

he was quite sure that Novelty got strongly worded instructions not to tell him anything about memory manipulation, since that would allow him to mess around with the matriarch's memory packet and potentially feed her forged information.

Still, Zorian was fine with that. He already got more out of the aranea than he thought he would have, and in case he ever got greedy for more than the matriarch was willing to provide? Well, there were more aranea than the ones beneath Cyoria, and Novelty made it clear they didn't really talk to each other much. If he traded for a single secret with ten different groups, he could easily amass far more knowledge than any one group would be comfortable with him having... for additional irony, he might even trade them a secret he got from one of the other groups he traded with. It was a classical trick that Ikosians used when dealing with tribal groups, and the time loop only made it easier.

But if he ever wanted to do such a thing, he needed to have some way of defending his mind. He got the impression that aranean tribes outside of Cyoria weren't nearly as friendly as the matriarch and her tribe, and mind effects transferred across restarts. The matriarch promised to teach him 'the basics of telepathic combat', which he translated as 'inadequate to threaten us, but good enough to ward off cranium rats and random mind mages', so he needed to know how human mind magic fared against your average aranea.

"We aren't 'progressing my lessons', because you're not going to teach me anything," Zorian insisted. "It's just an experiment. I want to see how my spells fare against you."

[Alright, I'm totally game, then!] Novelty agreed, suddenly enthusiastic. [But, uh, you're not allowed to attack me physically in response, okay?]

"That would kind of defeat the purpose of the experiment," agreed Zorian.

[Right. So are we assuming I'm attacking from an ambush or that I'm pressed for time?] Novelty asked.

"The difference being?"

[Well, if I was attacking from an ambush, I would try to simply bypass your shield entirely through superior skill. It's very effective when it works, but slow to set up, so it doesn't work if the target isn't either too busy with something to deal with me or unaware of the attempt. On the other hand, if time is of the essence I'd just batter down the shields with brute force. It's faster but more mana expensive. Oh, and it's kind of hard to judge the exact amount of force needed to break through a defense without also damaging the mind it was defending so, uh... let's just assume I'm attacking from ambush, okay?]

"Yes, let's," Zorian deadpanned.

The next hour was as frustrating as it was instructive. Novelty took the whole thing as a game, improving as time went on, despite Zorian's futile attempts to refine his defenses through repeated castings and spell combinations. It was rather embarrassing to see the over-excitabile, scatterbrained aranea go through his spells like they didn't exist in 30 seconds flat. Granted, those 30 seconds would be enough for him to incinerate her in real life, but that presumed he was in a position to do so, and that might be an unwarranted assumption. What if she was hidden from him? What if she was behind some kind of wards? What if she wasn't the only attacker?

But a little embarrassment was worth it. He now knew that his best defense against aranea (and other psychics, he supposed) was actually the basic mind shield spell. Other, more sophisticated spells couldn't seem to cope against Novelty's telepathic attacks.

[Most of the spells you used were really easy to trick and bypass with a few feints and a bit of careful timing,] Novelty explained. [They were all based on simple defense patterns and always reacted

the same to my attacks. That magic shell you used to surround your mind with, though... it's such a crude thing, but I have to admit it gave me trouble. No patterns or anything fancy, just a solid, unyielding mental barrier. I don't think I'd be able to bypass it at all if you hadn't kept messing up the spell every time you cast it.]

"I was messing it up?" asked Zorian in surprise.

[Yeah. The shell had these minute imperfections in it that I used to slip past it. I don't think those were supposed to be there,] Novelty said.

Hmm, minute imperfections, she said? Sounded like a normal result of a usual spell boundary. Very few mages could cast a spell flawlessly, and they rarely needed to – minute imperfections rarely mattered unless you were dealing with very special circumstances.

Apparently this was one of those special circumstances. Zorian suppressed a sigh – he could already hear the ghostly voice of Xvim in his head lecturing him about the failures of today's mages and the need to practice until you could do the spells *right* instead of good enough.

In retrospect, he was just asking for trouble with that line of thought.



When Zorian arrived at his weekly session with Xvim, he fully expected to get an hour of his usual crap from Xvim... which in this particular restart meant taking a bundle of thin sticks and trying to incinerate one of the sticks without singeing the rest of them or burning his hand in the process. Admittedly, Xvim was staring at him pretty hard when he came in, but Xvim did a lot of really weird things during their sessions.

Zorian hadn't even taken a seat before Xvim decided to speak to him.

"I have heard you have been casting fireballs," Xvim said. "Is that true?"

Zorian forcibly stopped himself from scowling at the man. Him making a comment like that was never a good sign – Xvim was never impressed with anything Zorian did, so no doubt he found something objectionable in his combat practice with Taiven. How the hell did the man even find out about that?

Xvim's face told him nothing, and Zorian had already tried to use his rudimentary empathy on him to no avail, trying to see what made the annoying man tick. Xvim had an incredible control over his emotions, and virtually nothing fazed him or truly set him off.

"I can cast the spell, yes," Zorian said carefully, as if talking slower would help him evade whatever minefield Xvim set up for him with his question. "Admittedly only at minimum power, but—"

"So that's a no, then," Xvim deadpanned. He stared at him, as if challenging Zorian to contradict him. Fortunately, Zorian was far too wise to get worked up over Xvim's proclamations at this point, so they simply stared at each other in silence for a few moments. Eventually, Xvim broke the stare-down with an overdramatic sigh. "Mages these days, always rushing into things half-baked. I expected better from you. There is nothing wrong with being interested in combat magic, but immediately going for the flashiest, highest rated spell in your reach is unwise. A half-powered fireball is no fireball at all. You should have concentrated on building a solid base until you could do it *properly*."

"Well," Zorian said calmly, "why not show me how it's done, then?"

In response, Xvim wordlessly drew a stack of cards from his drawer and threw them at him. Zorian instinctively caught them before they could collide with his head, too used to his antics to be surprised at the move.

"Cards?" he asked, turning them over in his hands. They

looked like regular playing cards, except their faces were replaced with squares, lines, circles and other geometrical shapes.

"Cards," Xvim confirmed. "Specifically, cards made out of mana absorbing material. The seemingly ornamental sigils on the corners expel any mana the cards gather, radiating it away into the surroundings. It takes a lot of mana to affect them in any way."

"And I'll be affecting them?" Zorian guessed.

"You'll try, I'm sure," Xvim said airily, pointedly rearranging the pens on his table instead of looking at Zorian. "They're very hard to affect for mages of such meager skills as yours are. To make the story short, you'll be trying to burn the shapes painted on the cards – and only the shapes. You may begin when you feel ready."

Zorian stared at the cards for a moment. He suspected he knew what the point of this exercise was - he had to use a lot of mana, and he had to use it instantly or the corner glyphs would simply radiate his mana away. That was pretty much the basic challenge of all combat magic: shape a lot of mana quickly without messing up the spell boundary too much.

So he took a deep breath, picked a card that looked easiest to him (it was just a circle in the middle, how hard could that be?) and poured a sizeable chunk of mana into his first attempt.

Other than the corner glyphs glowing a little, nothing happened.

Damn it. This just might be a little harder than he thought it would be.



After failing to affect the cards a few times and then overdoing it and burning down a few cards to cinders, singing his fingers in the process, Zorian finally managed to burn some blurry shapes

that were clearly inspired by what was drawn on them instead of being an irregular hole burned through the center of the card. Predictably, Xvim had some very disparaging things to say about that.

Eventually, Zorian ran out of mana and had to stop. What kind of shaping exercise was so mana intensive you can actually run out as you practice? The Xvim kind, apparently. Instead of simply sending him away, though, Xvim then proceeded to lecture him about the proper way of gathering ambient mana. Apparently there was a way to assimilate ambient mana faster if you sat completely still and focused on doing absolutely nothing else. So not very useful, all things considered, but probably crucial if he intended to complete Xvim's newest exercise in any sort of reasonable time-frame.

Then, as a parting remark, Xvim casually remarked that they were going to continue their lesson tomorrow. That tomorrow wasn't even a school day didn't bother Xvim in the slightest.

"Good," Xvim concluded. "We have a whole day, then. We will need the time from what I saw today."

It wasn't an isolated occurrence. From that day on, Xvim insisted on practice sessions every single day, monopolizing every bit of free time Zorian had. Why did Xvim suddenly decide to do that, when he usually never interacted with him outside their assigned meeting times? Hell if Zorian knew. It was certainly annoying, though.

The aranea, on the other hand, had their own frustrations. Trying to track down the ward-breaker that hired Taiven's group to recover the watch turned out to be fairly easy, but getting access to him was anything but. In addition to being good at breaking and analyzing wards, the man was also good at building them, and he was a very capable mage to boot. The aranea lost two of their members trying to corner him and eventually gave up on him for that particular restart, focusing on other leads for the moment.

They still did their best to counter the invaders during the summer festival, of course.

The next two restarts were much the same – the aranea gathered information about the invaders, sometimes asking Zorian to speak for them if they had to interact with someone openly, and started a limited assassination campaign among the cultists and other invasion collaborators that they managed to identify. Zorian learned combat magic, aranea mind arts, and tried to survive Xvim's lessons without punching the man in the face. Their efforts were steadily bearing fruit, with the invasion going more and more haywire with each subsequent restart, and the matriarch hoped their mysterious third time traveler was going to show up soon.

The biggest surprise, to Zorian, was that Novelty actually remembered their interactions in previous restarts. Apparently the matriarch wasn't monopolizing the memory transfer like Zorian thought she would, and was instead giving him memories of 6 different araneas in that memory packet of hers. Novelty, being something of Zorian's personal trainer by now, was deemed important enough to be included in that elite company, something the young spider was very smug about.

Now, though, Zorian was feeling it was time for a change of pace. Two restarts full of Xvim were enough for him, and Taiven had taught him most of what she knew about combat magic anyway.

He knocked on the door to Ilsa's office and waited for her to invite him in.



"Good morning, mister Kazinski," Ilsa said with a hint of amusement. "I haven't been expecting you until Friday. I suppose you've heard some stories about your mentor, then?"

"No, I already know what kind of person Xvim is. It's not why I'm here," Zorian said. "No, I'm here because I want to learn how to teleport."

Ilsa blinked in surprise. "That's... quite ambitious. Leaving aside the question as to why I should spend my time teaching you that, what makes you think you're even capable of casting such a spell? Even the simplest of teleport spells are very difficult."

"A fair question," Zorian admitted. "How about a demonstration?"

"By all means," Ilsa laughed, motioning him to go ahead. Zorian didn't need empathy to see she didn't think he was capable of impressing her.

Well then – challenge accepted.

Every difficult shaping exercise, every complicated spell he learned over the past two years in the time loop – he showcased all of them. Every written test or theoretical question she fielded against him he countered with a perfect answer – sometimes because he honestly knew the topic, and sometimes because she tended to ask the same questions each time he tried to impress her. And then, when she was still reeling from the realization that he was skilled enough to graduate from the academy right at that moment if he wanted, he pulled out several magic objects from his backpack and started explaining his spell formula experiments to her. While not an official spell formula teacher, Zorian knew from previous restarts that she had very good knowledge of the field, and could appreciate the difficulty of feats he was showing her.

"I'm surprised you haven't applied for a transfer to a tier 1 group with these kinds of skills," Ilsa remarked when he was finally done.

Ah yes, the tier 1 groups – the academy's answer to students too advanced for the normal curriculum. Sadly, the prestige of

belonging to one of those groups meant that many people did everything in their power to place their child into one of them, and that meant the actual lessons couldn't be *that* much more advanced from normal ones, else all the people who bought or otherwise arranged for their presence there couldn't keep up. Zorian had heard all sorts of things about those groups, good or bad, but the general picture seemed to be of a bunch of social climbers looking down on everyone else. Nothing that Zorian wanted to be a part of.

"I believe I can get more things done through independent study," Zorian said. "If I truly thought my classes had nothing to offer me I would just test out."

"Don't be too hasty," Ilsa warned. "I'm sure you can find the academy resources useful for another year or so. You aren't *that* advanced."

The academy didn't like it when people tested out. They publicly prided themselves on being able to help even adult mages, never mind gifted children. Graduating early implied that the student had nothing left to learn from the academy, and was considered a bit of a slap to the face on behalf of the student. You didn't get any money back for finishing early, either.

All in all, Zorian didn't really intend to test out – that wouldn't get him anything except create bad blood between him and the academy. Still, he always found that sprinkling some light threats into negotiations helped the other side take him more seriously.

Ilsa continued to think in silence for a while, rhythmically tapping her pencil on top of a folder full of written tests that Zorian had speedily filled out earlier in the meeting. Zorian didn't interrupt her, although he considered the long silence a bad sign. In all likelihood this attempt was a waste and he would have to try another approach in the next resta-

"Alright, here is my offer," Ilsa said suddenly. "I will transfer your mentorship from Xvim to myself. I will give you instruc-

tion in advanced aspects of illusionism, alteration, animation, and conjuration. If you impress me with your dedication, I will then include lesser dimensionalism spells in that list, and if you prove yourself adept at those... *then* I will teach you the basic teleport spell."

Zorian blinked. What? That was way more than he asked for! Not that he was complaining, but...

"That sounded better than I hoped for," Zorian said. "What's the catch?"

"Well, first of all, I'm expecting you to be my personal assistant," Ilsa said. "I've been trying to get one for the past two years, but the headmaster refuses to pay for their salary and finding a skilled person willing to work for free is surprisingly difficult. Anyway, you'll mostly be dealing with the large number of tests and homework I get every single day, and I may also ask you to take over some of my teaching duties to first year classes. Or any other random task I think of that I consider below me, really."

Annoying, but a fair price for what she was offering. In fact, this whole thing sounded remarkably like-

"And you'll officially become my apprentice," Ilsa continued. "If I am going to teach you advanced magic and trust you with my work, I want to have some kind of legal hold over you."

...like that. Normally Zorian would be very leery of signing an apprentice contract with someone he barely knew, considering their main purpose was to screw the apprentice over if they went against their agreement with their mentor, but this contract was only going to last until the end of the restart so what the hell.

"Oh, and you'll be taking over the position of class representative for your group," Ilsa suddenly said.

Zorian winced. Not only was that a thankless, horrible job, it was also already taken.

"Akoja is going to be devastated," Zorian mumbled. He felt

kind of bad at stealing her position, especially since he didn't actually want it in the first place, but there was no way he was missing this chance.

Ilsa laughed. "Zorian, the reason I'm giving you the position is that Akoja doesn't want it anymore. She says she hates the position – that everyone shuns her because of it and that I should give it to someone else. Unfortunately, I haven't received any offers to switch with her. Not from anyone I trust, anyway." She gave Zorian a knowing look. "You were one of the people she recommended for the position, but I didn't even bother asking you about it. Everything I heard about you suggested you wouldn't accept the position."

"And you were absolutely right," Zorian agreed, still in a little shock. Akoja didn't want to be the class representative? But the girl lived for that stuff! And anyway, if she didn't want to do it then why did she perform it with such dedication? If Zorian was stuck in a job he hated, he would do as little as possible, or even mess up deliberately so Ilsa would feel pressured to replace him as soon as possible. Why couldn't Akoja do the same? "The only reason I'm accepting this now is because your offer is so good."

"So we have a deal, then?" Ilsa asked for confirmation.

"Yes, but I have a question and a demand," said Zorian. "First, why do you want to teach me those particular subjects? And second, I want to learn the teleport spell before the summer festival."

"I somehow doubt you'll manage to master the prerequisites for the teleportation spell in little less than a month," Ilsa said. "But in the *highly theoretical* case you actually do so, I have no problem fulfilling your demand. Why are you so dead-set about that spell?"

"It's a bit of a dream of mine to be able to do that," Zorian shrugged. "In my mind, teleportation has always been one of the ur-examples of what a proper mage can do, should be capable of."

"Interesting. Out of curiosity, what are the rest of the things a

proper mage can do?" asked Ilsa.

"Make a force field, create a magic item, produce a fireball, repair broken objects and turn invisible," Zorian said. "I can already do the first four, and the fifth one is illegal without special permits."

He was already working on acquiring an invisibility spell anyway, but she didn't have to know that.

Ilsa gave him a knowing look and Zorian would have been afraid she was reading his thoughts if he weren't sure he could detect any casual intrusion into his own mind.

"To answer your first question, I chose those disciplines because they're my own specialty," Ilsa said. "It's only proper for an apprentice to learn his master's specialty, is it not?"

"Sure," Zorian agreed. "I'm not sure what all of those things have in common though. Aren't specialties supposed to be more focused?"

"Well, when I was a young mage, I too had a bit of a dream," Ilsa said. "Specifically, I wanted to master true conjuration."

Zorian blinked. "As in, creation of real matter out of thin air? Isn't that a myth?"

"That's the current Academy stance, yes," Ilsa agreed. "Pre-Cataclysm sources claimed that powerful mages could manage the feat, but all the spells to do so have been lost and no one has been able to recreate them in modern times. Many mages think they never existed and the old records are making things up or describing something other than actual matter creation. Anyway, as a young mage, it had been my dream to recreate those spells, so I studied anything I thought could be a path towards that goal. Modern conjuration basically involves making solid illusions, so it was somewhat natural to start with illusionism and then progress to conjuration. And then, since true conjuration involves working with real matter, I moved onto alteration spells dealing with fabrication of items."

"And... did you have any success?" asked Zorian curiously.

"Depends on your definition of success," Ilsa shrugged. "My ultimate goal was to design a spell that would summon material from somewhere else, without the caster having to know exactly where the materials are coming from. That was how I imagined ancient Ikosians could 'fake' matter creation. I sort of succeeded, but the spell I made only works in a specially prepared room and the mana cost of the spell varies wildly from casting to casting, depending on what I'm trying to conjure. And there was that embarrassing incident with the gold creation part of the experiment swiping these ancient coins from a nearby museum..."

She shook her head. "A story for another time. I have to get to class soon, anyway. I'll prepare an apprentice contract for you to sign tomorrow so be sure to drop by when you get the time."



The next five restarts were both hectic and boring. Hectic in that there was always something that needed to be done, and boring in the sense that little of it was truly novel. He steadily improved his various skills, the aranea were getting highly adept at countering the invaders in various ways, and Zach seemed to have finally accepted that something highly unusual was going on in the background, and it wasn't caused by him.

There was little chance of Zach identifying Zorian as the cause of the changes, since the sheer magnitude of them tended to drown out everything Zorian personally did. The aranea always started each restart very aggressively, giving anonymous tips to Cyoria's police department, assassinating a few people, and even spreading a few rumors around. The result was that by the time Zorian entered his first class, the changes had already propagated throughout the whole city, academy teachers and students included. Zach

didn't appear to suspect Zorian as the ultimate cause, or any other classmate for that matter.

Zorian was starting to agree with Zach in that regard – whoever the third time traveler was, he certainly wasn't in their class. Zorian had, through various excuses, talked to all of them – it helped that he spent the past five restarts as the new class representative, so he had plenty of excuses for such – using his slowly improving empathy to see whether they reacted with shock or surprise when he dropped some of the more suggestive sentences that would only make sense to a time-looping person. He found nothing to implicate any of them.

All in all, things were going pretty well in Zorian's opinion. The last restart was especially good as far as Zorian was concerned – he had finally managed to learn the teleport spell from Ilsa, Zach was actually starting to get smart about countering the invaders instead of simply trying to take them all on through his combat skills, and the last invasion attempt failed to conquer the main academy building or the student shelters because the aranea somehow managed to influence academy leadership into adjusting their warding scheme.

But the matriarch was getting impatient. Something was making her more and more nervous with each passing restart, and she refused to tell him what, giving flimsy excuses every time he asked. She seemed to be focusing most of her energies on some kind of personal project, which she described as 'information gathering' and 'following a hunch', and whatever results she was getting were clearly disturbing her. Zorian strongly suspected she had discovered some kind of vital information about the nature of the time loop, and she refused to share it with him for whatever reason. He was honestly kind of bitter about that. What could possibly be more disturbing than what they already knew about the phenomenon?

Regardless, the matriarch was insistent that the third time traveler had to be found, and the sooner the better. Once Zorian confirmed that they weren't in his class, she became convinced they, like Zach, weren't even present in the city most of the time. In all likelihood they simply gave critical information to the invaders at the start of the restart and then went to do their own thing. If they wanted to get their attention, the invasion would probably have to be a *spectacular* flop.

Accordingly, the matriarch laid out her plan for the next restart, one that would definitely be impossible to ignore...

SMOKE AND MIRRORS

Zorian would be the first to admit he wasn't the easiest person to get along with. He was unsociable, irritable, and tended to assume the worst of people. He had always known that, even before he had died and gotten stuck in a mysterious time loop, but he had also always felt he was justified in his behavior. Indeed, if anyone had been foolish enough to criticize him about it before the time loop, he would have reacted with all the subtlety and grace of a disturbed rattlesnake.

Now... well, he still felt he had good reasons to behave the way he did, and he wasn't going to win any friendliness contests any time soon, but the time loop had changed him. Made him calmer, and perhaps a tad bit more considerate to people around him. He hadn't had an argument with his family in years, his financial independence was all but ensured once the time loop was over, his growing magical prowess had done wonders for his confidence, and the sheer scale of his current problem made all his previous frustrations seem rather petty in comparison.

Thus, when Kirielle kicked him in the knee for the third time in as many minutes, he pointedly didn't snap at her. He didn't even sigh in exasperation. He just continued staring out of the window,

watching the fields fly by as the train sped ever closer towards Korsa.

"I'm bored," Kirielle complained.

Zorian gave her a curious look. While the wards protecting the train disrupted mana shaping, they had only a rudimentary effect on his empathy, and what he was detecting from Kirielle wasn't boredom – it was a mix of excitement, anticipation and apprehension. As far as Zorian could tell, such complex mixtures of emotions appeared to be the most common 'emotion' that people experienced, and they were almost entirely indecipherable at Zorian's current level of skill.

"What's really bothering you?" he tried. Her mind immediately burst into a flurry of activity, and she opened her mouth to say something before losing her courage and lamely disguising her attempt to speak as a particularly deep breath. Huh, so she wasn't just being restless...

"Nothin'," she muttered, averting her gaze and despondently picking at the hem of her blouse.

Zorian rolled his eyes and kicked her lightly in the knee. Despite doing the exact same thing to him only few moments ago, she proceeded to send him a nasty glare. Unsurprisingly, her attempt at intimidation failed utterly – she was about as frightening as an angry kitten.

"Tell me," he insisted.

She gave him a long, suspicious look before relenting.

"Will you teach me some magic when we get to Cyoria?" she asked hopefully.

How troublesome. The smart, reasonable response would be 'no' – there was no way she would get anywhere in a mere month, this particular restart was going to be extremely busy as it was, and she was going to forget everything she learned at the end of the month anyway.

"..I'll see what I can do," Zorian said after a few seconds of tense silence. Well, tense for Kirielle – he was pretty sure she literally stopped breathing while she was waiting for an answer.

"Yessss!" she crowed, pumping her fists in the air in triumph.

"But in exchange, I'll want your help with something," he added.

"Fine," she immediately agreed, not even asking what exactly he had in mind. "Hey, can you-"

"No," Zorian immediately said. "The train is warded to disrupt mana shaping. No one can cast spells in here."

"Oh," Kirielle deflated.

Truthfully, Zorian was bending the truth a little. The ward on the train that disrupted mana shaping was very weak and rudimentary, meant to deter overeager students and casual vandalism, and was little more than an annoyance to a proper mage like Zorian was. He could overpower the ward with ease, but he had analyzed it in detail during the previous restart and knew it reported any significant spellcasting to some remote location. He'd rather not get chucked out of the train before reaching Cyoria just because Kirielle wanted a free show.

Kirielle opened her mouth to say something else but was promptly interrupted by a sharp crackling sound that heralded the voice of the station announcer.

"Now stopping in Korsá," a disembodied voice echoed. "I repeat, now stopping in Korsá. Thank you."

Well, at least Kirielle would soon get someone else to bother in their compartment.

"So many people," Kiri remarked, watching the throng at the train station through the window. "I didn't know there were so many people going to that school of yours."

Zorian, who was amusing himself by trying to count the number of people on the train station using his mind sense, made an

absent-minded sound of agreement. While he was no longer totally oblivious to the world while using his mind sense, it still took most of his attention to get anything useful out of it. After half a minute of trying to separate the tightly-packed mass of people into discrete individuals that could be counted, however, he decided the task was beyond him at his current level of skill and refocused back of Kirielle.

"Why are mages so rare if there are so many people studying to become one?" she asked.

"They aren't terribly rare," Zorian said. "It's just that most mages coming from rural areas don't stay there once they finish their studies. I totally understand them too – I know *I* have no intention of coming back to Cirin when I graduate."

"What!? Why!?" Kirielle protested.

Zorian raised his eyebrow at her. "Do I really have to answer that question?"

Kirielle huffed and crossed her arms over her chest in obvious annoyance. "I guess not. But that means I'll be all alone with mother and father then. That sucks."

"Just pester mother to let you visit me often," Zorian shrugged. "She'll cave in eventually, especially since you'll be the only means through which they can maintain contact with me. Father doesn't care about either of us, so he'll follow mother's lead on this."

Kirielle gave him a weird look. "I can come and visit you?"

"Any time you want," Zorian confirmed.

"You don't think I'm annoying?" she asked.

"Oh no, you're definitely annoying," Zorian said, smiling at her mutinous expression. "But you're still the only part of our family I actually like. And I bet you find me annoying too."

"Damn right," Kirielle huffed, kicking him in the knee again for good measure.

They watched in silence as people boarded the train and sought out empty compartments for themselves and their groups. But soon enough such empty compartments dwindled in number and their compartment soon got additional passengers: Ibery, Byrn, and two other girls he never met up until this restart. That was a bit unexpected – he really only expected Ibery to be there. But no matter, maybe it was better this way. The more audience he had for this, the better. Now all he needed was an opening.

He didn't have to wait long.

"Well, your brother is far better than mine," one of the new girls said to Kirielle after his sister was done explaining who she was and why she was going to Cyoria. "I'm pretty sure mine would have done just about anything in order to avoid taking his little sister along with him."

"I almost decided not to bring her, what with the whole Cult of the Dragon Below incident," Zorian interjected. "But then I figured they're probably just a bunch of crazy idiots anyway. I mean, if it was so easy to summon an army of demons, all of Altazia would have been a burning wreck by now, wouldn't it?"

All conversation stopped as everyone turns to stare at him like he had grown another head. Zorian feigned confusion and gave them all a blank look.

"What?" he asked finally.

"What... exactly are you talking about?" Byrn asked carefully.

"You didn't hear?" Zorian frowned, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. "The Cult of the Dragon Below issued a threat... well, technically a proclamation of intent but whatever... that they intend to summon an army of demons on the day of the summer festival. The planar convergence scheduled to occur on that day will be the most powerful one in centuries, so this is apparently a once in a lifetime opportunity for them."

"You're serious," Ibery half asked, half stated.

"It's what they said," Zorian shrugged. "And Cyoria has a lot of those crazies running around, so I think I'm justified in being a little concerned."

"Cyoria has a lot of Dragon Cultists?" Byrn asked incredulously.

"It's the Hole," Ibery said with a sigh. "It's something of a holy location for them, being a huge gaping hole in the ground of uncertain depth that continually spews mana into the air. They think it's a direct conduit to the Heart of the World."

Wow, good thing Ibery was here – Zorian didn't know that and would have had to make something up. He should probably read up on the Cult's actual beliefs one of these days instead of simply thinking of them as a bunch of crazies. Know your enemy and all that.

The conversation didn't linger on the cultists and their goals for long, and soon shifted to other topics. Zorian allowed it, not interested in pushing the issue. He had no idea if this exchange was going to have any sort of meaningful effect on the restart, but it cost him nothing to try and start the rumor mill a little early.

The first domino was set.



Much like the last time Zorian had taken Kirielle to Cyoria, Byrn and Kirielle decided to tour the train station for a while before they moved on to the city proper. By that time, of course, it was heavily raining. Unlike last time, Zorian was now in possession of a warding necklace that he had made while waiting for the departure time in Cirin, so keeping the rain barrier up around the group didn't strain his mana reserves in the slightest. Consequently, he decided to be nice and didn't argue at all when Kirielle insisted they accompany Byrn to the academy.

That's probably why Byrn asked about keeping in touch when they reached his destination and were about to separate. Zorian gave him directions to Imaya's place and told him to drop by when he had the time. He was pretty sure Imaya wouldn't mind in the slightest and, while Zorian himself didn't care much for the boy, he could see that Kirielle got along pretty well with the first year.

And speaking of Imaya, their initial meeting went a lot better than it did last time. The fact they hadn't introduced themselves by frantically banging on the door and dragging water into the house probably helped with first impressions. Hell, she didn't even protest much when Zorian insisted he had something important to take care of and went out into the rain again.

The important thing he had to do was speaking to the aranea to give them back their memories, but this time he bore additional gifts – five stone discs that acted as telepathic relays, drastically improving the ability of aranea to coordinate their actions across large distances. Naturally, the 6 disc remained in Zorian's possession, so he didn't have to descend into the sewers every time he wanted to speak with the matriarch.

[You know, when I told you to contact me as soon as possible, I didn't really mean you should call me in the middle of the freaking night,] Zorian sent to the matriarch, putting as much of his annoyance and crankiness as he could manage into the message. He still wasn't very good at attaching emotions and images to his communication, but he was confident she would get the general picture of what he was trying to convey. [I'm not sure about aranea, but we humans actually have to sleep during the night to function properly.]

[My apologies,] the matriarch sent back. She didn't sound sorry at all. [It's a fascinating device you've gifted me with. Most impressive.]

[Not really. It's pretty shoddy as far as magic items go. I took a

lot of shortcuts in order to make so many and it shows. It's a fairly large, heavy disc made out of solid stone, so not very inconspicuous or portable, and it has a lifespan of only 2 and a half months.]

[That's still a month and a half longer than needed,] the matriarch remarked.

[True,] Zorian agreed.

[I assume you can make long-lasting versions?]

[Yes, of course,] Zorian said.

[Could other artificers duplicate your work?] she asked. [Or is this something you came up with yourself?]

Zorian frowned. Why would she need other artificers when she had him? Did she plan to ditch him after they left the time loop or something?

[It's something I came up with,] Zorian said. [Other artificers would have to design a blueprint first. That could take a while.]

True, but misleading. He did design the relays on his own, basically from scratch, but it honestly hadn't been that difficult. He suspected any good magic item maker could design one within a month or two... provided they were either psychic themselves or had a psychic on hand for testing purposes. She could figure out that little detail on her own as far as he was concerned.

[I see,] she said. [Well, I guess I shouldn't keep you awake any longer. I just wanted to tell you I've reviewed the memory packet and am convinced it is genuine.]

Zorian rolled his eyes. As if there was any doubt. Apparently having gotten what she contacted him for, the matriarch cut the connection and left him alone in his bed again. Well, alone in his head at least – Kirielle was very much in the room with him, a fact she immediately reminded him of by taking advantage of his momentary distraction to appropriate the last bit of bed covering he had managed to keep away from her thus far. He gave her a

nasty look for that, but she just snuggled deeper into her cocoon of stolen blankets, blissfully unaware of his ire in her realm of dreams.

He sighed. There was no way he was going to be able to go back to sleep now. He quickly cast a silencing ward on the room and then slowly extricated himself from the bed, taking care not to wake up Kirielle. She was annoying, yes, but it wasn't her fault his sleep was ruined.

'Note to self: the next generation relay needs an off button.'



After surprising Imaya by already being awake when she woke up, Zorian went out into the city to hit the stores. The plan he and the matriarch hashed out last restart involved creation of a lot of magic items on his part, and that meant buying material components and specialist tools. Not to mention that there were a few things he had to buy if he wanted to seriously start teaching Kirielle how to be a mage.

He really hoped Kirielle charmed Kana in this restart like she had the last time around – while Zorian himself was decently skilled in alchemy and could manage on his own if he had to, Kael's help would be invaluable in some of the projects he had planned for this restart...

"Zorian! Over here!"

Zorian snapped out of his thoughts and quickly made way towards the person calling him. Benisek was exactly the person he was looking for. He quickly sat down next to the chubby boy and exchanged a bunch of pleasantries before getting to the reason he had tracked the boy down today.

"Ben, my friend, you won't believe what I found out during our school break," Zorian said. "I still don't understand what they were thinking when they came up with that stuff. It's like something out of a bad adventure novel."

"Do tell," Benisek leaned forward.

"Well..." Zorian began, suddenly feigning reluctance. "It's kind of confidential, you know. I'm telling you this in strict confidence because we're friends, so don't go spreading this around, okay?"

Noting that he was about to tell him something confidential and warning him to keep it to himself was crucial – it meant Benisek was going to spread the story around twice as fast as he normally would.

"Of course," Benisek said pleasantly. "You know me, Zorian. I would never betray your trust like that."

Zorian couldn't help but smile. "Thanks, Ben. I knew I could count on you."



Having told Benisek all about the nasty terrorist plot to bomb Cyoria during the summer festival, Zorian went back to Imaya's place to wait for Taiven and her offer of joining the sewer run. He amused himself by creating one of those practice cards that Xvim had him hone his shaping skills on. He had planned to simply buy a stack of them from one of the stores he visited this morning, but they were a lot more expensive than he had figured they would be – his respect for Xvim rose slightly when he realized how much money Xvim effectively spent on his training during that restart. Zorian's list of complaints about the man was several pages long, but it seemed that being cheap wasn't among them.

He was still impressing Ilsa into taking him on as her apprentice, of course. Cheap or not cheap, the man was incredibly frustrating and only tolerable in small doses.

He finished painting the glyphs on the corners of the card he was making and started binding the necessary spell combination. Kirielle, who was in the process of drawing a nearby vase of flowers, briefly looked up from her sheet of paper when she noticed

him casting spells, but quickly went back to her work when she saw the lack of lightshows or other impressive visual effects.

He hoped that Benisek would keep silent about the source of the 'rumor' Zorian had told him. He probably would – Ben never revealed his sources if he could help it, since he liked to pretend he had some super-secret sources to draw information from rather than just spreading rumors from his fellow students – but Zorian had a contingency plan to follow even if someone with official authority came to confront him about the story. The fact that the aranea were currently spreading the same story in several different places should also help mask where exactly the whole thing had originated in the first place.

He was just putting the finishing touches on the card when Taiven burst into the kitchen and locked onto his position.

"Hey Roach, nice place you got here," she said, plopping down to a seat next to him and peering closer to look at his work. "Ooh, I know what that is. I've been meaning to get some, one of these days, but I always end up spending my money elsewhere. How many did you buy?"

"None," Zorian said. "They were too expensive for my taste so I decided to make my own. This is the only one I made so far."

Taiven raised her eyebrow at him, looking amused at his claim. Zorian frowned, not liking the expression – she didn't believe he could make a card like this? This was nothing! He thrust the finished card into her face with a scowl.

"Try it out," he told her.

Sighing dramatically, Taiven took a deep breath and... frowned. Zorian felt a mixture of surprise and frustration burst from her and realized she had tried to burn the circle he drew onto the card and failed.

"You couldn't do it, could you?" Zorian grinned.

"You made it wrong!" she huffed.

"Did not!" Zorian protested. "You just suck!"

"Do not!" she shot back. "Why don't you do it if you're so special, huh?"

"Hmph," Zorian scoffed, snatching the card back. He positioned the card so that she could see the results of what he was about to do (and in the back of his mind he noted that Kirielle had decided to see what the fuss was all about and was studying the card as well) and then flashed his mana into the card in a practiced manner.

The circle – and *only* the circle – momentarily shone red from the heat before collapsing into ash. Zorian blew a gust of air into the hole to scatter the remains across the table and then smugly handed the spent card to Taiven. He crossed his arms and waited for her reply.

"Ahem," a mature female voice interrupted the scene from behind him. "You will, of course, clean up this mess you've made on my table, won't you, mister Kazinski? Oh, and I would like to warn you that I will bill you for any property damage you inflict on my material possessions with your... experiments."

Zorian turned and gave Imaya a big, friendly smile. She rolled her eyes at him and gestured towards the ashes on the table. Hanging his head in defeat, Zorian went to get a rag from the bathroom, ignoring Taiven's soft laughter behind him. Just for that he was tempted to blow her off when she asked him to accompany her to the sewers.

Briefly. The fact was, he definitely needed to go with her this time.

"So what was it that you needed from me anyway?" Zorian asked, sitting down next to Taiven again.

"Ah, well, I was wondering if you'd join me on a little expedition..."

Zorian patiently listened to her explanation before revealing

he had contacts with the aranea and requesting that they try talking to them first before barging in, spells blazing. Much like in previous restarts where he had brought the issue up, Taiven accepted him hanging out with giant sewer-dwelling spiders easily enough, but this time she also had an additional request.

"Since you apparently think you're good enough to walk around the Dungeon all by your lonesome, meeting sentient monsters and gods know what else, I would like to test your skills a little," Taiven told him. "Plus, it doesn't hurt to know what your actual combat skills are if you're going to accompany me and my team into a potentially dangerous situation. You do know some combat skills, don't you?"

"Plenty," Zorian assured her.

"Good, so come to my place tomorrow at noon so I can test you," Taiven said. "You're sure they're going to hand us the clock if we ask nicely?"

"If they have it," said Zorian. "That guy who gave you the job doesn't sound all that reliable to me. I don't believe for a second that he didn't know what the aranea are, yet he still sent you go get a pocket watch from them. Either he's trying to get you all killed or... hell, I don't know what his game is there."

"If the watch is something very valuable or very illegal he might not want to send someone who could recognize what they are holding," Taiven frowned. "Just how dangerous are these spiders of yours? I mean, even if sentient, they're still bound to be vulnerable to burning and such. Maybe he thought we would just bulldoze through them without talking?"

"Aranea are all mages," Zorian said. It wasn't strictly true, as only a small minority of aranea was armed with a true spellcasting system, but psychic powers were versatile enough to count as a sort of specialized spellcasting system. "They are especially fond of mind magic, illusions and stealth. And they have a telepathic

link to one another so they will know and remember you if you massacre some of their outposts. And then you'd have a bunch of magical spiders with a grudge looking to ambush you or lure you into a trap the next time you descend into the dungeon."

"Shit," Taiven said. He felt a spike of anger from her before she reined it in and forced herself to calm down. "That asshole better have been ignorant of the danger or I'm reporting him to the nearest police station I find. That's practically a murder attempt!"

"Let's talk to the aranea first and see what they have to say," Zorian quickly said. He didn't want Taiven to confront the man and then cancel the whole thing. "I guarantee they won't attack you so long as you have me with you."

Taiven gave him a long, unreadable look.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," Taiven said. "it's just that... I thought I knew you, but now it turns out you have this whole secret life I've never known about until now. It's a bit unreal."

"Yeah!" Kirielle suddenly piped in. She had been silent throughout their discussion, but apparently she had been listening to everything with rapt attention. "How come you never told your own sister any of this!?"

"Oh that one is easy," Zorian replied smoothly. "I didn't want mother and father to find out, so telling you would have been foolish. Do you have any idea how many times you've gotten me in trouble by spilling my secrets in front of our parents?"

"Oh come on!" Kirielle whined. "I was a little baby! I didn't know anything! You can't possibly still be angry about that?"

"No, of course not," Zorian mumbled uncomfortably. "I did just tell Taiven about the aranea right in front of you, didn't I?"

Taiven shook her head sadly, rising from her seat. "You keep too many secrets, Roach. I feel a little hurt that you felt you couldn't confide in me but I was never one to hold a grudge

so I'll let it go. Just don't expect this to be the end of it – I'm going to pester you endlessly until I get the whole story. See you tomorrow."

"Wait," Zorian said. "Actually... yeah, there is something I need to tell you. All of you. Miss Kuroshka, I know you've been eavesdropping on us for a while now so you might as well sit down for this."

Imaya whirled around from where she was fiddling with the cutlery and placed her hands on her hips, giving him an angry look.

"I was not doing any such thing," she told him, "I was simply minding my own business, and in my own kitchen no less. If you didn't want me overhearing your conversation you should have taken it elsewhere."

"My mistake," Zorian agreed easily. He was pretty sure she had finished whatever she had come into the kitchen to do for a while now and was simply hanging around to hear them talk, but whatever. "Kiri, do you remember how I promised to teach you spellcasting in exchange for a favor back in the train?"

"Yeah?" Kirielle confirmed hesitantly.

"Right, a little background first. I am what is commonly known as an empath – a person who can sense other people's emotions. Unfortunately, up until recently, my powers have been kind of running amok. There was nobody I could turn to for help... at least not on the human side of things."

"The spiders," Imaya surmised.

"Yes," Zorian agreed. "Aranea are all empathic as part of their innate nature. Thanks to them, I now have more or less gained control over my empathic abilities, though it will take years of practice to truly refine them into something reliable. Follow me so far?"

"What am I feeling right now?" Kirielle asked.

"I actually don't know," Zorian admitted. "People's feelings are rarely very simple, and unless they are feeling one emotion very strongly I'm reduced to educated guesses based on my previous interactions with the person. The more time I spend around someone the easier I can read them."

"But isn't she your sister?" Imaya asked. "You'd think that if anyone was familiar enough for your ability to work it would be family."

"Our family is..." Zorian hesitated, searching for a proper word. "Slightly dysfunctional, I guess. I try to stay away from them most of the time, so I haven't interacted with Kirielle all that often. And I'm not the only one keeping secrets around here – Kirielle is also keeping a lot of things close to her chest. I guess we don't really know each other all that well, sibling bonds notwithstanding."

There was a brief silence as everyone involved digested that admission, but the awkward atmosphere was quickly broken by Imaya clearing her throat.

"Well," she said. "I guess it's a good thing you're both here now to reconnect."

"Yeah!" Kirielle immediately agreed. "Hey, do you think I could be an empath too?"

"Sorry, Kiri, but I'm pretty sure you aren't," Zorian said. "I would have been able to sense it if you were."

"You can sense other empaths?" Taiven asked.

"I can sense all minds around me, empath or otherwise," Zorian said. "I also get some basic information about each mind – how complex their thoughts are, their species, their gender, stuff like that. Empaths light up like little suns on my mind sense, so... sorry, Kiri."

"It's fine," she said dejectedly.

"You can sense people all around you, regardless of obstacles?" Taiven asked. Zorian nodded. "And the range on that ability is...?"

"If I'm busy with something else and just running my mind sense in the background? About ten meters," said Zorian. "If I'm specifically concentrating on scanning the environment? Easily ten times that. However, if there are a lot of minds around me I have trouble processing the information and they all sort of start to blend together in a confusing, headache-inducing mass. I mostly just shut my empathy off when I'm around big crowds."

"Roach, I am so recruiting you for my team," Taiven said. "I've been trying to find a tracker for my team for a while now! Now all we need is to teach you some divination spells and-"

"Already done, thank you," Zorian said. "I am quite proficient in divination."

"Even better!" Taiven said. "You're hired."

"We'll see," Zorian sighed.

"Fascinating," Imaya said. "I've never heard of that aspect of empathy, though I guess it makes sense that someone who can sense emotions can locate other people through it. But that's not what you wanted to talk about, is it?"

"No it's not," Zorian nodded. "It's not common knowledge, but empathy is just an initial expression of a much more... dangerous ability. A sufficiently skilled empath can bridge the gap between minds and connect with any person in range in order to talk to them telepathically, read their thoughts, fool their senses or mess with their memories. And aranea have been teaching me how to do that."

He paused to gauge their reactions. Well, none of them were quietly panicking or burning with outrage, so that was encouraging.

"I have no intention of doing that to any of you without permission," Zorian said. "But at the same time I need someone to practice on. The aranea aren't very suitable for this – their minds are too alien for a beginner like me to understand. I need a hu-

man volunteer, and I'm hoping for you to help me out, oh sister of mine."

"You want to read my mind?" Kirielle asked.

"To put it bluntly, yes," Zorian said.

"And if I say no, will you still teach me magic?"

"Absolutely," Zorian said. "It's a request, not blackmail. I'll just have to find someone else to help me if you refuse."

"Well, okay," she said. "I guess I'll help you. But you can't talk to anyone... about the stuff in my head. And you have to tell me all about your secrets in exchange!"

"Sure," Zorian smiled. "Sounds like a fair deal to me."



The whole confrontation went off surprisingly well, Zorian reflected. Sure, Imaya had been avoiding him ever since and Kirielle was giving him these weird looks, but none of them were terrified of him or anything – just mildly uncomfortable. They were taking the revelation much better than he had predicted they would.

And then, of course, was Taiven, who was apparently not bothered at all by his admission that he was learning how to read people's thoughts.

"You ready, Roach?" she asked, twirling her combat staff in her hand.

"I'm ready, yeah," Zorian said, gripping his spell rod tighter.

If he knew anything about how Taiven thought – and he did – she would immediately go on the offensive. Her battle philosophy basically boiled down to 'attack hard and you won't have to defend to begin with'... though she could defend too, if pressed. He had no way to win a protracted fight with her, even if he was technically a better mage than she was, so he would have to resort to trickery if he wanted to prevail here.

It would be nice if he could eke out a win against her – her face when she lost against little old 'Roach' was bound to be absolutely glorious to behold.

A blink and suddenly there were 5 magic missiles homing in on him. He let them crash uselessly against his shield and responded with a somewhat exotic electrical spell. A beam of electricity shot towards Taiven, who erected a basic shield of her own to tank it.

Half-way towards its target, the beam split into three smaller beams – one pivoted to the left of Taiven, the other to the right, and the third one straight above it. And then they all changed their paths again and crashed against her from three different directions, completely bypassing the shield in front of her.

It wasn't enough. Somehow, Taiven managed to smoothly transition from a single-direction shield to a full aegis before the beams managed to reach her. Zorian threw a couple of smoke bombs around the training hall to blind her, relying on his mind sense to tell him where she was, and started casting a complicated spell that wasn't etched into his spell rod the moment his location got obscured by the smoke.

Taiven responded by casting several gusts of wind to disperse the smoke and hopefully catch him in the area of effect as well. She had just about stripped him of his smokescreen when he finished the spell and felt his mana reserves drain almost completely dry.

'If this doesn't work, then that's it for this fight,' he thought.

A bright beam of concentrated force shot out from his hand and slammed into Taiven's shield. The shield flared at the point of impact, shattering almost instantly, and Taiven was lifted off her feet by the impact and thrown violently against the floor. She didn't get up, rendered unconscious by the impact.

"Oops," Zorian said quietly. "I think I overdid it just a little – that could have easily killed her if the wards hadn't worked properly."

After casting a few divinations to make sure she was mostly okay and not bleeding internally or something like that, Zorian allowed himself to smile. He would have to work on his restraint, but it *was* a victory. And she hadn't been any gentler towards him in their previous fights, so she hardly had any right to complain about excessive force. He couldn't wait to see Taiven's face when she woke up.



"Come on, Roach," Taiven growled. "Find those spiders of yours so we can be done with this mission. I'm getting sick of this place already."

Zorian sighed and refocused on scanning his surroundings. This would be going faster if Taiven stopped snapping at him every so often – talk about being a sore loser.

"Hey," a male voice whispered into Zorian's ear, breaking him out of thoughts. "What happened between you and Taiven to get her so bothered, anyway?"

Zorian glanced at Grunt and considered how to answer for a second. He decided to be blunt and truthful.

"I beat her in a spar," he said. "She thinks I cheated."

Grunt gave him a considering look. "You beat Taiven in a spar? Aren't you a third year?"

"Sure am," Zorian agreed, before he noticed a familiar presence on his mental map. "Oh hey, there they are."

After the initial introductions were done, Taiven immediately moved onto the reason they were down in the tunnels in the first place, only to get disappointed.

"So you don't have the watch?" Taiven asked.

"Alas, I'm afraid the next group of attackers managed to break into our treasury and escaped with a great many of our artifacts..."

the watch we claimed from the thief being among them,” the matriarch said regretfully. “I do know where their base is, however.”

This was all a bunch of bullshit, Zorian knew. The watch was indeed somewhere else – specifically in one of the forward outposts that the invaders used to launch attacks on the aranea – but it was there because the aranea had put it there. The idea was for Taiven and her group to stumble onto the outpost, realize they’ve stumbled onto something big – bigger than they could handle – and then report it to the authorities.

It was Zorian’s job to make sure Taiven and her group survived the encounter with the invaders.

“How convenient,” Zorian scoffed, “that getting the watch involves taking out one of your enemies in the process.”

“A happy coincidence,” the matriarch said easily. “We both get something out of it, after all – you get the location of the watch for free, and I get to deal with one of my problems without risking my Web. Now... do you want the location of the base or not?”

“Just who are these enemies of yours, anyway?” Taiven asked.

“I don’t know exactly,” the matriarch said. “The attackers consisted of a mage controlling two war trolls, but the base is guaranteed to have more forces than that.”

“War trolls!?” Taiven blanched. “Hell, that is way more than we signed up for!”

“The guy is definitely not paying us enough to confront a couple of war trolls with mage support,” Mumble said quietly.

“Maybe check it out anyway?” Zorian tried. “Like, from distance? I may be able to tell how many forces there are in the place.”

“Yeah,” Taiven said after considering things for a few moments. “Yeah, we should check it out at least. No offense to the matriarch here, but a bunch of guys running around the sewers with tamed war trolls sounds a bit... implausible. Maybe she saw something else.”

"I suppose it's possible," the matriarch allowed. "I haven't actually seen trolls before, and wasn't personally present when the incident occurred, but they sounded very much like the trolls humans speak of."

"Right," Taiven nodded. "Where did you say this base was again?"



The base wasn't actually in the city sewers. That part of the Dungeon was somewhat patrolled and monitored, and it would have been impossible to hide a large mass of soldiers there for an appreciable length of time. For that matter, the aranea didn't actually live in the sewers either, although they considered them part of their territory. Instead, both the aranean home base and the various invader outposts were situated in what was known to Cyoria authorities as the 'intermediary layer'.

It was not particularly rare for mages to descend into the intermediary layer, but it was not a common occurrence either. The intermediary layer was too dangerous for a casual stroll by an unarmed civilian, but mostly devoid of anything valuable that would attract dungeon delvers and other adventurers. The city hired mercenaries to sweep through the place every few years and get rid of any obvious threats that had set up residence, and they usually also picked the place clean of anything valuable, leaving a great expanse of little value. For those who wanted to challenge themselves against the denizens of the Underworld and search the place for riches, there was the Hole and its direct access to deeper levels that hadn't been picked clean over the decades. Most of the visitors from the city consisted of an occasional thrill-seeking student and an occasional patrol to keep an eye on things.

The invaders chose the timing of their invasion well. The city was so focused on the summer festival and its associated problems

that it didn't pay attention to what was happening in the dungeon at all. This would normally not be such a problem, as very few problems could spring out of nothing in a couple of measly months – especially with little to no indication that something big was happening – but now...

"Holy shit," Taiven whispered, peering from behind their cover to look at the camp again. "They've got a freaking army there!"

"Get down, you idiot," Grunt growled at her, pulling her down behind the rock they were using as cover. "Do you *want* them to see you? If they notice us, we're dead. There must be at least a hundred trolls down there and at least 20 handlers."

"Sorry," Taiven said. "It's just... so unreal."

Zorian had to agree. He was expecting it, and he was still surprised at the scale of what they were seeing. Then again, this was why the matriarch had chosen this particular base out of the 12 or so she knew of. The others were smaller and much better hidden, but this particular base was situated in a large open cavern and had enough artificial illumination that a human observer could see the whole camp easily from a sufficiently high vantage... like the one they were using, for example. In fact, the vantage point they were using was pretty much *perfect* for observing the camp.

'Hmm, I wonder...'

He silently ran his fingers against the walls of the tunnel that brought them here. It was bumpy but smooth. *Far* too smooth to be natural. The rock they were hiding behind was the same.

'Apparently this was even more of a set up than I thought it was,' Zorian thought. 'I bet one of the aranean mages made this tunnel specifically so we could find it. It would explain why no one seemed to be paying any attention to this particular entrance, even though the other two are both guarded – they don't even know it exists.'

Well, whatever – time to do his part in this charade. He pulled out a mirror from his backpack and silently cast a scrying spell on it. The base had a divination ward, of course, but it was based on the idea of stopping people from realizing that the base was there to begin with. Since Zorian knew that the camp existed and where it was, and was in fact right next to it, the entire ward was pretty much useless against him.

After 5 minutes of watching the camp through the mirror, Taiven decided she had seen enough and motioned him to cancel the spell.

"Let's go," she said. "I want to get out of here before our luck runs out."

They almost made it out without complications. Almost.

As the four of them approached one of the seals between the sewers and the deeper layers of the dungeon, they suddenly came face to face with a duo of hooded mages flanked by 4 trolls. For a moment, both groups halted and tried to make sense of what they were seeing, neither group really expecting to stumble upon each other. Zorian noted with annoyance that their mental presence was somehow muted – no doubt a countermeasure against the aranea – and cursed himself for thinking that his opponents wouldn't have some way of dealing with mind sense.

The impasse was broken when one of the mages ordered the trolls to charge.

Neither Taiven nor her two teammates hesitated when faced with four war trolls charging at them, raising their staffs to blast the attackers before they could overrun them. Zorian decided to keep the mages busy instead and fired a small missile swarm of four piercers, two for each mage.

Several things happened simultaneously. One of the mages dropped whatever spell he was casting and raised a shield to successfully tank the missiles coming towards him. The other was

less skilled and fumbled his shield – both piercers hit him straight in the chest and he went down in a shower of blood. Grunt and Mumble used quick flamethrowers to halt the charge of the trolls, but while three of the trolls did flinch away from the flames, the largest, best-armored troll lurched forward, a little dazed but unharmed.

Taiven hit them all with a battering ram of force, intending to knock the whole group down and give them some space, and for the most part succeeded – the three recovering trolls and the surviving mage were hurled deeper into the tunnel and away from them, but that one troll at the front kept its ground.

It raised its huge iron mace for an overhead strike and screamed out a challenge, its shout staggering them like a physical blow, acting almost like a lesser version of the battering ram that Taiven just cast. Strange, Zorian had always thought trolls had no magic other than their absurd regenerative capabilities.

He had no time to consider this, however, as the troll immediately capitalized on the distraction it caused and surged forward.

Frantically, Zorian erected a large shield in front of the group, trying to buy time. Sadly, unlike the other trolls Zorian had battled in the previous restarts, this one was too smart to just crash into the shield. It smashed its mace into the shield with great force – once, twice, three times. The shield broke and the troll kicked him in the chest, catapulting him backwards where he collided with Grunt and Mumble and interrupted whatever they were about to cast.

Taiven, on the other hand, managed to finish hers. A vortex of fire surged forward, finishing off the surviving mage and the three other trolls that were moving to aid their comrade but leaving the lead troll merely singed.

And very, very angry.

"Shit," Taiven said quietly, as the troll raised its mace for a

killing strike.

Even though he knew her death wouldn't be permanent, even though he had known there was a chance for this to happen when he had agreed to participate in this plan, Zorian found himself completely horrified at the idea of watching Taiven get crushed to death. Killed because of him and his plots and schemes...

He reached out to the troll's mind and noticed it was no longer being muted – while Taiven's spell failed to incinerate the troll, it seemed to have burned out whatever protected it from mind magic. Rather than try any sort of sophisticated attack, he simply flooded it with meaningless drivel, blasting its mind with random telepathy.

The troll flinched in shock and spasmed, halting its attack and dropping the mace it was holding. Zorian immediately threw two explosive cubes at its feet.

"Taiven, get back!"

She didn't have to be told twice, immediately snapping out of her daze and scrambling backwards out of the troll's reach. Zorian activated the bombs as soon as he judged her out of reach and the troll was enveloped in a deafening explosion.

Somehow, it still survived. It was kneeling and clutching its leg in pain, and bleeding all over, but Zorian could already see its flesh knitting together.

Damn it, what was it with this one troll!? Was it a super-troll or something?

And then two ice blue beams impacted directly into the troll's chest, courtesy of Grunt and Mumble, and the creature immediately froze over and went still.

"Is it finally dead?" he asked.

"I don't know and don't care," Taiven said. "Let's get lost before we meet another one."

Zorian took a deep, shuddering breath and nodded in assent. Then he tried to take a step and winced at the pain in his leg. He could walk, but he just knew he was going to be hurting for the rest of the week.

'This better be worth it, you damn manipulative spider,' he inwardly thought.



[So it's all done?] the matriarch asked.

Zorian gripped the stone disk in his hand tighter. [Yes. I just said so, didn't I? Thankfully, there were no actual casualties, though it was close. In many ways our close brush with death works in favor of your plan, since Taiven is really pissed about these people now and determined to bring them to justice. She is going to report the whole thing tomorrow to the city authorities. I sincerely hope it wasn't you who arranged for us to stumble onto that group, miss Spear of Resolve, or I'll be very angry at you.]

[Don't worry, I had nothing to do with it,] the matriarch assured him.

[Right,] Zorian sighed. Maybe he was being paranoid, but the matriarch's behavior had grown ever more secretive over the past few restarts and he wouldn't put it past her to pull something like that. [How about you? Is your task done?]

[Yes,] the matriarch confirmed. [I have contacted Zach and told him that the aranea are aware of the time loop.]

THE UNEXPECTED

Zorian stared at the stone disc in his hand in silent contemplation. It was done. Zach finally knew he wasn't alone in the time loop. True, the other boy didn't know about Zorian being one of the time travelers – the matriarch had presented herself as the time traveler and made no mention of Zorian – but it was only a matter of time now. There was no way that Zorian could fool the other boy for more than a couple of restarts now that the idea of there being other time travelers was no longer totally ridiculous in Zach's mind. Assuming he even wanted to. After all, if this plan of theirs worked and the third time traveler was neutralized, there would be no reason not to introduce himself to Zach immediately afterwards.

[So,] Zorian said. [How did Zach react to your... introduction?]

[Confusion, surprise and outrage,] the matriarch responded. [He had pretty much figured out that there was someone else looping beside him – it was the only way to explain all the wide-scale changes that had been happening in the last handful of restarts. He was very confused about how they came to be and why they didn't come to talk to him, though, and was considering doing something eye catching to get our attention. The idea that the other time

traveler is a giant talking spider caught him off guard but I don't think it will be a problem in the long term – he didn't seem to be arachnophobic or a human supremacist. Anyway, he was pretty angry when I told him there was a *third* time traveler and that he had been mind-wiped by them, so I cut our meeting short so he can cool off a little.]

[Understandable,] Zorian said. [I know that aranea consider memory editing to be business as usual, but humans tend to flip out over such things. Do you think he bought your story about you being the other time traveler?]

[Actually, I said there are *several* aranea time travelers. That I had a way to bring other people into the time loop. Technically true, and makes us look like a bigger threat.]

[Not sure if that was really necessary,] Zorian mused. [Or even wise. What we have planned already should be sufficient to annoy the third time traveler into confronting you. Making yourself look more dangerous than you already are is just going to make him more cautious and dangerous.]

[You're overthinking things,] the matriarch said. [We're trying to set a trap, not engage the enemy in battle. Given that our enemy hasn't responded to our provocations so far, I think that getting him to take the bait is a bigger priority than worrying what happens once he does. As you have yourself stated, and as Zach has learned so painfully over the course of this time loop, there is only so much a single mage can tackle on his own. However capable our opponent is, he's not walking off from a well-prepared ambush.]

[Right,] Zorian said dubiously. He was far less certain than she was about that plan, but it wasn't like he had a better idea. And besides, maybe having one of her plans blow up in her face would make her more forthcoming with information in the next restart. [So do we have Zach's support on this?]

[He will help, yes,] the matriarch confirmed. [I didn't really have to offer anything to make him cooperate. He even asked for a list of targets so he can help us soften up the invading forces before the actual invasion date. Very earnest and straightforward, that boy. Quite unlike you and your rampant paranoia, I might add.]

Zorian narrowed his eyes, gripping the stone disc in his hand a little tighter. Was that it? Was the matriarch trying to replace him with Zach? Someone more trusting and easier to manipulate?

Was Zorian going to be next on the chopping block once the threat of the third time traveler was gone?

That settled it – he was going to reveal himself to Zach sometime soon, regardless of how this ambush turned out. There was an advantage to anonymity, yes, but it was massively outweighed by the danger of allowing the aranean matriarch exclusive access to Zach. That could end up *very* badly for Zorian.

[You've been silent for a while,] the matriarch noted. [You do know I was just teasing you, right?]

[I was just thinking,] Zorian said, thinking about how glad he was they were communicating through the relays at the moment – it made it next to impossible for the matriarch to read his thoughts unless he specifically sent them to her. It wasn't really a safeguard he consciously installed, more like a consequence of their shoddy construction, but Zorian was pleased with the end result all the same. [What about the money? I'll be running out of savings soon, you know.]

[I'll be able to get you about 20.000 pieces by the end of the week. Will that be enough?]

[For the ingredients? Sure,] confirmed Zorian. [If we have to hire experts, though? I'm not so sure. Good experts are expensive, especially if you're hiring them on a tight schedule or expect them to be discreet. Hopefully Kael will agree to help us, or else I'll probably have to hire an alchemist.]

[I'll leave that to you,] the matriarch said. [You understand the problem far better than I do.]

There was a brief silence as both Zorian and the matriarch considered what to say next, if anything.

[Listen,] the matriarch suddenly said. [Did you know that the aranea sometimes scatter small memory packets into the minds of their males?]

Zorian blinked. What? What did *that* have to do with anything?

[No,] said Zorian hesitantly. [I can't say that I did.]

[Well they do,] the matriarch said. [It's a pretty good way to leave secret messages if you know what you're doing. If you break the message into sufficiently small chunks and embed it carefully enough into the targets, it's virtually impossible for anyone without a key to even find them, let alone piece them together into a coherent whole.]

[Why are you telling me this?] Zorian asked.

[Just in case,] the matriarch responded. [Aranea males are far smaller than female ones and very, very cowardly. They're frightened by fire and loud noises just like any other animal, and most divination spells designed to track aranea do not register them as the same type of creature. Most of the time when an aranean settlement is destroyed, a lot of males will survive the destruction. Leaving messages encoded in their minds is a good way to leave messages from beyond the grave.]

Zorian frowned. So the matriarch *did* acknowledge that the ambush could go wrong... but why would she leave a message for him in such a roundabout, complicated way?

[Why not just tell me?] he asked.

[It's probably nothing,] the matriarch said. [And you worry too much as it is. This is really just a precaution in case of the

worst outcome. Novelty will give you the key when you see each other next time.]

Before Zorian could continue the discussion, the matriarch cut the connection.

"Very mature," Zorian mumbled, throwing the disc on the bed beside him. Still, as annoying as the matriarch was right now, she had been nothing but helpful so far, so he would give her the benefit of the doubt. Maybe she really did have good reasons for her secrecy.

Still, after this restart maybe he should start making his own precautions. Just in case.



At Cyoria's train station, Zorian waited. It would be a while until Kael and his daughter arrived, and in the meantime Zorian amused himself by messing with the pigeons milling about on the platforms.

Animal minds were paradoxically both harder and easier to affect with psychic powers than human minds. Harder because simpler minds were harder to sense and pin-point, easier because their thoughts were easier to discern and subvert once a psychic finally managed to connect to them.

The pigeons weren't that hard to sense – not if he had a direct line of sight on one and could devote all his attention on the task – so there was little the birds could do to defend themselves against Zorian's experimentation. He simply sat on his bench and systematically targeted pigeon after pigeon, practicing his skills. Sometimes he simply tried to make sense of their rudimentary minds without alerting them to his intrusion, other times he tried to flat out hijack their senses or puppeteer their body. Neither task was going terribly well, but it was something to pass the time with and

he did have *some* success. After the 50 pigeon or so, he could distinguish a pigeon that was hungry, sick or in pain from those that weren't. He could make a pigeon stumble or freeze up for a second, or frighten them until they fled as far away from him as possible.

Actually, that last one was extremely easy. Considering the effect was almost identical to the 'Spook Animal' cantrip he had learned back in their second year, he shouldn't have been surprised. Though that did give him an idea... mind spells that affected animals weren't restricted as heavily as spells that targeted humans. Hell, some of them were freely available in the academy library! It might be a good idea to try some in one of the future restarts and compare the results with what he could achieve with psychic powers.

For now though, he concentrated on another idea – rather than flat out puppeteer the pigeon, he was trying to simply dampen its fear and influence it into approaching him on its own. It was a lot harder than scaring the bird away. The pigeons were already inclined to bolt at the slightest provocation, so it didn't take much to send them running, but having them approach a strange man with no food that kept staring at them went against their instincts.

It took him over twenty tries, but he gradually learned how to steer the pigeons towards him. Finally, on his 24 attempt, he found a pigeon fearless enough to play along with his game. It slowly meandered close and then briefly took flight in order to land on the same bench Zorian was occupying.

It cooed and stared at him, and when Zorian reached out with his hand and scooped it up it did not resist in the slightest.

Success! Zorian reached into his pocket and offered the docile pigeon in his hand some bread. It was only proper to reward such a cooperative experiment subject.

And his achievement was just in time too, since Kael's train was arriving at the station. He put the pigeon down on the bench

and left to help Kael disembark.

"Kael Tverinov? I'm Zorian Kazinski, one of your classmates. Miss Zileti sent me to help you settle down and show you around the city. Don't worry about your daughter, I know the value of being discreet."

Kael gave him a searching look before nodding. "I appreciate the help, mister Kazinski. As well as your silence. Lead the way, if you will."

"It's no problem at all," Zorian said, creating a floating disc of force and loading the other boy's luggage on the platform. "We live at the same place, after all."

"We do?" Kael asked curiously.

"Well yes. Or at least we will if you have rented a room at the place Miss Zileti had recommended to you. She recommended the same place to me when I told her I'm bringing my little sister with me this year and sought alternatives to academy housing."

"Your little sister?" asked Kael, shifting Kana in his hands. The little girl studied everything around them with her bright blue eyes but remained resolutely quiet. "How come you brought her with you, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Our parents went on a trip to Koth and someone has to take care of her. And, well, that someone has always been me in cases like this. I don't mind all that much really, and the owner of the place seems to be good with kids."

"Well that's a relief," Kael said. "To be honest I had great reservations about coming here, and I was kind of worried Miss Zileti overstated her friend's fondness for children in order to get me on board with the enrollment."

"I don't think you have a lot to worry about. Imaya, the owner of the place, seems honest and friendly enough. And I'm an empath, so I can usually tell."

Kael gave him a sharp, questioning look.

"Too sudden?" Zorian asked. "Sorry, but I wanted to get it out of the way first. I know some people can't stand the idea of someone knowing their private emotions, but I don't think I can keep it a secret from someone that I'm going to share a roof with on a permanent basis."

"If you aren't worried about living with a morlock, I don't think I have rights to complain about you being an empath," Kael said, shaking his head. He gave his daughter a sad look. "Truthfully, I am sort of jealous. Kana is so quiet most days, I sometimes wish I could peer into her head and see what she's thinking about."

Kana immediately wrapped her little hands around Kael's head and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. Kael snorted derisively and ruffled her hair, a smile dancing on his lips.

'Kana 1, Kael 0,' Zorian thought to himself. Quiet she might be, but Kana clearly knew how to deal with her father effectively.

A few moments later, when the moment had passed, the two boys resumed their conversation in a much less reserved fashion, the ice having been successfully broken.



Imaya's kitchen was crowded. Crowded and loud. Between Zorian and Kirielle, Kael and his daughter, visiting Ilsa and Taiven, and finally Imaya herself, the room was as full as it could comfortably be and there were constantly at least two simultaneous conversations going on at any particular moment. Strangely enough, Zorian felt comfortable being there. In the past, these kinds of gatherings had annoyed him terribly, and he would find some reason to excuse himself and leave as soon as possible. The difference, he realized, was that he was no longer in a gathering of strangers. This was the first time he actually felt he belonged in one of these things, instead of being a barely-tolerated intruder constantly scrutinized for weakness and misbehavior.

He still remained mostly quiet, of course. But it was a comfortable silence.

"...and then Grunt and Mumble hit it with polar beams and froze it solid," spoke Taiven animatedly. "I don't know whether that really killed it, but it put it out of the fight long enough for us to run for it. Most harrowing experience of my life, let me tell you. I'm really glad Zorian was there – if I had chosen any other third year student as filler, I don't think I'd have survived that encounter."

Zorian fidgeted in his seat, a little uncomfortable at the praise. If it weren't for him, Taiven wouldn't have encountered that troll in the first place, so he didn't feel like he had done her any favors.

"While it's indeed impressive that Zorian can contribute in such a fight, I'm going to have to insist you refrain from bringing him along to your dungeon delving in the future," Ilsa said with an amused smile. "He's my apprentice now, and it would look absolutely terrible on my record if I let my apprentice be killed by a rampaging troll or some other monsters immediately after signing the contract."

"Err, yeah..." Taiven fumbled. "Well, I have no intention of going down there for a while. I reported the incident to the police, but the cleanup will probably take months, and the place is too dangerous for me and my group at the moment."

"A wise decision," Ilsa nodded. She then shifted her attention to Zorian. "And the same principle holds for you. I don't want you taking such risks in the future. I will ignore the issue this once, since you were helping a friend and the situation escalated beyond anything that could reasonably be expected, but from now on consider all excursions into the Dungeon forbidden until further notice."

"Of course," Zorian immediately agreed, having no intention of actually honoring the restriction.

"And I want you to consult me before doing anything similarly dangerous in the future," Ilsa warned. "Is there anything else I should know about?"

"Not really," Zorian said. Ilsa gave him a hard stare. Hmm, maybe he should throw her a bone to distract her with before she starts actually monitoring him. "Well, I'll be meeting my aranea tutor on a regular basis, but she's totally harmless. Wouldn't hurt a fly, despite being a giant spider."

"Ah yes, the spiders," Ilsa said with obvious distaste. "Don't worry, Imaya has already told me about your... condition. I wanted to speak to you about that, but I'll wait until we can meet in a more private setting."

Zorian nodded, appreciating Ilsa's discretion. Kael still didn't know about the full extent of his mental abilities and Zorian didn't believe this was the time to reveal them. He was kind of disappointed that Imaya had told Ilsa about his 'condition' without asking for his permission. It was by no means unexpected, but still disappointing.

"I'm curious," Kael said. "If your teacher wouldn't hurt a fly, what does she eat? I'm pretty sure all spiders are strict carnivores."

"Mostly rats and stray dogs," Zorian said.

"Rats?" Kirielle asked in disgust.

"I'm told rats can get pretty big in Cyoria," Zorian said.

"Ho boy, can they ever," Taiven confirmed. "I swear I once saw one of them stalking a cat instead of the other way around..."

"She's just telling fisherman's tales," Imaya quickly assured the disturbed-looking Kirielle. "I've lived here my whole life and have never seen anything like it."

"How do you know that stray humans aren't also on their diet?" asked Ilsa.

"According to Novelty, the idea is about as likely as a group of humans hunting an occasional dragon in order to put some meat

on the table – that is to say, not very. There is almost always easier prey around,” answered Zorian. “Not that aranea are harmless, far from it, but if they kill me it’s not going to be because they want to eat me.”

“Novelty?” Kael asked.

“That’s the name of the aranea tutoring me,” Zorian shrugged. “Well, technically her name is Enthusiastic Seeker of Novelty, but that’s unwieldy and she doesn’t mind if I shorten it.”

“That name sounds stupid,” Kirielle said.

Zorian opened his mouth to tell her that ‘Kirielle’ was also a stupid name when he thought better of it. For one thing, it was best to reserve immature bickering with her when they were alone. For another he had just thought up a much more amusing and diabolical idea.

“Want to meet her?” Zorian asked.

“What?” Kirielle asked.

“Novelty. Want to meet her?”

Kirielle stayed silent, mulling it over. “I don’t know. I don’t like spiders. They’re disgusting.”

“Well okay,” Zorian shrugged. “I just figured you’d jump at the chance to meet with a member of a reclusive race of magical creatures that very few humans can boast speaking to. Once in a lifetime opportunity and all that. But I guess I understand-”

“Umm, well...” Kirielle fumbled. “Actually, I changed my mind. She’s not going to try to touch me, is she?”

Of course she was going to try and touch her. Novelty wanted to touch *everything*. By her own admission she once stuck one of her legs into an open flame in order to see what would happen.

“I’m sure she’ll keep her distance if you ask politely,” Zorian told her.

How he kept a straight face after telling her that he’d never know. Sometimes he surprised even himself.

The conversation continued for a while after that, but eventually began to peter out. Ilsa and Taiven excused themselves and left, while Kirielle amused herself with trying to teach Kana how to draw. Of course, unlike Kirielle, Kana was a typical child with age-appropriate (that is to say, appalling) drawing aptitude, but neither Kirielle nor Kana seemed discouraged by that. Zorian excused himself and went to his room to see if he could get some work done before Kirielle came looking for him.

It was not to be, though – barely a minute after he had sat on his bed Kael showed up and knocked on the doorframe to get his attention.

"Am I interrupting something?" he asked.

"No, I was just considering what to do with myself. Did you need something?" asked Zorian.

"Sort of," said Kael. "I just came to tell you that you don't have to dance around the issue of your mind magic any more. I already figured out you're not *just* an empath."

"Kirielle told you, didn't she?" Zorian sighed.

"Not so much told me as gave me enough clues to figure it out. She's a chatty kid. But there is no need to be angry at her, it's not like I'm going to turn on you just because you're learning how to read people's thoughts."

"Thanks," Zorian said. "Although quite frankly, it would be kind of hypocritical of you to shun me for dabbling in forbidden magics, mister junior necromancer."

Kael immediately flinched back in shock and gave him a wide-eyed look. "W-What!? There is no way..."

Zorian gestured him to quiet down and Kael immediately shut up and peered down the corridor to make sure no one had been listening. Zorian knew they hadn't been, he could feel that all of the other residents were still back in the kitchen. His scrutiny done,

Kael quickly stepped into the room and closed the door, leaning heavily on it.

"How?" he asked. He sounded more panicked than menacing at the moment, but Zorian knew that could change at any moment if he didn't get a satisfactory answer.

"Do you know the 'arcane lock' spell?" Zorian asked.

"I... yes," Kael said, still sounding rather dazed.

"Lock the door, then, and I'll make sure we're safe from any stray divinations," Zorian said, and immediately started casting a temporary divination ward at the room. It wasn't anything fancy, but it would ward off simple scrying attempts and hopefully notify him if anything more complex targeted them. Not that he really thought they would need it, but it was good practice and you could never be careful enough.

5 minutes later the room was as secure as Zorian could make it on such quick notice and Kael looked increasingly impatient. Zorian decided to get on with it. He opened his mouth and began to speak.

"Let me tell you a story of lost time and a month that refuses to end..."



Unpaid teenage labor was an age-old tradition among mages. While the ancient apprentice system had largely been replaced with specialized magical academies, and the quality of young mages had improved drastically as a consequence, there were some things that simply couldn't be learned in the classroom. For things like that, a mage needed a mentor – someone to show them the tricks of the trade, teach them unique skills and spells they had developed and did not share lightly with others, or just plain connect them with the right people. Said mentors usually had

plenty of work they considered beneath them, ideally of a sort that took advantage of their student's magical ability and prepared them for their future vocation.

Ideally.

As Zorian trudged towards his classroom, half an hour before any of his fellow classmates, he reflected on the fact that life was rarely ideal. In practice, a lot of work given to apprentices consisted of chores that their mentor thought beneath them or various busywork. The duties of the class representative, for instance, were largely one giant waste of time. In the previous restarts, this fact didn't bother him all that much – the job was fairly easy so long as you didn't take it as seriously as Akoja did – but this time he had so many things vying for his attention that he resented this additional duty being piled up on top of it all. Maybe he shouldn't have talked Ilsa into taking him as her apprentice this restart but, well, what's done is done.

He yawned. He supposed he was just cranky today since he had gotten very little sleep last night. His conversation with Kael literally took hours since the other boy wanted to know absolutely everything and kept asking for details. While Zorian didn't begrudge the other boy for wanting answers and considered the time well spent, he kind of planned to use that time to read through the research assignments he had collected from his classmates on behalf of Ilsa. Assignments he had to give to Ilsa today, complete with corrections and grade recommendations. He had thought his knowledge from previous restarts would make the task a child's game, but apparently something about their massive changes to this restart caused Ilsa to give out completely different topics for research and he had to actually read everything from scratch. He ended up spending most of the night dealing with those stupid things and then had to get up half an hour earlier than usual too because he was class representative to boot.

Peering into the classroom, he saw that Akoja was already inside. He rolled his eyes at her excessive punctuality and marked her down as present on his little attendance sheet. The blackboard was full of horrible drawings, love confessions and other garbage, but he knew better than to wipe it clean right now – a clean blackboard was utterly irresistible to some of the idiots in his class, and they would no doubt make a mess again by the time the teacher finally showed up. Who knew, maybe if he left it alone long enough Akoja would take care of it on her own initiative, as she was sometimes wont to do.

The first to arrive were, surprisingly since they weren't normally early birds, Aneka and Armie – the (in)famous Ashirai twins. The Ashirai family consistently produced soul-bonded twins as their descendants, and the two sisters he shared his class with were no different. Zorian had considered asking them for help back when he thought he was soul-bonded to Zach, or at least questioning them about the mechanics of soul bonds, but eventually decided it would be a bad idea. For one thing, mage families tended to jealously guard their family magics, and it was obvious that the Ashirai family was trying to become an official House with their own magical specialty centered around their soul bonds. Asking too closely about their family style could have ended up blowing up in his face spectacularly, and Zorian hadn't been willing to risk it, time loop or not. A second concern was that the twins were unreliable. Benisek-level unreliable. They were giggly little twits who took nothing seriously and wouldn't keep quiet even if he paid them.

No, it had definitely been smart of him to stay away from them.

Next to arrive was Kael, who apparently couldn't sleep very well after yesterday's revelations, and eventually decided to just come early. They didn't talk much before the morlock boy decided to retire to his seat, but Zorian could already see there would be

more questioning in the near future. Lovely. He had forgotten how inquisitive and interested in the time loop Kael had been the last time he had been aware of it.

Briam, Naim and Edwin were marked down as present next. Briam gave him a wave as he passed by him, his other hand holding his fire drake familiar close to him, while Naim and Edwin were too absorbed into their conversation to take notice of him. Zorian didn't really mind, it wasn't like he knew either of them all that well. Naim was a first generation mage, much like Zorian and Akoja – a child of some soldier that rose to the rank of general in the wake of the disruptions caused by the Splinter Wars. Edwin had golem makers as his parents, and they clearly passed on their enthusiasm for the craft to Edwin – he was always tinkering with various mechanisms and making blueprints, even during lectures or other times during which he should have been concentrating on something else.

The next to come was Raynie – the red-headed mystery that transferred into their class in the previous year. She was reserved, polite, extremely attractive, a good student and absolutely refused to tell anyone about her family or origins. The only one who knew anything concrete about Raynie was Kiana, another of his female classmates, and she was resolute in her silence.

And so it went, student after student, until the list was complete and he could finally slip inside and try to rest for a bit before class started. He absent-mindedly erased the blackboard with a single alteration spell, causing the chalk to simply peel off the surface and fall to the floor, and sat down to wait.



"No, Ben, you cannot turn in your assignment a week from now," Zorian growled. "The deadline was yesterday. I have to hand them over to Ilsa today. Don't you see the problem here?"

"Come on, Zorian, this is what friends are for," Benisek complained. "What good is having your best bud as the class rep if you can't ask him to cut you some slack?"

"You're not asking for a favor, you're asking for the moon," Zorian told him, giving him a flat stare. "I *cannot* help you in this regard."

"But I really, *really* can't get another demerit," Benisek said, giving him a hopeful smile.

"Tough," Zorian said. "I guess you should have thought about that before you decided to completely blow off another assignment from Ilsa. You already know she can't stand students boycotting her homework."

"She's completely ridiculous!" Benisek said. "What kind of teacher gives out 3 assignments during the first week of the year?"

"Umm," a new voice cut in. Zorian silently offered a prayer to whosoever was still listening on the spirit planes for the interruption. He was seriously ready to strangle Benisek to get him to shut up. This wasn't the first time he was suffering through this conversation, but he usually wasn't so tired when dealing with his... sort-of friend. He was honestly rethinking his connection with the boy at this point.

As it turned out, the interruption was by Neolu, though Kiana and Jade were also hanging behind her. All three were holding a sheet of paper.

"I know the deadline for the assignment was yesterday, but I was sort of wondering-

"If you could turn it in now?" Zorian finished.

She nodded furiously and extended the paper towards him.

"No," Zorian deadpanned.

"Seriously?" Jade piped in. "You're going to make a big deal out of this?"

"Yes?" Zorian asked rhetorically.

"Why don't we just leave this here," Kiana said, placing her assignment on his desk, "and you can decide whether you want to bother with them when Benisek is done annoying you and you cool down a little."

"Hey!" Benisek protested.

"Sure," Zorian shrugged. "You do that."

Zorian patiently watched as the three of them left their assignments on his table and filed out of the classroom, waited until Benisek finally gave up on convincing him to... write Benisek's assignment for him, he supposed? And then he calmly fished out a pen from his backpack and wrote 'did not turn in assignment within the deadline' at the top of each sheet of paper before unceremoniously shoving them into his backpack along with the other assignments. There, let Ilsa decide what to do with them.

"Why are you still here, Ako?" Zorian sighed, turning to the last person remaining in the room. "Your assignment was flawless, if that's what's worrying you."

"I'm glad you decided to take the position from me," she said. "I don't think I could have gone through another year of it. When I accepted the position back in our first year, the teachers said it was a privilege. That there were benefits for the class representative. That it commands respect. But it was all a sham and by the time I realized that nobody was stupid enough to take the position from me."

"Hey..." protested Zorian lightly.

"I'm not saying you're stupid for taking it," she immediately clarified. "You accepted it because it was bundled along with the apprenticeship with Ilsa. You were far smarter about it than I had been."

"More like less naïve," Zorian said. She flinched at his remark; apparently he hit too close for comfort. "Why did you sink so much effort into it if you hated it? Why not just boycott the whole

thing?"

"Because it would be wrong," she said vehemently. "You shouldn't shirk your responsibilities. And I had accepted the class representative duties as my responsibility."

Zorian gave her an incredulous look.

"What?" she challenged. Defiant. Daring him to tell her she was wrong.

"Nothing," Zorian said. He didn't want to argue with her. Ever since he had started to develop his empathy, he became increasingly sure she had a crush on him. A small one, but it was there. And while he didn't return her feelings at all, he also didn't want to hurt her emotionally. And he would have hurt her if he started talking to her honestly – they were two very different people, with different worldviews and ideals, for all that Akoja seemed to think they were alike.

"Listen, Ako," he said, rising from his seat. "I spent most of last night reading through the assignments and I'm not the best person to hold a philosophical discussion with right now. Can we table this for another day?"

"You shouldn't have procrastinated until the very last day," Akoja said. "That's almost as bad as what those three did."

"No it isn't," Zorian disagreed. He hefted his backpack in one arm and rose from his seat. "And it's impolite to preach like that. See you around, Ako."

"Wait!" she said. Zorian could suddenly feel a wave of nervousness emanating from her, and the fact she was wringing her hands under her desk and looking anywhere but in his direction completed the impression. "I... can we talk? Not now, but... I'd like your opinion with something."

Crap. This had never happened before in any of the restarts. What set her off? He really hoped this wasn't a love confession, he couldn't afford that kind of drama right now.

"Can it wait until next week?" he asked. "I will be really busy the next few days."

"Yes," she immediately agreed. "That's perfect. I need to gather my thoughts on the subject anyway. I'll... I'll tell you when I'm ready."



"You wanted to see me?" Zorian asked as he peered into Ilsa's office.

Ilsa gestured him to come inside, too busy sipping on her tea to give a verbal response. Zorian sank into the visitor's chair and promptly handed her all assignments he had collected from the students. She took a glance at them before setting them aside and taking another sip from her cup.

For a minute or so, she just kept silently scrutinizing him. Finally, she put down her cup and sighed.

"I wanted to talk to you about your experimentation with mind magic," she said, drumming her fingers on the table. "I'm sure you're aware of the rather illegal nature of most mind-affecting magic, but since it's the product of an inborn ability rather than access to restricted spells and literature, some allowances can be made. The Empath Association goes to great pains to make a distinction between empathy and mind reading, and to claim one is just a logical extension of the other is... novel. And more than a little controversial. Nonetheless, my discreet inquiries into the subject have discovered there is indeed a known link between the two abilities so your story holds water."

"Technically, empathy and mind reading are indeed different. Empathy is a passive skill with no mental intrusion involved, while mind reading requires one to actively invade the mind of another," explained Zorian. "It's just that every empath is capable of mind reading with the right training."

"Oh? Interesting," said Ilsa. "I'm surprised more mages haven't stumbled upon the fact, then."

"I thought about that, actually," Zorian said. "The aranea are born with the ability. They speak to each other telepathically as their normal mode of communication, they have telepathic scuffles as kids, they use it to hunt their prey, for just about anything. It's natural that they would refine and build upon the ability, exploiting it to its logical extreme. Human empaths, on the other hand, are rare and isolated, so most of them have to rediscover the wheel alone, so to speak. It doesn't help that few people are willing to let someone read their mind, so any 'training' is almost certainly illegal. So most people who discover their latent telepathic abilities are either going to keep mum about it or become outright criminals. There probably is a fair number of empaths who have discovered the fact, but they certainly aren't going to admit it to anyone."

"Excellent reasoning," Ilsa praised. "And actually, it is the issue of training partners in particular that I wanted to talk to you about. I understand your sister has already agreed to help you with your training, but I am given to understand that having a wide variety of targets to practice on would be preferable, yes?"

"Yes," agreed Zorian.

"Believe it or not, one of the students has issued a request for someone to help them train their mind magic expertise. Understandably, none of the teachers are eager to have a student mess around with their heads. But simply refusing it is... politically unfeasible."

"You want me to step in and take a teacher's place," Zorian surmised.

"It would benefit both of you," Ilsa said. "You both want a target to practice on, and you're both more qualified to help one another when it comes to mind magic than any of the teachers the

academy has at its disposal.”

”And if the other student protests this?” asked Zorian. ”I mean, they may have wanted someone to practice on, but that doesn’t mean they’re willing to let someone else practice on them in turn.”

”Then it wasn’t a simple case of the academy refusing a request out of hand, now was it?” Ilsa said, giving him a conspiratorial grin. ”But I very much doubt the student in question would make a fuss about that. What do you say?”

Zorian hummed thoughtfully. While there was a risk that the other side might find out about the time loop from his thoughts, he did possess some rudimentary mental defenses and was familiar with limitations of mind reading. So long as he didn’t let the other student trawl through his long-term memories, he should be fine. And he was curious about this other student dabbling in mind magic.

”Alright, I’ll give it a try. Who am I going to be working with?”

”One of your classmates. Tinami Aoep,” Ilsa said.

Zorian blinked. Tinami was... wait, of course it would be her. Aoep were rumored to dabble in mind magic, among other things. Not all rumors were malicious nonsense. And it would explain why Ilsa knew about the request in the first place, come to think of it.

Besides, didn’t he promise to himself to introduce her to the aranea at some point to see what would happen? Yeah, he was totally fine with this.



”Hello, Tinami,” Zorian said, walking into the empty classroom Ilsa had reserved for their ’lessons’. ”Am I interrupting anything?”

”Umm,” she fidgeted. ”I’m actually waiting to meet someone...”

"For mind magic practice, right?" he asked. Her eyes widened in response. "That would be me. I will be your partner today, if you would have me."

"Umm, ah, I was... I don't want to be rude but I was kind of hoping for an expert..."

Huh, so Ilisa didn't tell her who was going to teach her? Strange.

"I'm a natural mind mage," Zorian said. "I'm the closest thing the academy has to an expert on the topic. Why don't we try this and you can leave in a huff if I can't satisfy you, okay?"

She immediately flushed scarlet and looked away, her feelings cycling between embarrassment and outrage. Uh, maybe he should have worded that better...

"Bad choice of words, let's pretend I said something else," Zorian said quickly. "Anyway, I'm surprised you didn't know who would be teaching you. How much did Ilisa tell you about me?"

"Just that you need someone to practice on, too," Tinami said quietly. "I don't really mind. I have enough mental discipline to keep sensitive things from my surface thoughts most of the time."

"Likewise," Zorian said. "And I won't allow you to look into my memories."

"R-Right," she agreed. "I mostly just wanted to practice telepathy and mind reading. The spells are not hard to cast, but actually using them takes a lot of practice."

"Well, feel free to go first," offered Zorian.

Just for the occasion, Zorian had memorized portions of a biology book describing various forms of wild plants, and simply recited them in his head while Tinami tried to read his thoughts. Not only did this ensure he wouldn't reveal any sensitive details to Tinami, it actually made her job easier. It was a lot simpler to read someone's thoughts when they thought in concrete words and sentences, as opposed to a confusing stream of consciousness

that composed the vast majority of people's thoughts. In fact, the matriarch explained to Zorian that it was simply not possible to read people like a book, unless they were literally reciting text in their heads like he was doing at the moment – there was always a large amount of guessing and extrapolation involved, and no mind reader could completely understand another sentient being.

But they could get pretty damn close.

"Why are your thoughts full of information on plants?" Tinami asked with a frown.

Apparently, Tinami didn't know that. Aoep style of mind magic training was very crude, and boiled down to throwing a kid into the swimming pool and hoping they didn't drown. A bit disappointing, really. He eventually shifted to reciting sequences of numbers and imagining simple geometric shapes.

"I guess I owe you an apology for doubting you," Tinami said. "You really do know your stuff. Do you want to try now?"

Zorian nodded and then focused on her, homing in on the glittering star he saw in front of him through his mind sense and connecting with her mind.

[Are you sure you're ready?]

She yelped and jumped in her seat. "W-What?"

[Telepathic communication,] he explained.

"But... you didn't cast a spell," she frowned.

[I don't have to. As I said, I'm a natural mind mage. I can sense all minds in my vicinity and I can connect to them if I want to. Right now I am talking to you telepathically, but if you're ready I will expand my awareness to your surface thoughts.]

She closed her eyes for a second but then frowned and opened them again.

"Wait," she said. "I don't understand. If you made a telepathic link between us, why can't I use it to talk to you telepathically?"

[I suppose that's how it works if you use a structured spell for it?]

"Well yes. I mean, there are various 'sending' spells that simply send a mental message to someone, but you need to cast them again and again every time you want to send something to the target. If you want a proper mental conversation with someone, you create a telepathic link between them and yourself. The main issue being that people often don't know how to filter their thoughts well and end up sending inappropriate things over the link."

[Hmm, I guess you could say I continually 'send' messages over the link I established between us. I don't know how to establish a two-way link yet, I'm afraid,] Zorian said contemplatively. The aranea never mentioned anything about two-way telepathic links, and in retrospect it was obvious why – a psychic could use an established link to reply telepathically regardless of who the maker of the link was. Every aranea was psychic, so why would they bother with two-way links? It was something he would have to figure out on his own, probably. [Anyway. Are you ready?]

"Yes," she nodded. "Feel free to start."

Unlike him, Tinami didn't resort to text or numbers, and instead did her best to imagine a random scene out of her life in as much detail as she could make it. The scenes were wholly unexceptional – one of Ilsa's lectures, an inconsequential conversation between Jade and Neolu as they talked next to Tinami, a walk down the street... it was all very visual, but still very challenging. His little sister was still much harder to read, ironically because she wasn't trying to hide anything from him – her disjointed, stream-of-consciousness succession of thoughts was next to impossible to figure out unless he engaged her in conversation and made her focus on one particular issue.

"Okay, I'm officially jealous," Tinami huffed. "I've been practicing this for three years with my mother and her friends, and I'm

nowhere near this good."

"Don't feel too bad," Zorian said. "I have... an unfair advantage."

"So do I," Tinami said. "My family has been dabbling in mind magic for generations, and I have their advice. It's frustrating to realize just how much raw talent can mean in a field like this."

"Ah, it's not just raw talent," Zorian said. "I too have a teacher with generations of mind magic practice."

She raised her eyebrow at him. "There aren't very many of those," she remarked. "I'm pretty sure my mother would know if any of our rivals adopted a new student."

"Not many human ones you mean," Zorian smiled. "Your mother definitely wouldn't know, not unless she keeps tabs on the many colonies of telepathic spiders scattered throughout Altazia."

Tinami stared at him in silence for a few seconds, before leaning towards him excitedly.

"Telepathic spiders? You mean... you have actually met one of the legendary aranea?"

Legendary? Zorian almost scoffed, but he supposed that the spiders were very good at hiding themselves. While there were humans who knew about them, very few seemed to be willing to advertise their connections to the aranea colonies. Zorian didn't think it was because of intimidation on behalf of the aranea (or at least not *just* because of that) – in all likelihood the mages that were 'in the know' simply wanted to preserve their monopoly on the business with the aranea and didn't want rival mages butting in and demanding their piece of the pie.

"Her name is Enthusiastic Seeker of Novelty," Zorian said. "Would you like to meet her?"

SOULKILL

The temple was just as imposing as it had been the last time Zorian had visited it – the same guardian angels glaring down at him, the same deserted feel to the building and the same creation story carved into the heavy wooden doors. This time he studied the carvings on the door with more interest than he had done the last time, however, since some of the images were rather interesting in light of things he had discovered after his first visit. Specifically, some of the bottom carvings depicted monsters that sprang up from the World Dragon's flaking heart and these monsters were clearly primordials. They had the whole 'impossible patchwork creature' look that seemed to be the primordial's one defining feature, and they matched the descriptions of well-known primordials he had read about in the books.

The unholy cross between scorpion, dragonfly and a centipede was clearly Hynth, the Locust Lord, whose bronze carapace was impervious to just about everything but divinely-forged weaponry and whose four pincers could tear steel like paper. The ability to release clouds of biting, devouring insects from pores on his body that devastated the countryside for kilometers around the thing, all while the primordial tackled anyone strong enough to stop them completed the image of a living natural disaster. The cluster of

wings hanging above Hynth was probably Ghatess, who was allegedly a ball made out of multicolored bird wings – and *only* bird wings – and created storms and tornadoes wherever it went, funneling matter into the center of its sphere where it seemed to just disappear without a trace. The boar/crocodile/porcupine thing was Ushkechko, a beast made out of indestructible black glass that poisoned anyone who so much as scratched themselves on one of its numerous bladed protrusions and could fire said protrusions like arrows at opponents. The slug-like entity covered in eyes and mouths was-

"Can I help you with something, young man?"

Zorian wrenched himself from his scrutiny of the door to look at Batak. The last time he had been here he had asked to speak with Kylae, but this time the man in front of him would suffice. He might even be preferable, considering Kylae was supposed to be a master diviner. He gave the man a nervous smile and spoke.

"I... wanted to have a talk with you, if it's not too much of a problem."

"Of course!" the man said happily, quickly ushering Zorian inside. Zorian recalled from last time that the temple didn't receive many visitors. It must be a pretty lonely existence to serve as custodian of this place. Before long they were both seated in front of a small table in the kitchen-like room that Batak used to receive visitors, a prepared tea pot steaming in front of them.

"So... What did you want to talk to me about?" Batak said after some small talk, raising his cup to his mouth and taking a long sip.

"I wanted to ask about primordials," Zorian said.

Batak promptly choked on his tea and spent the next few seconds coughing.

"Why *cough* would you want to know about *them*?" Batak asked incredulously.

"I'm... not sure I should tell you. I don't want any trouble."

Batak gave him a curious, impassive look, but Zorian sensed a note of worry in his mind.

"Well, I'm not sure whether you know or not but there is a rumor spreading around that some people are going to try to disrupt the summer festival," Zorian began.

"I've heard about that, yes," Batak sighed.

"Well, a few days ago I went with some friends into the upper levels of the Dungeon to do a job for a client. A simple find and retrieve job, but we ended up running into an underground base full of war trolls and nearly died in the process. The police are keeping it very hush at the moment but I understand their investigation revealed it wasn't the only base down there. Somebody had spent months preparing a beachhead for this attack and they have a lot of assets to burn..."

After more than an hour of explanations and clarifications, Batak seemed to accept that the attack was something a lot more serious than he had thought and (more importantly) that it was just a distraction for an attempt at primordial summoning. Thankfully, everything Zorian was telling him was totally true so whatever method of truth detection the man was using returned his explanations as genuine. The fact that Kylae had a prediction blackout around that time probably did a lot to legitimize the claim in the priest's eyes, since the successful summoning of a primordial could be the reason for her divinations failing. Which was actually why Zorian came to this temple in particular, rather than, say, the main temple of the city.

"I'll notify the church hierarchy, they should be able to spare a squad or two of investigators to check it out," Batak said. "Especially if they have solid proof rather than just an anonymous tip. Do you have anything in writing, perhaps?"

"Here," Zorian said, retrieving a stack of documents and notebooks from his bag and handing them over to Batak. "This is ev-

everything I have about the invasion. I tried to be as thorough and methodical as possible. I'd really prefer if my name was not mentioned anywhere, though."

Batak eyed the stack speculatively. "I cannot guarantee that. If your name comes up during the investigation—"

"It won't," Zorian interrupted.

"Well, then I don't foresee any problems," Batak shrugged. "A bit odd of you to have so much information on this group if you're not a defector from their ranks."

Zorian said nothing.

"Alright," Batak said, perking up and shaking his head slightly as if to clear it. "Are you still interested in hearing about the primordials or was that just a ploy to get my attention?"

"I'm still interested, yeah," Zorian said. "I'm really curious why they felt the need to organize all this just to summon one."

"To be fair, I don't think knowing more about the primordials will satiate your curiosity in that regard," Batak said. "Anyone who wants to summon one of these things is clearly insane. But no matter – tell me, what do you know about the primordials in the first place?"

"They're some kind of powerful spirit hailing from ancient times," Zorian tried. "Like fey or elementals, only older, weirder and far more dangerous."

Batak sighed. "I knew you were going to say that. In the future, when you're interested in some aspect of the spiritual world, please consult religious texts first before delving into mage-written works. I know the church can be a little biased about a lot of things, but we really do know our stuff when it comes to the spirits and everything related to them. Ever since the gods fell silent, spirits are the only thing we have left, so we have done some extensive work on them. And we don't hide it much either."

Zorian nodded sheepishly. It never even occurred to him to look at religious texts on the topic. He blamed his town priest back in Cirin, who was a bigoted old hypocrite that kept making problems for Zorian whenever they crossed paths and consequently soured the Church as a whole for him.

Batak drummed his fingers on the table for a few seconds, gathering his thoughts.

"Alright. First, let me tell you something about actual spirits. I'm sorry if this is already familiar to you, but I need to get it out there to explain why primordials absolutely cannot be spirits."

Zorian motioned for him to continue.

"Spirits are, from a practical standpoint, divided into two main groups: outsider spirits and native ones. Outsiders spend most of their time in their own spiritual worlds and can only ever enter ours if summoned by someone from this side. Demons and angels are the most famous of outsider spirits, though lumping all demons into a single group is mostly done by humans for human convenience – there is no demonic equivalent to the angelic hierarchy and two demons are as likely to fight each other as they are to cooperate on a common goal. Native spirits are a multitude of spirits that exist on the material plane by default – you already mentioned elementals and fey, which are the two most common types of native spirits. It is likely that native spirits were once outsider spirits that gradually adapted to life on the material world, as they share the key feature that all spirits have. Namely, that they don't really have bodies the way humans and animals do: they are disembodied souls that need some type of vessel to contain them and allow them to interact with the world around them."

"So spirits are soul entities," Zorian mused. "Like lichs or body snatchers."

"Yes, very much like that," Batak agreed. "In fact, some spirits are very much body snatchers and prefer inhabiting bodies of

humans and animals. And it's likely that the process of transformation into a lich has been developed by studying spirits and the way they interact with their vessels. Anyway, primordials. Primordials have bodies. Actual, flesh and blood bodies. Most people, even mages, assume they're spirits because of their strange forms and great resistance to damage, but they really have more in common with dragons and other magical creatures than with spiritual entities. Spirits tend to be weird because their bodies are usually just ectoplasmic shells, which they can twist into whatever unnatural form they feel like taking. Primordials are creatures of the material world, just like you and me."

"But wait," Zorian said. "If primordials are not spirits, but some kind of strange magical creature, how are the attackers planning to summon one?" asked Zorian.

"They don't," Batak said. "I didn't want to interrupt you while you were talking, but you almost certainly misunderstood something there. Primordials can't be summoned, since they're down here with us already. Bound, forced into sleep and locked away, but still with us. What they can be is *set loose*."

Zorian felt a shiver run down his spine. The primordial wouldn't disappear, he realized. The Ibasan invaders thought they were summoning a fancy demon to go romp over their enemies, but that thing was never going back to its home plane on its own. It didn't have one.

"Why were they sealed away?" Zorian asked. "Why not just kill them?"

"Primordials don't die the way most things do," Batak said. "They are a remnant, a relic of the age when the world was still fresh and the World Dragon had only just been bound at the center of our world. They are her original children, the purest expression of her rage and hate, and they have found ways to strike out at humanity and the gods even in their death. They

spawn smaller, weaker primordials in their death throes, and often inflict corrupting effects on the area in which they died. Even the gods found the aftermath of one of them dying to be difficult to deal with, so they eventually just contained the lot of them and trapped them in far corners of the earth.”

”And the attackers believe one of them is in Cyoria,” Zorian stated.

”Apparently,” Batak said. ”I wouldn’t know personally – no one has ever seen one of these prisons within living memory and written records are deliberately vague about their locations. Still, Cyoria had effectively *been* ’a far corner of the world’ up until relatively recently, historically speaking, so I suppose it’s possible. Strange that no one had ever found any indication of it in all this time, though, considering how many mages delve into the depths of the Hole on a regular basis...”

”I see,” Zorian said. He excused himself soon afterwards. While interesting, this truthfully didn’t change much and his task had already been done.



Zorian was feeling pretty pleased with himself for organizing this little event. While setting up Kirielle for a meeting with Novelty was done purely for amusement and sheer curiosity at how Kirielle would react to Novelty’s antics, introducing Tinami to Novelty was... well okay, it was also mostly done for the sake of his curiosity and amusement. But that didn’t mean he didn’t take advantage of it to gain something from little miss ’forbidden magics’ Aoape. Like, say, getting her to teach him the invisibility spell. He knew, just *knew* that Tinami had been taught how to cast that spell, restricted magic or not, and he was totally right! So now he had finally completed his ’list of spells every proper

mage should be able to cast', and all it took was promising to do something he had intended to do for free, anyway.

And the cherry on top? Novelty loved him for promising to bring her two new humans to meet. He didn't need to make it up to her in any way, because she thought he was doing her a *favor*!

Yes, Zorian was feeling very pleased with himself. Now all he had to do was wait with Kirielle until their two guests showed up and then stand back and watch the fireworks. Novelty would come first and meet with Kirielle to start with, since that meeting was bound to be shorter and more casual, and would then remain to greet Tinami when his classmate eventually showed up at Ima's place. There shouldn't be any problems, but just in case there were problems and they somehow degenerated beyond his ability to handle, Zorian had arranged for a for a bit of insurance...

"So aranea are about the size of a dog?" Kirielle asked.

"A big dog," Zorian said. "But Novelty's not scary at all, and I'm sure you'll get along splendidly. She reminds me of you, actually."

"A giant spider reminds you of me?" Kirielle asked him, sounding surprisingly threatening for a 9-year-old.

"You'll find out why soon enough," Zorian said, more amused than anything. "She's coming over as we speak."

He had been devoting only half of his attention to his conversation with Kirielle, trying to train himself to pay attention to his mind sense and talk at the same time, and had thus immediately noticed Novelty when she came in range, despite the fact that she had tried to dim her mental presence to surprise him. He immediately launched a telepathic attack on her and she promptly dropped her attempt at stealth in favor of a short mental wrangle that resulted in Zorian being quickly booted out of her mind. Despite his poor showing, Zorian was pleased. He had been doing such 'greetings' for a few days, ever since he realized that Novelty didn't consider such telepathic 'play-fights' hostile, and compared to his initial re-

sults, this was absolutely amazing.

It was kind of amusing how Novelty refused to actually teach him telepathic combat due to the matriarch's orders, but had no problems helping him practice in such a fashion. In fact, after his first few attempts, she sometimes even initiated such impromptu telepathic combat herself, or tried to stalk and surprise him like she did today. He supposed she didn't think of it as teaching – it was just a game as far as she was concerned. She would be rather cross with him if she ever caught him thinking it, but she really was still a child in many respects.

[That was barely any better than yesterday,] Novelty complained, apparently not sharing his optimistic self-assessment. [This is why I think we should have gone with my idea for teaching you. It would have been a million times faster than our lessons so far.]

[You are not locking me in one of your hatcheries,] Zorian told her.

[But you'd have left a master of telepathic combat within a week!] Novelty protested. [Well, master by human standards, anyway.]

[No,] Zorian responded. He suddenly became aware that Kirielle was tugging on his shirt. "What is it, Kiri?"

"You drifted off," she said.

"I was just talking to Novelty," he said. She looked at him oddly. "Telepathically, I mean."

"Oh," Kirielle said, her eyes widening in realization. "I'm so jealous you can do that. I wish I could talk to people without being overheard. It would have been *so* helpful around mom."

"Don't I know it," Zorian sighed. "So many things would have been easier if I could have done that earlier. Though maybe it was a blessing in disguise – a lot of people back in Cirin would have freaked out if they started hearing voices in their head and mind

magic abuse is punished very harshly by the mage guild. Anyway, let's go introduce you to Novelty."

To her credit, Novelty hadn't immediately rushed in towards Kirielle and started to crawl all over her. To *Kirielle's* credit, she didn't immediately scream in fear and try to hide behind him upon seeing a huge black spider hop into the room. Instead, the two of them faced each other square on, standing a good deal of distance from each other, and carefully scrutinized one another.

[A mini human!] yelled Novelty telepathically, breaking the stand-off. [Great Web, she's so much smaller than you! Can she even talk yet?]

"W-What!?" Kirielle protested. "Of course I can talk! I even learned how to read and count last year! What do you think I am, a baby!?"

[Oh, you *can* talk, that's excellent! Excellent! I actually *was* afraid you were a baby,] Novelty admitted, skittering left and right to take in Kirielle from different angles. [Not that there is anything wrong with being a baby, but I got assigned as a babysitter for *soooo* long and it gets *soooo* boring after a while you know? They're all so needy and grabby and they never know anything interesting...]

"Um, yeah," Kirielle said. She shot Zorian a suspicious look, but he was maintaining his impassive facade through superhuman will. His lips only twitched into a smirk once she returned her attention back to Novelty. "I guess I can understand that. But I'm definitely not a baby anymore! I'm nine years old, and that's a lot!"

[Wow, that *is* a lot!] agreed Novelty. [You're only a year younger than me! How come your brother is so much bigger than you, then?]

"He's... older than me?" Kirielle tried. "Wait, if you're ten, aren't you just a kid like me?"

[No way!] Novelty protested. [I went through the maturation ceremony last year, so I'm totally an adult of the tribe and no one

can say otherwise!]

Zorian watched as Novelty and Kirielle went through a clash of cultures in miniature, gradually coming to an understanding of sorts. They both complained about not being taken seriously by people around them (it was a mystery as to why; no, really) and exchanged some information about their respective species. Zorian actually learned a few new things about the aranea that he had never really thought to ask about. Apparently aranea had a lot shorter lifespan than humans did, with 55 years being considered positively ancient. He knew they could spin webs from before, but apparently the webs weren't at all involved with hunting prey and were instead used exclusively as construction material to make walls, bridges, etc. He had also thought they were fully subterranean in nature, with only Cyoria's colony interacting with the surface so heavily, but it turned out they all preferred to hunt on the surface and only used the Dungeon to build their settlements in.

Eventually, Novelty decided to try her luck and approached Kirielle, which resulted in his brave little sister immediately backpedaling and cutting the meeting short. Not that Zorian was very surprised by this turn of events at all – if anything, this went a lot better than he thought it would. Hell, Kirielle even indicated she might not be averse to the idea of another meeting in the future.

[Aww,] Novelty wilted, drooping pitifully over the couch she was currently occupying. [I scared her away.]

"She did say you could meet her again in a few days," Zorian pointed out.

[But I wanted to talk some more,] Novelty telepathically pouted.

"Just give her some time to digest the whole thing. And don't try to hug her next time."

[But humans love hugs! I totally read so in one of your books!]
Novelty protested.

Zorian thought about explaining to her that that wasn't universally true among humans – his parents were never really big on physical contact, with any of their children, really, and Zorian didn't remember the last time he was hugged by anyone other than Kirielle. Not that he was particularly crazy for hugs himself, mind you. He decided against it.

"I'm afraid that aranea just don't have what it takes to give a proper hug," Zorian nodded sagely. "Sad but true."

[Do we really look so ugly to you humans?]

"Scary," Zorian corrected. "The word you're looking for is 'scary'. You probably shouldn't have spent so much time lovingly describing how your fangs can easily punch through bone and hardened leather or how you kill your prey by driving said fangs into your victim's neck and severing the spine."

[But cats do the same thing, and cats are cute! You explained so yourself!]

"And then you butted in to note that cats are 'yummy', thus completely invalidating my attempt to make you seem less threatening," Zorian noted.

Novelty sent him an unintelligible telepathic message accompanied by a note of annoyance. Zorian just shrugged and went back to his book while they waited for Tinami to show up.



"Oh. My. Goddess," Tinami said, staring at Novelty like she was the best thing ever. "She's *beautiful*!"

[Well yes, I don't want to sound arrogant but I have been told I'm quite a looker,] Novelty preened, standing a little straighter and trying to look more dignified.

"And she really does talk telepathically, just like the stories say!" Tinami exclaimed. She turned towards Zorian. "Wherever did you meet one of them? How did you befriend her? Can I touch her? Do you think she'd teach me her ways if I ask? Do you?"

"I don't think I'm capable of pulling off the 'yes, yes, no, yes' routine so one question at a time, please," Zorian said. "Also, most of those questions you should be asking Novelty here instead of me."

"Oh! I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be disrespectful and ignore you," Tinami said, turning back to Novelty. "I was just excited and it felt natural to talk to the guy who brought me here. To be honest, I was half-convinced this was his idea of a prank and already had a little curse prepared-"

"Hey!" Zorian protested. "That's totally illegal!"

"-but I guess it won't be necessary now, and that's probably for the best," Tinami continued blithely, like she was not interrupted at all. She took a deep breath. "I'm Tinami Aope, by the way."

30 minutes later, Zorian found himself unceremoniously booted out of the room so they could have some privacy. Ungrateful scum, the both of them. He considered spying on them with a scrying spell but considering their conversation mostly consisted of Tinami fawning over Novelty and the young aranea feeling very smug about the attention, he really wasn't losing much. He remained close by for another half an hour, in case of possible problems springing about, but after a while it became obvious he wasn't needed (nor much wanted) and entered the room to tell them he was going for a walk.

The moment he was far enough from Tinami that he could no longer feel her on the very edge of his mind sense he found a quiet corner and shrouded it in some basic anti-divination wards.

"You can come out now," he said to no one in particular. The matriarch promptly stepped out of the nearby shadowed corner,

fading into visibility. The trick was somehow less impressive now that he could duplicate the feat and become invisible himself. "So?"

[She is neither a time traveler nor is she connected to the invasion in any way,] the matriarch said. [And as far as she knows, neither is her family.]

Zorian nodded. He had expected that – the Aoep were part of Eldemar's ruling elite and tied far too tightly into its power-structure to participate in a wild stunt like this invasion, and Tinami was too genuine to his senses to be constantly pretending - but it was nice to have a confirmation. "You had no problems with her mental defenses?"

[She had them, but they were of the wrong sort, much like the 'advanced' ones you demonstrated to Novelty,] the matriarch said. [I'm certain she hadn't noticed my intrusion, and I've done nothing except look so there should be no traces left for anyone to find.]

"There is no way for her to have fooled you?" Zorian asked. "I've read plenty of stories where people are pretending to be dominated by a spell cast by the villain, and then surprise him by a stab in the back once they let their guard down."

[Must be a human mind magic thing. I can't see that sort of thing happening to a psychic. Well, unless the target has constructed a fake mind on top of their real one and fooled the attacker into thinking it was the target's actual mind. But that almost never happens. Constructing a fake mind that is actually convincing is really, really hard.]

Zorian blinked. He hadn't even known that constructing 'fake minds' was possible.

"Well, sorry I bothered you with this, I guess," Zorian said.

[Nonsense, it was a reasonable suspicion and I actually found a number of useful details by trawling through her mind. Not only is her family not at all friendly towards the invaders, they are likely to be quite annoyed about their plans. Cyoria is their powerbase

and they don't want it ruined. And since Novelty is back there, charming the young Aoep heir, we will have an easy way to get in contact with the Head of House. Getting such a prominent Noble House on our side will guarantee that the evidence of an invasion plot is taken seriously. Have you spoken to the priest?]

"Yes," Zorian confirmed. "He said the church would send someone to look into it."

[Yet another proof of our legitimacy,] the matriarch stated with satisfaction.

"Hopefully I won't get pulled in for questioning," Zorian said. "I don't think my half-truths and understatement could stand up to professional investigators."

[My web is trying to divert any ongoing investigations away from you, so it shouldn't be much of a problem,] the matriarch said. [We've already ambushed and killed three different investigation groups by the Cult of the Dragon Below, and we've been subtly redirecting official Cyorian investigations towards us.]

"You?" asked Zorian in surprise.

[It has been decided to turn this restart into something of a testing run,] the matriarch explained. [As I've told you before, my web's goal is to eventually reveal ourselves to the city at large and join the population as rightful citizens. While full disclosure would be too disruptive for what we're currently trying to achieve in this restart, we've decided to reveal ourselves to a number of prominent people in Cyoria during this restart – both to coordinate the response to the invasion better and to sound out their reaction.]

"And?" asked Zorian, honestly curious.

[It's a mixed reaction, and the fact we're bringing news of an impending invasion doesn't help calm people down. We've overheard several 'secret' meetings that discussed how to deal with us in a hostile manner, thankfully with the conclusion that they should

wait until after the summer festival before doing anything, but also a couple of meetings that discuss how to profit from our presence.]

"Which you have no problems with," Zorian surmised.

[Nobody wants to kill the goose that laid golden eggs,] the matriarch said. [No offense to your kind, but I trust your greed more than I trust your compassion. I talked to Zach about that issue you wanted to talk about, by the way. You were right. He doesn't remember any restarts being cut short for any reason whatsoever – you dying doesn't seem to reset the time loop.]

"I knew it," Zorian said. "Even Zach would have realized something was wrong if he kept restarting every time I was killed before he was. This is more proof that Zach is the anchor of the loop."

Zorian had at one point toyed with the idea that there was an actual mind behind the time loop – a god that decided to break the Silence, perhaps, or some kind of very powerful spirit. However, there were a lot of little ways in which the situation matched better with the idea of the time loop being a spell of some sort and none was so clear as the way the spell was treating time traveler detection. Clearly, on some level, the spell knew it was Zach who was the anchor of the time loop and that everyone else was a tagalong. However, at the same time, it could get easily confused (via a little soul blending) into including multiple people into the awareness of the loop. That sounded more like a dumb spell function trying to reconcile incompatible directives with each other than a willful, intelligent mind making a judgment call.

The trouble was, a spell implied a human caster. And a human caster shouldn't be able to roll back time *once*, much less repeatedly.

[If we managed to provoke the third time traveler into revealing themselves, most of the questions about the time loop should be answered easily enough,] the matriarch noted. [I suspect they know what the time loop is and how it functions.]

"Yeah," agreed Zorian. "Let's hope so."



Days passed. When Zorian was not attending to one of his numerous obligations (he'd never try to do so many things at once in the future!) he alternated between creating the various traps and items needed for the ambush of the third time traveler and helping the aranea root out the cranium rats from the city.

Picking the ambush site and preparing it had fallen mostly on Zorian's shoulders in the end. The aranea knew how to make traps and ambushes, of course, but most of them were based around lethal force or mind magic assaults. Considering that the third time traveler almost certainly knew how to counter aranean mind magic and that they wanted him alive, little of it was useful for their purposes. Thus it fell to Zorian to design something that would contain and disable their target, or at least distract them until the aranea could strip them of their mental defenses and do their thing. Kael contributed by helping Zorian make a mixture of powerful alchemical sedatives for disabling purposes and the matriarch served as his assistant since she was the most capable aranea when it came to structured magic and knew a lot about the local mana flow of the settlement. She would also be the one to lead the execution of the actual ambush with her fellow aranea, so she had to be extremely familiar with how the trap was going to work.

In the end, Zorian decided upon a three-part trap, set in the middle of the aranea settlement. The first part was a fairly exotic effect on the floor that turned stone temporarily liquid. The effect would only activate for a moment, immediately shutting off and turning the stone back into a normal solid state once the target sunk to their knees into the rock floor. As far as Zorian could tell, there was no easy way for a mage to get themselves out of the rock once the effect ended. The spell couldn't be dispelled any more than the ashes of a fireball-destroyed book could be dispelled back

into a pristine state, and trying to blast the rock off was liable to blow the caster's legs along with it. The only convenient way of getting out was to phase or teleport out, which is why the second part of the trap was a dimensional lock that would shut down most dimensional shenanigans. Finally, the last part involved dousing the combat area with smoke infused with the powerful sedatives Zorian made with Kael's help.

It was a bit simple, but Zorian had read that the best plans are always simple. Just in case, though, he had built backup traps in several other aranean caverns. These were a lot less sophisticated ones, though, and boiled down to 'explosions'. A whole lot of explosions.

Aside from that, Zorian had made a great deal of combat equipment for the aranea participating in the ambush: shielding discs that they could strap on to their body to shrug off some of the weaker attack spells, stone cubes and alchemical vials that produced a variety of effects when set off, and some equipment for himself and a handful of mercenary mages that the matriarch discreetly hired as additional muscle during the ambush. Of course, in an ideal scenario Zorian wouldn't have to fight anyone at all and the equipment he made for himself would be a useless waste of time... but really, what are the chances of an ideal scenario? Things had been going a little too well for him as it was.

As for the hunt for the cranium rats, that had actually been his own idea, and he had been pleased that he had thought of something the aranea, with all their connections and psychic might, hadn't. The basic idea was to capture one of the rats and then use that specimen as a connection for divining the location of the rest of the rats. Not quite a novel idea to the aranea, but they thought heavily in terms of mind magic and tried to follow the telepathic links connecting the captured rat to the rest of the hive mind – something that quickly failed, since the main collective promptly

cut the connection with any captured rats. Zorian, on the other hand, used good old locator spells – divinations meant to find and keep track of all sorts of things, so long as the caster had something connected with what you're trying to find. A cranium rat, even if disconnected from the collective, was sufficient for those divinations to work. Zorian ended up following the connections until he located the main bodies of the cranium rat swarms (there had been 4 of them, as it turned out) and then, with a handful of aranea acting as support and psychic powers suppressant, herded them into tight formations that could be wiped out with a single fireball spell. By the end of the month, the cranium rats had been effectively wiped out.

When he was finished torching the fourth rat swarm, one of the aranea assigned as his body guard during the operation told him she finally understood why humans were supposed to be so scary and dangerous.

Zorian wasn't the only one who was busy. Kirielle persisted in trying to learn magic, more stubbornly and diligently than Zorian had ever seen her. She was doing very well for a complete beginner, but the sad fact was that she was closer to him in talent than, say, Daimen or some other child prodigy. Novelty had become something of an unofficial liaison between the aranea and House Aoep, and was as a consequence subjected to a crash course in diplomacy and proper conduct by the matriarch – something she constantly complained about to Zorian whenever they met. Tinami, for her part, was much more interested in her lessons with Zorian once she found out some details about what being psychic means, and appeared to be working on some kind of personal project that consumed most of her free time. Zorian suspected, from the snippets of thoughts that briefly bubbled into her consciousness during their lessons, that she was trying to somehow artificially make herself psychic. Which struck him as crazy dan-

gerous, since it meant messing with your own mind and all, but that was House Aoep for you. Kael was also pursuing some kind of personal project that he refused to elaborate to Zorian – though it apparently had something to do with spell formula because he kept borrowing Zorian's books on the topic. Zorian left him to his work – Kael had been incredibly helpful throughout the month, taking it upon himself to help Zorian as much as he could for some reason. Zorian didn't think it was just generosity and hadn't forgotten just how fascinated with the time loop the other boy was last time, so he wondered when the other boy would approach him about what he *really* wanted from Zorian.

Apparently, the answer was 'just before the summer festival'.

"Hello Zorian," Kael said. "Are you doing something?"

"Not really. I'm just waiting for Akoja to show up so that I can go to the dance," Zorian said. "There is no point in starting anything since she's bound to show up absurdly early. What is it?"

Ah, Akoja. He still wasn't sure why he had asked her to be his date for the evening. Probably because she gave every indication she wanted him to and he didn't want to make her sad for no reason. Not that she had actually come out and said it, though – hell, she even chickened out on the meeting she had arranged with him and made it look like she wanted some school advice instead of... well, whatever it was she had really wanted to talk about. Hopefully she would be a little less pushy this time around and the evening wouldn't end in as big of a catastrophe as it had the last time they went out for the evening.

"I have... a gift and a request," Kael said. Zorian mentally translated it as 'a bribe and a demand'. "First, I have been thinking about your stories of previous restarts and couldn't help but notice the presence of a powerful lich on the side of the invaders. Those are... very hard to deal with, especially with classical magics."

"But not with soul magic?" surmised Zorian.

"Well, sort of. It's not easy, even with soul magic, but there are some tricks you could pull on a lich if you knew how to mess with souls. The thing you need to remember is that a lich's soul is automatically pulled back into their phylactery when their physical form is destroyed. This is because destroying their body severs the link between their soul and their body... obviously, since there is no body to speak of anymore. Still, if you could sever the link between the soul and the body – something that is a lot easier to do with creatures whose soul is artificially connected to the body through magic – then their souls would immediately be wrenched back to their phylactery, even if their body is technically intact."

"They'd be effectively banished," Zorian concluded. "It wouldn't kill them, but..."

"The process of possessing a new body is not that fast for a lich – they need a whole day at the minimum, and that's assuming they already have a new body ready to go. Banishing the lich back to its phylactery is as good as killing it, at least for your needs."

"You're telling me you can teach me a spell to do that?" asked Zorian excitedly.

"Well no," said Kael, promptly popping Zorian's bubble. "And it would be of dubious value even if I could. The spell requires you to touch the target."

Zorian winced. "Yeah, I don't see myself getting within touching range of the lich."

"So I got you this, instead," Kael said, handing him a small silver disc, reminiscent of a particularly large silver coin. Closer scrutiny, however, quickly made it clear it was some kind of a spell tool, being covered in spell formula instead of typical imagery common to currency.

"I don't have to touch the lich!" Zorian realized after thinking about the 'coin' for a few moments. "I just have to make sure the coin touches him!"

"Yes," Kael said. "I noticed your fighting style seems to be based around items, so I've imbued the spell into that disc... it should work but I make no guarantees so use it at your own risk. I tried to make it as small and non-threatening as possible, but..."

"But there is no way to be sure the lich will let it touch him," Zorian finished for him. "Trying to keep a strange item thrown by your enemy from touching you is common sense. I don't suppose that hitting the target's shields is sufficient, is it?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Yeah, that's what I was afraid of. Thanks anyway. What about your... request?"

"Well... the truth is I want a favor in exchange for helping you. I know you're almost certainly going to make further use of me in future restarts, and I have no problems with it... except I want to get something out of it too."

"I'm not sure what I can do for you that won't be rendered hollow by the restart, but okay," shrugged Zorian. "What is your wish, oh great Kael?"

"I want the same thing you're already doing – to use the time loop to improve my skills," said Kael. "In case of magics that require shaping skills and the like, this is clearly next to impossible without being brought into the time loop, but there is a magical discipline that is far less dependent on shaping skills. One that I happen to be quite good in."

"Alchemy," said Zorian.

"Exactly. Now, practicing alchemy on my level involves a lot of experimentation – testing the effects of your brews, improving them and designing original concoctions. These things take a lot of funds and a lot of *time*, but once you have a recipe for a potion..."

"You want me to help you design finished potion recipes and then give you the result in subsequent restarts, thus allowing you to refine your recipes further and then take *those* results and-"

"Exactly!" Kael said. "And then, when the time loop ends, you're going to give me the fruits of this labor and I will have saved myself months, possibly years of my work! It will require you to delve more deeply into the intricacies of alchemy than you did currently, but I don't see that as being a big problem for you – you're clearly going to need it if you intend to rely on items so much."

As it turned out, Kael had spent most of the month running various experiments and promptly brought him a notebook with the results. There was a lot of text there, but Kael explained he only really needed him to memorize the last two pages, which listed which avenues of research were dead ends and outlined a partially finished recipe for some kind of anti-fever potion. Kael explained that giving him those results in the following restarts wouldn't just help Kael improve his craft, but would also allow Zorian to convince the other boy he was really a time traveler far faster than would otherwise be possible. And would also make Kael more willing to help, sooner (wink, wink, nudge, nudge, do you get it yet?). Not seeing the harm, Zorian spent the rest of the wait memorizing the results and then leafing through the rest of Kael's research notebook. It wasn't every day that a mage got to scrutinize another mage's research methodology, after all, and Zorian could use some pointers for the future.

"Zorian, your *girlfriend* is here!" Kirielle called, trying to sound teasing but just ending up mocking and annoying in the process.

"Coming," said Zorian, closing the notebook and going out to greet Akoja, who was trying not to look too awkward in front of Imaya and Kirielle. And failing miserably, as she seemed completely at a loss how to deal with his sister's light-hearted teasing and Imaya's advice on what to do if Zorian got too grabby during the evening ('kick him in the crotch' seemed to be the gist of it). After a few minutes, he decided to have mercy on her and drag her

away from those two so they could be on their way.

It was time to get this show on the road.



The evening had been going splendidly. Akoja was still rather frustrating, but with the date not being a mission from Ilsa this time around she wasn't nearly as insistent on dragging him along to pointless introductions and the like and instead settled for criticizing him every 5 minutes and in general being far too self-conscious and high-strung for what was ostensibly a casual dance. As for the invaders, they were doing incredibly poorly. Zorian kept monitoring the situation through the telepathic relays he had left with the aranea and it was obvious that the whole invasion had unraveled at the seams. While the city didn't believe the invasion was of the scale described by the aranea and vastly understaffed their response forces (though as far as Zorian understood the city's reaction was considered a huge overreaction by a large portion of the leadership), they were prepared to respond to some kind of invasion... and the attackers were a mere shell of their usual strength, due to the lack of forward bases and a whole lot of assassinated leadership. There was no initial bombardment because the artillery mages had been ambushed before they could do their thing, the academy had opted to change their warding scheme so the attackers couldn't just teleport wherever they wanted to go, and their invasion routes were being actively contested by defending forces that continually swelled as the city realized the scope of the invasion and drew on all the combat assets available to it.

So saying that Zorian was surprised when the door to the dancing hall was suddenly and violently blown into bits, showering the unfortunate guests who stood too close to the entrance with a rain of splinters and concussive force, would be a vast understatement.

A few moments later, before the dust had a chance to settle and screams died down, three people strode into the hall.

At the center of the three-man formation was the lich. It was just like Zorian remembered it: an imposing skeletal figure, its bones black and vaguely metallic-looking, wearing a crown and a suit of metal armor. In its skeletal hands it held a scepter, completing the royal-like appearance. To the left of the lich strode forth a woman clad in black clothing reminiscent of a military uniform – simple pants, a plain jacket with some kind of crest sewn in on it (it was too far for Zorian to see clearly, but it seemed to feature a skull as a prominent motif; who the hell actually puts a damn skull on their crest?), and heavy leather boots. All very bland and utilitarian, if somewhat sinister-looking due to its black color. She strode purposefully forward, gripping a sword strapped to her belt, her expression stony and severe, and Zorian couldn't help but notice that her pale skin and coal-black hair (currently tied into a tight pony tail) made her seem somewhat vampire-like.

...she *was* a vampire, wasn't she? Gods, every time he thought the Ibasan force couldn't possibly look any more sinister they pulled something out of their closet to show him that they totally could.

The final part of the triumvirate was a person in a blood red robe which covered him from head to toe. His face was invisible behind a patch of darkness that seemed to fill every open portion of the robe, obscuring the wearer's features. Unlike the lich and the vampire girl, who did their best to look dignified and imposing, Red Robe (which is how Zorian promptly named him in his head) walked carefully and scanned the shocked crowd with interest, his cowed head swinging left and right in search of something. Or someone, as it turned out: the moment his eyes locked onto Zach he immediately stopped and spoke.

"Him," Red Robe intoned, his voice magically distorted and

resonant, pointing his staff at Zach.

As if to punctuate the statement, a small stream of war trolls and (brown) robed mages suddenly poured into the dance hall through the broken door, and everyone snapped out of their daze and realized they were under attack.

All chaos broke loose.



The plan Zorian and the aranea matriarch had made assumed that the third time traveler would attack Zach, overpower him and then pull the information about the aranea out of his mind. Zorian was not sure about a lot of these steps, but a big one was the idea that Zach could lose against the third time traveler so easily. For all his flaws, the other time traveler seemed to be a capable combatant.

It did not take long for Zorian to understand that Red Robe was the third time traveler, and the way he intended to beat Zach was immediately obvious – by not coming alone. Zach seemed to have problems tackling the lich on its own, and with Red Robe and the vampire girl joining the undead mage the outcome was never in question.

Admittedly, Zach was in a room full of mages who also fought against the three attackers, but the other forces they had brought with them served their purpose as distractions and tied down most of them. Kyron tried to help, as did a couple of others, but they just weren't on the level of their opponents.

But they certainly tried. Kyron summoned some kind of glowing whip of force that severed the arm of the vampire girl at the shoulder and then used the same whip to fling her sword (which was clearly magical, burning with strange purple fire that ate through forcefields) out of her reach. It was this that finally confirmed his suspicions that she was some kind of undead, as

her severed stump didn't bleed at all and the sudden loss of an arm only seemed to inconvenience her – she promptly pulled out a knife with the other arm and returned to attacking people again. Red Robe was actually bloodied by one of the students when they managed to overpower his aegis with a coordinated barrage of magic missiles, but sadly enough that stunt just about wiped them all out and he was sufficiently well after it ceased to take them down in response. As for the lich, he was utterly unfair – nothing seemed to scratch those bones of his in the slightest. Zach actually managed to blow his shiny armor to bits with some kind of black bolts and even knocked the thing's crown off its skull, but nothing ever made a mark on the bones. What the hell was that thing made of?

Zorian reluctantly didn't involve himself. The plan didn't call for it, and quite frankly he was likely to end up dead if he tried. He did help put down a couple of war trolls and disposable mages that ventured too close to his position, but other than that he just watched uneasily as Zach was slowly taken apart by his three opponents.

But things never go as planned. Eventually Kyron finally got tired of the one-armed vampire girl butting in on his fight with the lich and blasted her away. She landed next to Akoja.

He had gotten separated from Akoja earlier in the attack and decided not to go after her, since she was clearly terrified and would want him to stay away from any danger while he personally didn't intend to completely stand on the sidelines while people died. Now, however, the vampire girl suddenly decided to go after Akoja instead of rushing back into her original fight. Why? Hell if Zorian knew – maybe she wanted a hostage? In any case, Zorian immediately threw a low-yield explosive cube under her feet to halt her in her tracks and then poured most of his mana into an incineration beam aimed straight at her chest.

Beam spells weren't Zorian's ideal form of combat magic: they dealt a lot of damage, but they were also very mana intensive and it was easy to waste most of the beam's power on the surroundings if you couldn't keep the beam constantly on target. And in a room packed this tightly with panicky civilians, 'surroundings' often meant 'innocent bystanders'. Zorian knew that he needed to kill the vampire girl quickly, however, as she was extremely fast and her blades could cut through force fields with ease, meaning he'd get his throat slit the moment she got close to him, so he had to use the most damaging spell in his repertoire. Thankfully, she was sufficiently dazed by the explosion that Zorian didn't have any problems keeping the beam on target and he knew from watching her fight against Zach and Kyron that she was vulnerable enough to fire.

He kept the beam on her for full five seconds, reducing her to a little more than a heavily charred skeleton and a pile of ash.

Akoja seemed to be in shock, both at the sudden lunge towards her by a crazed undead woman and the brutal method of her destruction. The other students around him were watching him with a mixture of fear and awe, and Red Robe continued his fight against Zach without reacting. The lich, though...

Oh crap, the lich was staring at him.

Indeed, the lich took one look at the smoking corpse of the vampire girl and then locked its hollow eye sockets with Zorian, its gaze seeming to look right through him. Kyron used the moment of distraction to launch another one of those glowing whip-things that severed the arm of the vampire girl like it was paper, but instead of moving out of the way the lich simply snatched the whip out of the air with one of its skeletal hands, its finger bones closing around the thread of severing light with no ill effects that Zorian could see, and pulled. Kyron let the whip dissipate almost immediately, but not enough to maintain balance. The lich promptly fired

an angry red beam of jagged light and drew a line between Kyron and Zach. They both went down in a spray of blood.

"Watch it!" Red Robe yelled. "That could have killed him! I told you I need him alive!"

"I grow tired of this," the lich responded. "He is alive enough for your purposes, and this way he'll struggle less. And you should watch your tone, little whelp – you're not in charge here and I could kill you whenever I want without anyone batting an eye. Enough of your 'information' has turned out to be incorrect that your value is being questioned."

"I told you, we have a leak," Red Robe said. "That's why I need Zach intact."

"You don't need him intact to rip the information from his mind," the lich said. "Do your thing and be quick. There are already reinforcements from the city on the way here."

Red Robe seemed to want to say something, but the lich had already returned to scrutinizing Zorian some more and eventually simply bent down to Zach's motionless form and started casting some complicated spell before placing a hand on Zach's head.

Zach's motionless form suddenly blurred into action, as Zach revealed himself to have just been pretending to be unconscious and tried to punch Red Robe in the face. Sadly, while Zach wasn't totally unconscious he wasn't in top form either, and Red Robe deflected the attack before slamming Zach's head into the floor several times until he went limp and then repeating the spell.

The lich chuckled hollowly. "*Now* who's being too rough? You could've cracked his skull with that stunt, you know? Living beings are such fragile things..."

"The aranea?" Red Robe said after a while. "I can't believe it, I'd never have thought those thrice-damned bugs would be... no matter, I have to go. Time to go tie some loose ends."

"The aranea were never part of the-" began the lich, but Red

Robe already teleported away. "Hmph. I am killing that fool when I meet him later. He's more trouble than he's worth."

He turned back to Zorian after a few moments, and people around him edged away from him.

"I hated her, you know?" the lich said conversationally, pointing at the smoking remains of the vampire girl. "She thought she was so much better than little old Quatach-Ichl. I was a relic, she said, while she was the next generation of undead or some bilge like that. Now look at her, killed by a precocious student with a simple fire spell. Still, while I find the situation amusing, I can't exactly let you get away with it, you know? She was kind of important, much as it rankles me, and I can't just go back home and say 'Remember that Zoltan House heir you told me to take care of? I kind of lost her, oops'. The head of house will at the very least want your head for this, if not your soul."

Crap, crap, crap. So he ended up killing some kind of House heir now? On the other hand, it was nice to have a confirmation that the lich was Quatach-Ichl. Quatach-Ichl was male, wasn't he? He could stop referring to the lich as an 'it' now. Now if only he could get out of this with his soul intact..

"I don't suppose you would accept a bribe to pretend you couldn't catch me?" asked Zorian with as much calm as he could muster, taking out the silver disc Kael gave him and flinging it towards the lich.

Thankfully, amazingly, the lich reacted just as Zorian expected him to: he extended his hand and snatched the coin out of the air. Zorian had figured the lich would do that instead of knocking it aside with a shield or something, as he seemed to consider himself invulnerable – not an unwarranted assumption considering those weird bones of his. In any case, the moment the lich's skeletal hand closed around the silver disc he froze in place for a moment before collapsing to the floor like a puppet with its strings cut.

"What?" one of the students behind him asked. "What happened? What the hell did you do to him?"

Zorian ignored him. Instead he rushed towards Kyron and Zach and started examining their injuries. A few seconds later he was pulled away by a girl who looked a few years older than him and who claimed to be a trained medical professional so he let her do her thing.

Instead he pulled a telepathic relay out of his pocket and closed his eyes in order to contact the aranea and see what was happening on their front.



It had started so well. The red robed intruder, presumably the third time traveler, walked blithely into the trap, his confidence buoyed by the familiar layout of aranean defenses near the entrance, as well as several victories against the sentries that the matriarch had purposely sacrificed in order to lull the enemy into a false sense of security. The moment he was near the center of the room, the floor turned to liquid and he sank into it before it froze solid again.

The aranea and the human mercenaries the matriarch had hired for the evening attacked immediately, dousing the area in sedatives and disabling spells.

But something was wrong, the sedatives didn't seem to have any effect on the robed man and many spells also failed to have any effect. Even stricken immobile, the man somehow managed to defend himself effectively, exploiting any openings to fire off strange purple beams that slew anyone they hit instantly. They were slow to cast and only targeted single opponents, so their losses were light, but it was still frustrating. Finally, one of the purple beams hit one of the human mercenaries and his companions lost their nerve, responding with a barrage of glowing lances

that tore straight through the robed man's shield and impacted his chest.

For a moment, the matriarch was afraid that they had killed the man, making all her preparations and plotting meaningless... but the reality turned out to be far worse than that. Instead of erupting into a shower of blood and gore, the robed man simply... turned into smoke.

The opponent they had been fighting hadn't been the third time traveler in person. It had been merely an ectoplasmic shell infused with some of his skill and magic. A simulacrum, meant to test the waters and distract them.

A cone of purple light washed over the room, instantly slaying all of the human mercenaries and scores of her loyal aranea. Damnation – their opponent had taken advantage of the distraction their simulacrum had provided and set up an ambush of his own. She turned to sound a retreat to-



Zorian jolted awake from his trance as his connection to the matriarch had been violently severed at the end. Watching the events unfold from her perspective had been strange and mildly unpleasant, and Zorian would have to talk to the matriarch later about doing stuff like that without asking for permission, but considering the sudden end of the transmission? The matriarch was probably dead. And the rest of the aranea would probably soon be as well.

They failed. All that preparation and they had still failed. Damn it.

"Zorian?" a raspy voice from the floor near him broke him out of his thoughts. It was Zach, who was apparently conscious again, a heavy bandage wrapped around his head. "You with us again? You kind of drifted off for a while."

"Yeah," Zorian breathed out. "I'm... fine."

"They say you killed the lich," Zach said, pointing weakly towards a pile of black bones some distance away from them. A couple of braver students were clustered around the fallen body of the lich, whispering and pointing. "How the hell did you manage to do that?"

"I severed the connection between his soul and his physical vessel, thereby causing it to snap back into his phylactery. He's not really dead, just banished."

"Oh," Zach said. "Still, that's... I never managed to do anything even close to that. How... how is it that you knew how to do that? You... are you..."

"I need to go," said Zorian, rising to his feet.

"Hey wait!" Zach said, trying to rise up before wincing in pain and giving up on that idea. "You can't just ignore me and go- Zorian! Zorian!"

Zorian ignored Zach, as well as Akoja's questions about where he was going. He just continued towards the exit, mentally plotting the path to the nearest sewer entrance. Nobody moved to stop him.

"Zorian, you ass! I swear I'm going to punch you in the face the next time I see you!" Zach shouted behind him.

"Sorry, Zach," Zorian whispered to himself. "But this takes precedence."



By the time Zorian had arrived to the aranean settlement, the whole place was dead, and Red Robe had moved on somewhere. Probably to hunt down any fleeing aranea that had scattered into the city – Zorian knew that a number of aranea were above ground at the time the ambush had been taking place. Whatever the reason, Zorian thanked his good fortune and started examining the

place for additional clues about what had happened and for any surviving male aranea.

The fight had been fierce, but Zorian couldn't help but notice that most of the damage to the settlement had been inflicted by the aranea themselves, as they futilely tried to halt Red Robe's advance through the use of the spell cubes he had gifted them and their own traps. Red Robe killed incredibly cleanly, leaving no mark of damage on the bodies of the fallen – it was those strange purple spells obviously, but why was he taking such pains to kill all the aranea so bloodlessly when he could just chuck a fireball and fry the lot of them?

He was thorough, though. Zorian didn't know whether the man was unaware that the aranea males were not intelligent or simply didn't care, but quite a lot of males ran afoul of his desire to kill as many aranea as possible. This thoroughness was another strange thing – the man hadn't seemed hysterical or furious back in the dance hall, so why was he so insistent on getting every last aranea before the time loop was done? He even wiped out the children's crèche, for gods' sake! Yes, obviously killing them all would ensure that he got any time travelers amongst them for sure, but still – they would all be back in the next restart anyway.

Disturbing. Even though the emotional impact of seeing an entire settlement butchered down to the last child was blunted somewhat by their obvious non-human anatomy, Zorian was still sickened and disturbed by the cold-hearted brutality of the third time traveler.

Well. Maybe the matriarch's message from beyond the grave would provide some answers. With the help of his divination compass and his mind sense, he slowly tracked down the surviving males one by one and extracted the pieces of the message they held.

There were two parts of the message, Zorian soon realized. The first was a simple narration – a voice message left to him by

the matriarch explaining her actions. The second was a detailed map of Cyoria's underworld, with several locations marked as important. Both messages were incomplete, due to the thoroughness with which Red Robes hunted down the aranea, and the matriarch seemed to prioritize the map as more important, since several males had redundant copies of some of the sections of the map.

As the time loop inexorably inched towards its end, Zorian took stock of what he had managed to piece together.

[Missing] ...mean things went awry. I know you think I had it coming by rushing into this but... [Missing] ...simple: the time loop is degrading. I can't tell how long it will be before... [Missing] ...can leave at any time. Thus, stopping him was... [Missing] ...can only ever be one winner in this game. I am truly... [Missing] ...hope it won't be necessary, but just in case I put in a map to... [Missing] ...whole other continent. I didn't think it was possible, even with the help of... [Missing]

That was it. The map was also full of holes, although Zorian noted he still currently had what was an incredibly accurate map of Cyoria's underworld by commercially-available standards.

Before he could really consider the message at length, the loop ended and everything went dark.



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

"Good m-!" Kirielle began, only to get cut off as Zorian immediately shot upright into a sitting position, sweeping Kirielle into a crushing hug. The suddenness of the motion shocked Kirielle into a few seconds of silence as Zorian took several deep breaths to calm himself down.

"What's wrong?" Kirielle asked, wriggling inside his grip but not really trying to break free of his hold. Zorian promptly let her go and tried to think of a good answer. He failed to think of any.

"N-Nothing," he exhaled. "It's just a nightmare. I'm sorry for worrying you."

And it really was a nightmare. All their manipulation and preparations, all his combat practice, all the tricks he had thought of, and they *still* lost. They lost miserably. The aranea... they had been hunted down like stray dogs and massacred. Why? What could the third time traveler hope to accomplish with such pointless brutality? And the message the matriarch had left him didn't explain much of anything, either.

"Like I was really worried," she huffed, giving him a sharp poke and jumping away from him. "Mother wants to talk to you so you better hurry down."

"Right," Zorian said, getting up and making a motion towards the door. Predictably, Kirielle sped away to occupy the bathroom, and Zorian immediately locked the door to his room once she was gone and started pacing around like a caged tiger.

He needed to warn the aranea, and he needed to warn them as soon as possible. He wasn't going to bring Kirielle with him this time and the moment the train disembarked in Cyoria he was... no, no, no. That was too slow. Far too slow. Considering Red Robe's actions in the previous restart, and the fact that he 'knew' they were time travelers now, Zorian wouldn't put it past him to butcher them all at the start of the restart this time.

The aranea needed to be warned right *now*, not by the end of the day. He would have to teleport directly to Cyoria. He mentally apologized to his mother and Kirielle, since they were going to have a fit when they realized he had gone missing from his locked room, and started casting.

He couldn't teleport straight to the Aranean settlement. The

araneas had actually warded most of their settlement against teleportation, and in any case the aranea lived deep underground. Teleporting underground was a bad idea – between the sheer amount of rock in the way and the magical interference created by heightened levels of ambient mana (which only got worse on a mana well like Cyoria), there was a good chance he'd end up killing himself. As much of in a hurry as Zorian was, killing himself in a teleportation accident was even worse than being late, and he had no mana to waste either. Teleporting to Cyoria's teleport beacon was going to be hard enough on its own for a mage of his meager capabilities in the field.

Teleportation had a reputation of being dangerous among most mages. This was because, at its core, the classical teleportation spell wasn't a pure dimensionalism spell – it had a substantial divination component that divined the exact coordinates of the location the caster was trying to reach, and if the caster set up the divination wrong... well, all sorts of weird and unpleasant things could happen. Then there was the fact that some people really didn't like people teleporting into their home and territory and set up wards that didn't just cause teleportation to fail, but to fail *catastrophically*. Such wards were illegal, but used by a certain type of people anyway.

Other than that, though, teleportation was a fairly safe and convenient method of transportation. So long as your destination wasn't behind wards. Or underground. Or somewhere you've never set foot in. Yeah.

Ah, whatever, the point was that it could get him to Cyoria in mere moments. Cyoria thankfully had a teleport beacon in the city that funneled travelers into a central location and simultaneously made teleportation easier (and less mana intensive) for the mage doing the teleporting. That meant that Zorian wasn't going to spend most of his mana on the teleport, which was a very good

thing.

His world shifted unpleasantly – he still wasn't good enough with the spell to produce a smooth transition like Ilsa could manage – and suddenly he was at Cyoria's teleport redirection point. He promptly ran into the city proper and went about preparing himself. As tempting as it was to immediately descend into the Dungeon and seek out the aranea, he had to think of his own safety first. The aranea could be saved in some other restart, but if he got captured by the third time traveler, all would be lost. He had to wait half an hour or so until his mana reserves regenerated enough that he would feel safe descending into the Dungeon, so he set off in search of a store to buy some equipment at, as there wasn't enough time to make his own.

Well, finding a magical store in Cyoria wasn't too difficult. Unfortunately, their selection of spell rods legally available to someone like him had been very underwhelming. He bought a shielding bracelet and a rod of magic missiles, but everything else required permits he didn't have.

"I hate to sound like a crazed killer or something, but don't you have something... more lethal in your selection?" asked Zorian impatiently.

"Well sure, but I can't really sell them to you without getting into trouble, can I?" the merchant said with a radiant smile, not at all disturbed by his question. "The mage guild keeps a close eye on the sale of spell rods and such, and I don't really want to get into trouble for a handful of coins. Sorry."

He then gave him a shrewd look. "But you know, if it's lethality you're worried about, may I suggest a somewhat... unorthodox choice?"

He reached beneath the counter and withdrew a plain wooden box, placing it on the counter. With great fanfare, he opened the box and showed its contents to Zorian.

Zorian stared at the contents for a few seconds, thinking it over. It was unorthodox yes, but...

"I'll take it," he said.

The man gave him a knowing smile and started to write up a bill.



He knew something was wrong the moment he approached the aranean settlement without being intercepted by the sentries. He should have been intercepted by now, especially since he had been deliberately inflating his telepathic presence to be as noticeable as possible. But no one came to confront him, and no one answered his vocal greetings. It was unnerving, and as Zorian got nearer and nearer to the Aranea settlement, an undercurrent of dread began to seep into his mind.

Was he too late? But he came here as fast as reasonably possible!

He finally encountered one of the aranea after a few minutes, followed by another one 30 seconds later. Dead, both of them. There was no sign of physical damage Zorian could see, either on the dead aranea or the environment, and he could detect no magical residue to indicate heavy spellwork. It looked eerily like the aftermath of Red Robe's attack in the previous restart. He promptly stopped to cast 3 different protective spells on himself: non-detection to stop simple divination, invisibility to hide from sight, and a spell to increase his natural spell resistance. He didn't know what those purple spells were, but they looked like direct effect spells rather than simple projection attacks, so spell resistance should work against them. Finally, he took out a cheap scarf he had bought back on the surface for this very purpose and wrapped it around his head to hide his identity. He was currently invisible,

yes, but that was going to get disrupted the moment he cast a spell and it wasn't something to rely on.

Then he proceeded more carefully into the settlement proper.

It was a graveyard. Everywhere he looked there were dead aranea, silent and motionless, legs curved inward and glassy black eyes staring at nothing in particular. The terrifying thing was that there was absolutely no sign of struggle anywhere he looked – no spell damage, lingering mana concentrations or groups of corpses piled together as they attempted to delay the attacker at some chokepoint. In fact, most of the aranea seemed to have simply dropped dead in the middle of some mundane activity, such as feeding on a rat corpse or making some kind of sculpture out of webbing.

After thirty minutes of trying to piece together what happened, Zorian was tempted to conclude that the third time traveler enacted some kind of wide-scale area of effect ritual that duplicated the effect of those purple beams of his and killed every aranea in the settlement in a single moment, before they even realized what was happening. The problem was not *every* aranea had died. Some of the males had survived whatever spell wiped out all of the females and roughly half of the males. And them being simply outside of the settlement when the spell took effect didn't sound relevant, since the forward guards he passed earlier on the way to the settlement had also been dead and they were pretty far from the settlement proper.

After capturing several males and delving into their minds, he was starting to notice something. All of the males he captured felt... familiar to him. He had delved into their minds before, in the previous restart when he was retrieving the matriarch's message from them.

No. It couldn't be! The aranea weren't time travelers so why would-

A sizzling sound accompanied by a flash of light heralded the opening of a magical portal somewhere behind him, and he immediately whirled around to confront the newcomer. Hopefully it would be Zach and-

Of course it was the third time traveler.

For two whole seconds, the two mages stood in silence, staring at each other in surprise. The third time traveler was in the exact same getup he had used in the previous restart – a blood red cloak that covered every inch of his body and wreathed in some kind of protective spell that left his face as an empty, featureless patch of darkness beneath the hood. Zorian was technically invisible and the other mage shouldn't be able to see him, but he knew from the way the other mage was looking straight at him that the spell was not having any effect on the other mage.

The moment was broken when the Red Robe whipped out a spell rod in a fast, practiced motion and fired a swarm of 5 magic missiles at Zorian. Caught off guard, Zorian could do little except soak the hit with his shielding bracelet. Thankfully the shield held, but he knew he wasn't going to win any fights with a guy that bested Zach. He managed to set off a disintegration spell at the floor of the cave between them, throwing clouds of dust into the air and allowing him to disengage from battle.

He ran.



He didn't get far.

"You are shielding yourself from divinations," Red Robe said in his distorted voice. "Good. At least you're smarter than that fool Zach. Can you believe that even after all these decades in the time loop he still hasn't learned how to hide himself from the most childish of locator spells? You, on the other hand, have been in the

time loop for, what? Three, four years? And you already know how to shield yourself from my soul perception.”

Zorian said nothing, trying to sink further into the crack he was hiding in and wracking his brains for a way to lose the man. It was fortunate that Kael had taught him how to shield himself from soul sight, because Red Robes was apparently a motherfuck-ing *necromancer*!

He was just fortunate he figured out how the man was seeing him, or else he'd be already dead by now.

“They're permanently dead, if you're wondering,” Red Robe continued. He didn't seem to be able to pinpoint him with his soul protection active, but he clearly could tell he was around. And he was slowly getting closer to Zorian. “When I killed them in the last restart, I didn't just kill their bodies. No matter how many times the time loop repeats itself, the aranea will always start the time loop dead, their bodies present but their souls forever gone. Soul magic is so fascinating, isn't it?”

Even though he had been suspecting it, Zorian still felt his heart drop at the admission. The aranea... were dead permanently? That's... He felt a storm of outrage and guilt building up in him and ruthlessly crushed it. Now was not the time. There would be time for breakdowns and self-recriminations later, but now he had to make sure that there would *be* a later.

“But I'm not as violent and unreasonable as I might first appear, you know?” Red Robe said conversationally. “If you tell me the names of other people the aranea have brought into the time loop, I promise I will leave you alone. I might even teach you a thing or two.”

Zorian blinked. Is that why Red Robe hadn't flooded the whole room in fire to flush him out? Because he thought there might be more time travelers beside him? Huh. In retrospect, that seemed like a reasonable conclusion: the matriarch did claim such to Zach,

after all.

Suddenly Red Robe surged forward and snatched him by the shirt. Before Zorian could do much, the other mage slammed him into the rough wall of the aranea cavern several times, causing Zorian to see spots and hover on the edge of unconsciousness. He tried to break free, but he was never particularly gifted in the physical areas and Red Robe's strength was utterly superhuman and completely out of proportion with his size and build.

"How many others have the aranea brought into the time loop?" Red Robe asked menacingly, dropping all pretenses of politeness and friendliness.

Someone else might have been tempted to try and lie, but Zorian knew it was best to stay quiet. A statement could be divined for hidden meanings and veracity. You could not divine the meaning of silence.

"Oh fine, have it your way," Red Robe said with a dramatic sigh. "I guess I'll just have to rip it out of your mind like I did with Zach. Regardless of what those arrogant bugs told you, the aranea aren't the only ones capable of mind magic."

Zorian felt the other mage trying to connect with his mind, but he immediately realized the attempt was incredibly crude and simplistic. Zorian was better and he knew it. Not willing to let this mistake on the part of his opponent go to waste, he promptly clamped down on the connection and blew Red Robe's telepathic attack to bits before counter-invading his mind. Knowing he had no experience with subtle attacks, he simply proceeded to blast the Red Robe's mind with an undirected telepathic scream. Red Robe flinched back and tried to terminate the connection. When that failed, he reached for his spell rod, but Zorian caused his hand to spasm and it promptly slipped between his fingers and clattered to the floor of the cave.

After several seconds Zorian realized that, while the other

mage was no match for him when it came to telepathic combat, he wasn't defenseless either. He couldn't overpower Red Robe mentally, and the moment his concentration dropped the other mage was going to sever the connection and beat him to a pulp in the physical world. He tried to commandeer the Red Robe's limb to release its grip on him so he could flee but the hand remained resolutely wrapped around his neck.

Well fine then. Zorian reached to his belt and retrieved the revolver he had bought from the merchant, emptying the entire wheel into Red Robe at point blank range.

He lost concentration as the gun fired, the bang surprising him with its volume, but as the first two bullets impacted Red Robe's chest he immediately released Zorian in favor of erecting a hasty shield around himself. The last four bullets splashed uselessly against the plane of force the other mage had managed to raise in front of him, but the damage was already done, as the first two bullets had already struck true, tearing through whatever protections the other mage had on his robe and drawing blood.

Zorian took advantage of the aftermath to flee, hoping that Red Robe's fresh wounds would inhibit his pursuits. The lack of footsteps following him told him he was correct.

A disintegration beam narrowly missing his head also told him that his opponent wasn't out of the fight yet.

"You shot me!" the Red Robe's voice yelled hysterically behind him. "What kind of mage uses a gun!?"

Zorian didn't grace this with a response and instead opted to keep running. The idea of simply activating his bombs (the only item he bothered to make before coming down here) and killing himself was tempting, but he realized that would be a horrible idea. His opponent was a necromancer – suicide wasn't going to protect him from Red Robe, not in any way that mattered. It wasn't like the time loop was going to reset itself when he died – it only did

that for Zach.

No, he had to find a way to kill himself in such a way that Red Robe could not recover his body afterwards. After wracking his brains for a second, he accessed the map of the underworld the matriarch had left for him and searched for something... there! That tunnel led to a long vertical shaft that ended in a giant underground lake marked as 'dangerous'. That probably meant there was something living there, ready to eat anyone who ventured into the waters. His body would likely be eaten long before Red Robe could recover it. He sped off towards his destination.

He narrowly avoided the next two spells, Red Robes constantly on his toes, not nearly as crippled by his wounds as he should have been. He shot him in the chest, for gods' sake! Twice! What the hell did he do to himself to get that kind of resilience? Some kind of forbidden ritual, maybe?

Red Robe seemed to finally lose patience with him and flooded the entire corridor in a vortex of crackling blue lightning that immediately caused Zorian's muscles to lock up and washed all his thoughts in a sea of pain. He was too late, though, because Zorian had already stepped over the edge of the hole leading into the vertical shaft and inertia caused him to promptly tip over and fall in.

Zorian tumbled through the air, for some reason thinking it was funny he was doing his damndest to kill himself while the third time traveler was trying to stop him. He had the presence of mind to activate the explosives in his pocket just before he hit the surface of the water and his world ended in light and pain.

End of Arc 1

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Repeti-
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mother of learn-
ing, the father of ac-
tion, which makes it
the architect of
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