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MOTHER OF LEARNING

Arc II - Part 1

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

CAST ADRIFT

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

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

Relief immediately flooded his mind, closely followed by despair. He did it – he kept his soul safe from the third time traveler and survived the encounter entirely unscathed. But his allies...

"Zorian? Are you alright?"

Zorian stared at his sister for several long seconds, a million thoughts racing through his mind. She looked uncomfortable with his blank stare and silence, but Zorian couldn't really bring himself to care at the moment. His mind was still stuck on his desperate escape from Red Robe. On the fact that he almost got captured by a mass murdering psychotic necromancer with an untold amount of time looping experience. On the fact that said necromancer now knew there were other human time travelers running around and could be coming after him this very moment.

On the fact that the aranea were dead. Dead and never coming back.

He absent-mindedly pushed Kirielle off of him, put on his glasses and started pacing around the room.

Killing a soul was impossible. They could not be destroyed, only modified. Everyone said so – the teachers, all the books he had read discussing the topic, Kael the amateur necromancer... hell, even the goddamn *lich* had said so in one of his offhand comments back when Zorian was first brought into the time loop. How, then, did Red Robe manage to kill the souls of the aranea?

He supposed the simplest explanation would be that Red Robe simply found out something that normal mages hadn't. He was a necromancer with a huge amount of time and an easy way to avoid the usual consequences of various grisly experiments. Perhaps he succeeded where other necromancers had failed. Zorian didn't think this was likely – the lich seemed to be a better mage than anyone he had met thus far, Red Robe included, and he certainly considered a soul-killing spell impossible – but that just might all be wishful thinking on his part. He didn't want the aranea to be gone for good. Dammit, he had grown to like the stupid spiders! Sure they'd had their disagreements, but he had really never wished them ill and he didn't think they had wished him ill either. Novelty certainly hadn't, and she couldn't lie to save her life. If... if he was being perfectly honest with himself, he had practically thought of Novelty as a second little sister. But now she was gone, just like the rest of the aranea beneath Cyoria.

And the worst thing? He let it happen. He had spent the whole evening gathering the matriarch's last message, oblivious and uncaring to what was really happening, while Red Robe was hunting down the aranea across the city. He had *known* he was dealing with another time traveler and he had never once considered that the man might have developed countermeasures against others of their kind. Gods, he felt so stupid now.

Although it was strange... First of all, if Red Robe could perma-

nently get rid of anyone who bothered him with a spell like that, why hadn't he used it more often? Surely the invasion would be a lot easier if he got rid of a couple of key stumbling blocks. Yet Zorian never heard of any notable people waking up dead at the start of each restart, and he had access to the extensive information network maintained by the aranea. There was an obvious answer to that, of course: there could be a significant cost associated with the spell which Red Robe was unwilling to pay. But the fact that he had gone out of the way to remove *every single aranea in Cyoria* made Zorian doubt that. If there was a serious cost associated with it, he would have made sure to investigate more thoroughly and soulkill only those he had to.

Secondly, the aranea weren't *actually* time travelers, so the spell shouldn't have worked! Zorian was quite sure that the time loop didn't pull every soul back in time – if that was the case, every mage would feel the difference after a dozen or so restarts as their shaping skills miraculously increased overnight. Plus, there are 'normal' necromantic killing spells that forcibly banish the soul from the body to kill people and Zorian had occasionally seen them in use during the invasion. If every person whose soul was banished from their body ended up dead at the start of the time loop, the number of inexplicable corpses showing up at the start of the time loop would have started to pile up quickly and everyone would have realized something was very wrong by the time Zorian was brought in. So all in all, clearly the souls of regular people who were not time travelers weren't affected by anything that happened to them in previous time loops. The fact that Red Robe's spell affected normal people in future time loops was strange, to say the least.

Zorian stopped pacing and frowned, idly noting that Kirielle had left the room at some point. He was getting the feeling that Red Robe was exploiting the very nature of the time loop to some-

how get the desired effect. Zorian himself had no idea how the time loop really functioned, but presumably Red Robe did. Without that knowledge, he was probably never going to figure it out. Like always, he needed more information.

...except his main source of information – the aranea – had been utterly wiped out by the enemy, leaving him with nothing except a cryptic, incomplete dying message.

Damn it.



Over the next few hours, Zorian simply went through the motions, trying to hide the frustration, shame and panic he was feeling and to appear as normal as possible. He had failed to keep his inner turmoil strictly to himself, if mother's worried questions were any indication, but in the end she accepted his explanation of being slightly shaken from a recent nightmare and stopped bothering him so he took that as a win.

And what a nightmare it was! Aside from losing the aranea, there was a non-negligible chance that Red Robe managed to figure out his identity and was going to assault the house at any moment now. True, he had managed to hide his face behind a scarf and had never spoken, but there were ways nonetheless...

He didn't even think about trying to immediately leave the house in panic, though. The first and main reason for that was that if Red Robe had identified him and was coming to Cirin, then his family was in danger of being permanently killed, just like the aranea, and he wasn't willing to let that happen. Kiri had grown on him over the course of the time loop and while he didn't like his mother very much he wouldn't let some psycho murder her. No, it was bad enough that the aranea had paid the ultimate price for his mistakes - he'd be damned if he'd leave his family to save his own hide.

The second reason was that, while it was certainly possible that his identity had been compromised, it was just that – a possibility, not a certainty. Yes, it would be easy to track him down by noting which students from Zach's class were missing and then checking them out one by one, but it was entirely possible that Red Robe wouldn't think of it. After all, as far as Red Robe was concerned, the mysterious human time traveler was associated with the aranea, not Zach. There was no reason to search for him among Zach's classmates. And while Zach probably knew that Zorian was a time traveler by now, Zorian strongly suspected he would be out of Cyoria when Red Robe came knocking. If Zach had even a smidgen of common sense (not a certainty, admittedly), he would skip town first thing in the morning upon starting a new restart. Considering Red Robe thoroughly trounced Zach during the invasion by bringing the lich as his backup, and that Zach actually remembered it happening this time, Zorian felt that even Zach wouldn't be crazy enough to stay where the clearly superior enemy could find him.

That was a lot of assumptions to rely on, but what else did he have left? He was backed into a corner. All he could do was wait and hope Red Robe wasn't a master detective on top of being a scarily good necromancer and gods know what else.

In any case, his plan was quite simple at the moment - go board the train as normal, then promptly disembark upon leaving Cirin. He had no intention of going back to Cyoria in the near future. Red Robe was bound to pay attention to Cyoria for a while, trying to catch any time travelers the aranea may have brought in, so going there so soon would be just begging for trouble. Any minor misstep could blow his cover, and he didn't trust himself to be able to lay low for multiple restarts at a time. No, best if he avoided the city for a while. He would have to return there at some point, of course, but he had to be a lot stronger and a lot better informed

before he could show himself in the city again.

Aside from his determination to avoid Cyoria at all costs, his plans were virtually nonexistent. He was feeling rather lost at the moment. All emotional attachment aside, the aranea were also his best allies in this messed up event, and losing them effectively pulled the rug from under his feet. What the hell was he supposed to do *now*?

The conclusion he settled on was that he needed some time to calm down and come to terms with what happened. Think up a new way forward. He would probably end up just wandering around the country for a restart or two. Or maybe a dozen restarts. Yes, now that he thought about it some, the time loop was the perfect time for him to go on a country-wide, maybe even a continent-wide tour. Just... exploring and sight-seeing. Very relaxing. Admittedly, the matriarch's last message mentioned something about the time loop gradually decaying, but she named no concrete deadlines in the fragments he had managed to piece together and he believed she would have put greater emphasis on that part if the timetable was particularly tight. No, that statement was there just to let him know he did not have an infinite amount of time to work with – he had some fairly large, but very much finite number to look forward to, and time was steadily ticking.

At least he hoped. He was quite doomed otherwise. 'Large but finite' he could work with, but if he had only a handful of restarts left? It didn't bear thinking about.

"Mister Kazinski?" Ilsa said, breaking him out of his thoughts. Just as well, his thoughts had taken a dark turn again, and he was tired of feeling depressed. "Are you listening to me?"

"I'm listening," Zorian lied. He wasn't really listening, of course, but that was because he'd had this conversation with Ilsa a million times by now.

"Right," Ilsa said dubiously. "As I was saying, you can pick up

your badge when you finish school since it's so expensive and-

"What if I want to pick it up now?" Zorian interrupted. His savings should be enough to fund a month of aimless wandering so he probably didn't need the badge for work, but he didn't like the idea of keeping his spellcasting abilities a secret lest some overzealous policeman report him to the guild and ultimately bring the academy in. Having a badge to prove his certification and membership would allow him to do as he pleased for the most part.

"You can pick one up at any of the mage guild offices scattered around Eldemar," Ilsa said. "Most large cities and regional centers have one."

Oh good. He had feared he could only pick one up at the Academy or something.

Eventually, Ilsa left, her parting words being that she looked forward to seeing him in class. Huh, that was new. Did she suspect he intended to blow off school to do his own thing? Well whatever, even if she did, it did not matter much – the academy always had a rather anemic response to students who didn't show up for class. They would send a letter to his parents informing them that he wasn't attending his classes, and that was it. And fortunately for Zorian, no one would be at home to read the mail by the time the letter arrived, since his parents were going to Koth to visit their precious Daimen.

Satisfied that his course had been set for the moment, he picked up his things and set off towards the train station.



As the train departed from Cirin and started its journey towards Cyoria, Zorian began to relax somewhat. Part of that was that train rides always made him kind of sleepy and therefore sapped the tension straight out of his body and mind, but a great

deal of it came from the fact that Red Robe was nowhere to be seen. Hours had passed – enough time to prepare and mount an attack on the Kazinski household several times over for someone of Red Robe’s abilities – and no hostile force had struck against him or his family, so chances were that Red Robe wasn’t coming at all. That meant his identity was probably safe for now, which was a major relief. If he hadn’t discovered Zorian’s identity in the previous restart, he probably wouldn’t discover it at all – a month was ample time to track him down if Red Robe knew where to look. He wouldn’t really relax fully until several restarts passed as peacefully as this one, but this was an encouraging sign.

He just had to make sure he didn’t make any more stupid mistakes in the future.

The train stopped for a moment and then continued onward towards Cyoria. Zorian opted to stay on the train for now, despite his initial intention of getting off the train on the very first station after Cirin. The first stop after Cirin was an even smaller village that gravitated towards Cirin and had nothing notable to recommend it to anyone. Him disembarking there would be noted and remarked upon by the inhabitants and there was a chance that someone might recognize him and report him to his family before they could leave for Koth. And that was the kind of drama he really didn’t need at the moment. And besides, what the hell would he do in a tiny unfamiliar village like that? No, it was far better to wait until Nigelvar and then travel on foot to Teshingrad. Nigelvar was also a small town of little note, but it was an important enough transport junction that no one would find a traveler who disembarked there on the way particularly strange. Teshingrad was a regional capital. It couldn’t hold a candle to Eldemar, Korsa or Cyoria, but it was big and influential enough that newcomers were normal.

Teshingrad also had a mage guild office, so he could pick up

his badge there.

He disembarked at Nigelvar without complications and immediately set out towards Teshingrad. Unfortunately for him, the storm that invariably hit Cyoria on the first day of every restart was apparently a more wide-scale phenomenon than he first thought, because he found himself in the middle of a raging rainstorm halfway there. His rain shield thankfully held out long enough for him to reach one of the roadside inns and take shelter there. He ended up spending the night there, slightly annoyed at the delay despite not having any concrete plans for the restart. It did not help that the food was terrible and the people kept giving him funny looks. It was probably his clothes – the ones his mother made him wear were clearly a bit fancy and out of the price range of most commoners, and he didn't have the chance to change before entering the inn. He made sure to put a basic warding scheme on his room to deter would be thieves and attackers, but thankfully no one tried anything while he slept.

Having survived the night at the inn without incident, Zorian departed the place early in the morning and reached Teshingrad a few hours later... only to get unpleasantly surprised when he tried to pick up his badge. As it turned out, Ilsa had not been exaggerating when she said the badge was expensive. It would cost him half of his savings to have one of those made! It was a highway robbery in Zorian's opinion, but the man he spoke with in the mage guild office wouldn't hear anything about lowering the price. Instead he pointed Zorian at a nearby wall where a job panel stood. It was similar to the job panel posted at the academy in Cyoria, only the jobs were much more reasonably priced, since the town did not have the same glut of amateur mages that Cyoria did. It would take two days for Zorian's badge to be ready for pickup, so he figured he may as well earn some money while he waited to replenish his money stash. It wasn't like he had something better to do.

The job list was... rather more eclectic than he hoped. He was sure that 2 chickens and a bag of flour was a fair price for fixing up a broken wall, but it was of no use to him personally. And the couple of job postings that did not define any concrete payment sounded very suspicious to him. Even so, he still found plenty of things to occupy his time with. Thus, for the next three days, Zorian helped with a bunch of repairs, tracked down a missing goat, carried a stack of stone blocks from one end of the town to the other on one of his floating discs, helped the local alchemist harvest her herbs, and eradicated a particularly nasty rat infestation in one of the private granaries on the edge of town. None of it was particularly difficult, but Zorian would be lying if he said he didn't learn anything in the process. It was a lot different knowing a spell academically and trying to use it to solve concrete problems.

"Well, there you go," the man behind the counter said, handing Zorian his badge. It was quite unexceptional in appearance, though Zorian could feel a complex spell formula embedded in it when his fingers touched the surface. He would have to take one of these things apart someday to see what that was about. "You can apply to any job you want with that, not just unofficial ones like the ones on the job board. Nice work, by the way. It's been a while since someone went through the town and helped out the townsfolk like that."

"I didn't really do it out of charity," Zorian grumbled.

"Oh, I know," the man said. "But there are a lot of mages who would consider such petty jobs to be beneath them and refuse to do them out of principle."

"A lot of them look like something the civilians could do on their own," Zorian admitted. "And no offense, but why don't you help if it's something that so desperately needs doing? I kind of doubt the guild would place a non-mage as their representative for the area."

"Ha!" the man laughed, not at all insulted by the accusation. "I do in fact help... when I find the time. This position is a lot busier than it appears, trust me on that. And while those jobs are admittedly not very desperate, most of them would take great efforts and a lot of time to accomplish without magic, whereas even a baby mage like yourself can solve them in less than an hour with a handful of spells. So yeah, maybe you didn't save the world in the past few days or whatever, but the people you helped are certainly glad you made their lives a little easier. The townsfolk saved some time, you got some easy cash to spend, and I got rid of some of my more annoying obligations. Everyone's a winner, no?"

"Hmm," said Zorian noncommittally.

"So... do you have a specific job already waiting for you or are you in search of one?" the man asked.

"Nothing specific," Zorian said. "I was going to wander around for a while and see what catches my eye."

"Ah, I see. Well, I can recommend a few neighboring sites if you're interested in checking them out."

"Sure," shrugged Zorian. "It can't hurt to check things out, I guess."

"Alternatively, if you're looking for a better paying version of the sort of one-off jobs you've been doing for the past few days, I recommend you go north, towards the Sarokian Highlands. Always plenty of work at the frontier, whether it's in infrastructure building or hunting monsters and whatnot. Much more dangerous than hunting overgrown rats, of course, but also a lot more profitable."

"An interesting idea," Zorian said. The only problem was that Cyoria was the main springboard for the expansion efforts into the Highlands. From what Zorian could figure out from the maps, it was very hard to bypass Cyoria when going that far north, and he didn't want to be anywhere near the city for the foreseeable

future. "You know, I can't help but notice that the mage guild is pushing the settlement of the Sarokian Highlands pretty aggressively. What's up with that?"

"Ah, well, it's the whole thing with the Splintering, you see? Successor States are always looking to one-up each other and searching for advantages that could let them overcome their enemies. Eldemar has a nice big access to untamed wilderness to the north, so it would be a bit silly not to take advantage of it. It's a place rich in natural resources, I hear, both magical and mundane."

Zorian spent an hour with the man, discussing the region and his options. He didn't really want to settle down in any place in this particular restart, but he supposed he might want to try out some of the options presented by the man in the future, and in that case it might be convenient to have visited the location already and thus be capable of teleporting there directly.

So for the next two weeks, Zorian walked around the region, visiting various workshops, libraries, alchemists, herbalists and so on. Or just plain sight-seeing and doing odd jobs for the villagers and townsfolk he encountered along the way. He did not stop his magical training, but in the absence of any sort of clear goal or a convenient repository of spells like the academy library had been, he defaulted to the most basic of advancement methods – shaping exercises. It helped that most of the rural mages he met on his journey had some private shaping exercise they were willing to show him... and unlike Xvim, who simply told him the end result he wanted and refused to elaborate, they actually had detailed instructions about what to do and in what order.

By the end of the time loop, Zorian had learned how to peel the surface of a marble away, layer by layer; how to do the same to an apple and other fruit; how to cut paper by dragging his finger along the cutting line; how to induce a gentle ripple in a pool of water

without touching it; how to levitate a blob of water and shape it into a perfect sphere; then freeze that sphere; and finally, how to telekinetically draw geometric shapes in the dust. None of those were really mastered in the Xvim sense of the word, but luckily Xvim wasn't anywhere near him this time so he could simply move on to the next exercise when he felt he had absorbed it to his liking. Shaping exercises were a lot less annoying when he didn't have to keep doing them until they could be done flawlessly, he found.

He also continued practicing his mind powers. They were extremely important, he felt – if it weren't for them, he would have never survived his altercation with Red Robe intact. At some point he planned to seek out other aranean colonies and execute his 'exploit the time loop to slowly leech aranean magic from them' plan, but right now he couldn't do it. It was too soon, his memories of aranea and their demise (and the role his obliviousness and carelessness played in it) too fresh in his mind. So instead he simply used his empathy on every person he spoke to and practiced connecting to the minds of various animals. He particularly liked walking near streams and ponds and taking control of the dragonflies flitting about in order to make them perform dizzying acrobatics around him. Insects had such rudimentary minds that taking total control over them was exceedingly easy, though figuring out how to puppeteer them effectively took some doing and he still couldn't keep control over more than 3 dragonflies at the same time.

Time passed. For the most part he managed to keep himself busy enough that he didn't have enough time to be depressed, but all his worries and feelings of powerlessness returned in full force every evening as he prepared himself for sleep. Every plan he tried to make seemed hollow, doomed to failure. He wasn't powerful enough. He didn't know enough. Red Robe had years and years of experience over him, and that was *never* going to change.

As the end of the restart approached, his mood only turned

darker. He had avoided another confrontation in this restart, but what about the next? Would he wake up next time to eerie silence, only to find out that Red Robe got to his family after he had left and left them lifeless, soulless husks for him to find?

On the last night of the restart, Zorian didn't sleep at all, simply watching the night sky from a small, isolated hill he had found in his travels, idly using his mind powers to deflect mosquitos away from him as he stood consumed in his own thoughts.



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

"Good mor- Hey!" Kirielle yelled as Zorian enveloped her into a strong hug. "What the hell, Zorian!? Let me go, you brute!"

"Still the same Kirielle as ever," Zorian sighed dramatically, a weak smile on his face. "Now get off of me before I hug you some more."

His family was alright and, just like in the previous restart, Red Robe was nowhere to be seen. Thus, a much happier Zorian once again boarded the train and disembarked at Nigelvar. He didn't bother picking up his badge this time, though – it really was very expensive, and no one had actually asked to see it anyway. Instead he simply teleported himself to the last place he'd been at in the previous restart and continued his wanderings.

Being a mage out there in the periphery was a lot different than being a mage in Cyoria, Zorian mused. Without the massive quantities of ambient mana gushing out of the Hole, conserving mana was actually a noticeable issue – even shaping exercises tended to deplete his reserves after a couple of hours, whereas back in Cyoria

his main limitation had been his patience and existing obligations eating into his free time. That was another reason why Zorian focused on shaping exercises in preference to any actual spellcasting while traveling.

He was also starting to miss the academy library. He had thought its reputation was way overblown for a while now, but now that he could no longer hit its vast shelves every time he ran into some issue he realized just how damn convenient it really was. It had a lot of holes where really exotic topics were concerned, but its selection of basic spells and books on common topics was second to none. Out here in the periphery, finding a spellbook that had the exact spell you needed was damn hard. They existed, but they had only the most basic of things and if you wanted anything exotic you were directed to some other settlement or private collection or what not.

He also found out that magic detection spells were a lot more useful than he had first realized. Outside of Cyoria, magical items and creatures actually stood out when exposed to such scrutiny. Back in Cyoria, most general magic detection spells just returned false positives all the time – you had to narrow your divination criteria down to something specific to get results.

All in all, he was starting to understand why mages tended to flock towards Cyoria and other cities situated on top of mana wells. Those kinds of places provided a whole lot of resources that were hard to acquire elsewhere in one convenient location.

But Zorian's journey continued. He was determined to visit every large city in the country, if nothing else then so he could teleport to any of them as he pleased, and he was seriously considering a journey around the continent as well. The only thing stopping him was that international travel was bound to be a hassle, and he was doing all this traveling to relax, not argue with border officials about authorization.

When another restart passed and Red Robe still failed to show up, Zorian finally allowed himself to more fully relax. It had been three restarts, and Red Robe still hadn't tracked Zorian down – he was pretty sure that meant he never would, then. Not a master detective then, that was good to know. Buoyed by the knowledge that he dodged the bullet this time, Zorian seriously considered what to do next.

He needed to contact Zach, but it wasn't a priority. Zach likely didn't have any crucial information that would help Zorian figure out how the time loop functioned, and Zorian didn't know how to find the other time traveler anyway. They were bound to meet again at some point, and Zorian wasn't going to play dumb again when they finally encountered one another, but he saw no need to waste his time on looking for a boy who probably didn't want to be found right now. It wasn't like he didn't have anything to do in the meantime. He absolutely needed to master a number of skills before he considered going back to Cyoria and looking for Zach: he needed to find out more about soul magic, he needed to hone his mind magic into a proper tool and weapon like the aranea had done, and he needed to raise his combat skills to a level where he could meaningfully counter Red Robe in open combat.

The first priority was pretty obvious: he needed to know how to at least counter soul magic if he wasn't going to get blindsided again when dealing with Red Robe. Preferably he also wanted to figure out what Red Robe really did to the aranea and – if possible – reverse it. He still had Kael's list of people who could help him in that regard, and all of them were conveniently outside of Cyoria.

The second was just as crucial. Whatever knowledge about the time loop the matriarch gained behind his back, she almost certainly did it by ripping it out of someone's mind. Someone who wasn't Red Robe – probably a handful of normal people not aware of the time loop but still holding a small part of the puzzle. If he

could identify these key people and read their minds he could find out what the big secret was. In other words, he *needed* to develop his mind magic, ethics be damned. He didn't think he could do this on his own, so he would have to seek out other aranea webs for this.

Lastly, he was embarrassingly powerless against Red Robe in their last encounter, and if the other mage hadn't made some big mistakes when handling him he would have lost utterly. He needed better traps and ambush tactics, better combat skills in order to not be utterly doomed when said ambushes fail, and better movement magic to retreat and escape when said combat skills prove insufficient. As far as he could tell, the only effective way to improve here was simple practice – in other words, going around and looking for trouble. The only problem with this was that this went against pretty much every instinct he had.

It would have to be done, though. He figured that delving into the Dungeon and taking a few restarts to visit the untamed wilderness to the north should do for a start, and he would figure out later where to go from there.

In line with those goals, he decided that his third post-aranea restart was going to be a bit more systematic than his previous wanderings. After marking down the locations of Kael's associates on a map, he chose a medium-sized town called Knyazov Dveri as his next destination. The town was close to the northern wilderness and had a notable dungeon access, so there should be plenty of opportunities to practice his combat skills; it was situated on top of a Rank 2 mana well, which was fairly anemic as far as mana wells went but was nonetheless better than nothing; and finally, it was roughly in the center of a diffuse cloud of Kael's associates scattered throughout the region, so he would have easy access to the rest of them should the one in the city prove to be a dead end. It was, as far as Zorian could tell, an ideal place to start at.

The next day he teleported to the nearest town he could reach with his teleport spell and set off towards his target.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

CAULDRON

'Life takes you to all sorts of unexpected places,' Zorian mused, once again taking the knife to the winter wolf's corpse. 'If someone had told me, back in my first year at the academy, that I would need to know what the best way to skin a winter wolf was, I would not have believed them.'

Then again, he technically didn't need to skin the animal – he just felt it would be a horrid waste not to, since winter wolf pelts fetched a pretty high price back in Knyazov Dveri. If he was going to venture into the wilderness, looking for monsters and dangerous animals to fight, he might as well earn some money doing it.

Finally, the bloody work was done. He was sure a real hunter could have done it in a quarter of the time and hassle, but he didn't care – a success was a success. He placed the pelt in his bag and went off in the direction of the stream he had encountered earlier, intent on washing the blood and grime off his hands and clothes. At some point he intended to use spells to do these sorts of things, but since harvesting spells were based on animation they were sort of useless to him right now. Animation spells worked by embedding a portion of the caster's mind into the spell, so until Zorian knew how to properly skin an animal the old-fashioned way, he couldn't hand it off to an animation spell.

As he walked towards the stream, he kept an eye out for the reason he was in this particular section of the forest in the first place – a small cottage of an old witch called 'Silverlake', who was one of the possible sources Kael had named in his list. So far, Kael's prediction that he wouldn't be able to find the place on his own and that he would have to loiter around the area until she approached him herself had been entirely correct – no divination could track the cottage down, and he hadn't stumbled onto it by simply wandering around the place. If he didn't have Kael's assurance that someone lived here he would have given up long ago. The only reason he even managed to pin point the area as well as he had was because the old witch had a habit of harvesting all of the alchemically-useful plants and mushrooms in the area and Kael warned him to be on the lookout for suspiciously picked-clean areas like this one.

With a sigh, he plunged his hands into the stream. The recent rains had caused it to swell into a small muddy river, but the water was good enough for washing his hands in and cooling off. That done, he crouched next to the water and idly studied his reflection. He looked like a mess. He *felt* like a mess too. While he wasn't entirely out of shape, and this wasn't the first time he ventured into a forest, there was a difference between taking a two-hour stroll through the semi-tame forest near his town and spending most of the week in the great northern wilderness, hunting winter wolves and dodging snakes and other dangerous wildlife. Thank the gods he had the foresight to put that anti-vermin ward on himself or else he would have been covered in ticks and leeches by the end of day one... and that was assuming the mosquitos hadn't driven him mad before that.

And the worst thing about it all? He would never get used to it, because any muscle growth and body adaptation would be wiped out when this restart ended. He made a note to himself to look into the possibility of getting enhancement potions or rituals to

improve strength and stamina, because spending the first week of every restart with every inch of his body tense and hurting wasn't a fun prospect at all. Or at least a potion to ease the- wait, was the bottom of the stream *moving*?

He managed to throw himself back just in time to avoid the huge brown shape that jumped out of the muddy water and tried to envelop his head with its massive jaws. He quickly backpedaled as the huge lizard-like creature tried to haul itself onto the shore and sent a small missile swarm consisting of three piercers straight at its head. Thankfully, the lizard thing was actually pretty slow, its surprise attack notwithstanding, so all three missiles found their mark. The creature's skull promptly exploded from the impact, showering bits of tissue everywhere, and it immediately slumped dead where it stood, its lower half still submerged in the stream.

Zorian immediately turned on his mind sense and scanned the creek for the possible presence of more such monsters and then, having discovered none, slowly approached the corpse to inspect it.

It was a salamander. A huge brown salamander with a massive triangular head and beady black eyes that probably couldn't actually see anything. It was a miracle that something that big could actually hide in a stream this shallow, but the muddy water provided it with just what it needed to surprise him. Damn, that would have been humiliating – killed less than a week in by a giant salamander. Then again, he nearly fell into a ravine on his first day here, and there was that assassin vine that tried to choke him yesterday...

"Is there anything here in this forest that isn't going to try and kill me the moment I take my eyes off of it?" Zorian asked out loud.

He didn't expect anyone to answer, since he was alone and all, but he did receive an answer. Sort of.

"What do you think you're doing, feeling all sorry for yourself?" a harsh female voice answered him.

There was no one present as far as Zorian could see, and his mind sense detected only animals, but he still managed to detect fairly quickly where the voice was coming from – the source of the speech was the raven perched on a nearby branch.

"Well don't just stand there and stare at my familiar, boy," the voice said, cutting in through the silence. "Quickly, haul it out of the creek before the stream washes it away! Do you have any idea how valuable giant salamanders of that size are? This is the find of a century!"

Zorian was tempted to point out that this 'find of a century' nearly killed him, but decided not to. If this was who he suspected, he needed to stay on her good side. According to Kael, asking the old witch for help was a bit of a long shot, but likely to achieve very good results if he could convince her to seriously try and help him. Silverlake was very powerful and skilled, but also very annoying to deal with. She wouldn't kill him or do anything overtly hostile to him without provocation, but she was capricious and prone to wasting people's time. Zorian figured it was at least worth a try to approach her for help.

"You would be Miss Silverlake, I presume?" guessed Zorian.

The raven answered him with a burst of laughter. It was really strange to see a bird laugh like that.

"Miss, am I? Well aren't you a polite one... don't get too many of those, these days. Why, maybe I'll even listen to whatever silly request you came here for!" the bird finally said. "Now why are you just standing around? Didn't I give you a task to accomplish?"

With a sigh, Zorian turned away from the bird and started casting a levitation spell to haul the giant amphibian out of the water.



Silverlake (no last name, and he shouldn't ask about how she ended up without one – Kael was very firm on that part) was not

like Zorian had expected her. She was old, yes, but for a woman of 90 years she was incredibly lively and spry. In fact, Zorian had a feeling she had an easier time moving through the forest than he did. She wasn't particularly unkempt, either, despite living in the middle of the wilderness – her pitch-black hair was devoid of a single white strand (she probably dyed it regularly), and the simple brown dress she was wearing was unremarkable but immaculate. If it weren't for the wrinkles, he would have pegged her as less than half her age. Was this a consequence of some sort of potion regimen or was she just lucky that way?

Well, no matter. Zorian followed her back to her cottage, the giant salamander floating behind him on a disc of force, where she promptly started to butcher the beast with practiced ease. Her hands didn't tremble at all as she handled the various knives and heavy jars at her place, and Zorian became even more certain she put herself through some kind of enhancement regimen to ward off the effect of aging.

She *was* a potion master according to Kael, and alchemy had always been one of the best ways to prolong your life and keep yourself healthy.

"Don't think I didn't notice you faffing around the area for the past few days," she suddenly said, never taking her eyes off the salamander corpse. "Rather annoying, that. Also worrying. Means that someone told you where to find me. I don't suppose you could shed some light on that, could you?"

"Kael told me where to find you," Zorian readily admitted. It wasn't a secret, really.

"Kael?" she asked, before frowning. "No, wait, don't tell me. I'm sure I heard that name som- oh! Now I remember – he's the little rascal that knocked up Fria's granddaughter! But I heard he ended up marrying her afterwards, so I guess that's not so bad. Actually, I recall that Fria had been quite happy about that. She had

been afraid the girl would never find herself a husband."

"Why?" asked Zorian curiously. Silverlake shot him a judging look, her brown eyes boring into his own, before returning to her work. "I mean, if it isn't impertinent to ask. You don't have to."

"Relax, boy," Silverlake snorted derisively. "I am a lot of things, but I was never very tactful. If I'm bothered by something you say, I will tell you. If you ask something impertinent, I will tell you to go screw yourself. I'm just thinking. Let's see... as you probably suspect by now, Fria, Kael's mother-in-law, is a witch like me. There are some nasty rumors circulating about witches and their daughters – about how they sacrifice male children, have orgies with summoned demons, poison their husbands for inheritance, how they're too lazy to work around the house and other ridiculous bilge. It makes a lot of men reluctant to marry the daughter of a witch."

"I see," said Zorian. He had never heard about that particular issue, but it sounded plausible enough – witches had a really bad reputation for dabbling in various unethical and forbidden magics.

"It's been years since I last seen Kael and his wife," Silverlake said. "Or Fria, for that matter. I guess I should have been a little less harsh the last time they visited, but... well, what's done is done. It's strange the morlock saw fit to send you here when he himself dares not show his face to me."

Zorian frowned. "I... think you're misinterpreting the situation somewhat. I don't know what happened between you and them, but the reason they haven't visited you is because they're dead. Fria and Kael's wife both contracted the Weeping and died. As for Kael, he had been too busy grieving and taking care of his daughter to go on a trip like this. You *are* rather isolated."

For the first time since he met her, Silverlake seemed taken aback by his answer.

"Dead? Fria is... and all this time I thought..." she mumbled,

before halting and giving him a considering look. "Wait. You said Kael *and his daughter*. I see... hmm..."

Silverlake spent the next few minutes considering something. Zorian took the time to observe and study the cottage next to them. It looked rather flimsy and old, but it shone like a lighthouse to his senses when he discreetly cast a magic detection spell on it. How the hell hadn't he noticed the thing earlier when he was searching for it? Those must be some powerful divination wards she placed on it. He couldn't figure out how she was powering them, though – wards that strong needed a powerful source of magic, and this place wasn't a mana well. There was no way Silverlake could be powerful enough to provide enough mana for the entire edifice, could she? Kael did mention that she was extremely strong and skilled in magic of both Ikosian and witch origin, and that he should never underestimate her, but this was still beyond what he was expecting.

Aside from the impossibly complex and powerful warding scheme, though, the cottage looked unremarkable. There were several racks next to it where various herbs and mushrooms were drying in the sun, but it wasn't unknown for hunters and lumberjacks to have a side business of gathering herbs to sell in the nearby city so hardly something that would raise warning flags all by itself.

Silverlake snapped her fingers in front of his face, spraying droplets of salamander blood and other bodily fluids all over his glasses and breaking him out of his inspection. Despite his resolve to be polite to her, Zorian couldn't help but glare at her in response. She just grinned at him, showing him two rows of gleaming white teeth. Apparently in all of her 90 years of life she hadn't lost a single tooth.

Yes, definitely magic.

"If you're done gawking at my home, we can continue our dis-

cussion," she said. "I have a request for you. You have a way to get in contact with Kael, yes?"

"Of course," said Zorian. "We're friends, he and I." Or they would be, once he returned to Cyoria in one of the future restarts.

"Then I would like you to deliver a message to him," she said. "It's nothing urgent, but I want him to know... that I regret how our last meeting ended and that I would very much like it if he came to visit me with his daughter sometime in the future. Oh, and that I want to teach his daughter the secrets of my magic. She is a descendant of a proud line of witches stretching back to time immemorial, and it is her birthright to continue it... should she want to. Got all that?"

"Sounds simple enough to remember," Zorian said. "And... could I now trouble you with the reason I came here for?"

"No," she snorted. "What, you think that just because you know a couple of people close to me and agreed to help me with a simple request like this that I'll jump into whatever crazy problem you need help with?"

"You don't even know why I'm here," Zorian pointed out.

"Nobody ever comes to me for help with the little things," she said with a grin. "If Kael sent you to me, that means he's truly stumped for a solution."

"I... suppose I can't argue with that," Zorian admitted. "You see, I-"

"I don't want to hear it," Silverlake said, pointing her bloody palm towards him to shut him up. "Until you make it worth my time, I don't want to listen to your sob story. If you want my help, you're going to have to earn it."

"How do I even know you can help me at all, then?" asked Zorian. "I could end up paying you for nothing in the end."

"You could," Silverlake grinned. "You will have to risk it."

Damn witch. She was probably just wasting his time, but...

"Fine," he sighed. "What do you want from me?"
If anything, her grin just got wider.



Space blurred around Zorian, and then he was back in Knyazov Dveri, in one of the less traversed streets where he was fairly sure no one would see him teleporting in and out. It wouldn't be a huge problem if it got out that he could teleport, but at the same time it would be notable and would attract attention to him. Few mages would be willing to teach the spell to a 15-year-old, and even fewer 15 year olds would be capable of learning it. It would be best if he were discreet about it for now.

Seeing how his arrival appeared to have gone unnoticed, he promptly exited the street and went towards the town square to grab something to eat, only to get distracted by the newspaper boy's shouting.

"Shocking news!" the boy yelled. "A Cyoria mercenary company found dead to a man in their homes! Monsters stalk the streets of the city! Coincidence or conspiracy, read all about it in today's edition! Shocking news, shocking news!"

Well... that sounded interesting. Zorian wordlessly shifted his course towards the boy and bought the newspaper in question. He then found a quiet corner to lean on and started to read.

Like he suspected, the mercenary company that was found dead was the one he and the aranea hired to participate in the ambush – there was a picture of the man who led the group next to the article and Zorian would recognize the man anywhere thanks to the distinctive scar he had above his right eye. Apparently they were all found dead at the start of the restart, with little clue as to who killed them and why. Naturally, that immediately produced a lot of interest from anyone, since it clearly wasn't natural. The

obvious conclusion – that someone managed to off an entire group of experienced battlemages in the span of a single night, not all of which were asleep at the time of death and some of whom were under heavy wards – was highly disturbing, but there were very few alternatives.

Another complication was that immediately after that discovery, there had been a stream of incidents involving various monsters moving out of the Dungeon and into the sewers... and sometimes then even emerging into the streets of the city. The experts were baffled as to why this was happening now, and the city leadership was hastily organizing an operation to descend into the Dungeon in order to bring the situation under control before the summer festival.

Well, that certainly put a damper on the invader's plans. Zorian wondered how they would deal with *that*. In retrospect, it wasn't hard to explain why monsters were invading the sewers and the streets of the city – the invaders were putting pressure on them from below, so they went upwards as a response. In the past restarts, the aranea were there to act as an unwilling anvil to the invaders' hammer, preventing the inhabitants of the Dungeon from breaking into the upper levels. But the aranea were dead now, and with them gone a whole layer of Cyoria's defense that most people hadn't even known about had collapsed.

Zorian couldn't suppress a nasty grin at the thought that maybe Red Robe ended up shooting himself in the foot when he enacted his 'soul killing' tantrum.

Interestingly, the mysterious murders and the monster attacks seemed to have had an effect on the academy too. There was a short sub-article next to the main one about the families who withdrew their children from schools in Cyoria, including his own academy. Jade, one of his classmates, had been pulled by her parents from the academy. She was listed among the names of

notable students who opted to leave the city for their own safety – her father was a high-ranking member of House Witelsin – while the other notable names included... him?

Yes, there was no mistaking it – 'Zorian Kazinski, younger brother of Daimen Kazinski', was listed in the article as one of the students pulled from school by his parents. He wondered what that was based on – he was certain no one had managed to contact his parents before they left for Koth, so either the academy or the newspaper had decided to interpret his absence in light of current events and trends.

Zorian shook his head and closed the newspaper before continuing on his way.



After spending a week in Knyazov Dveri, Zorian had decided he kind of liked the town. It was a busy, lively pace where the arrival of a newly-minted mage like him was unremarkable and raised no eyebrows, yet not so large and prosperous that people like him were common and underappreciated. Thanks to the town's position as a regional center and the presence of both a notable mana well and a dungeon access attractive to dungeon delvers, the town was full of shops catering to mages or requiring mage employees, and thus offered plenty of employment opportunities for a young mage... enough so that people sometimes offered him employment without him even asking about it.

He didn't accept any offers, since a regular job would eat up a lot of time and would just distract him from his real quest, but it was something to keep in mind if he ever got out of the time loop.

"Why hello there. Mind if I join you for a bit?"

Zorian peered up from the map of the surrounding region he was studying and took a good look at the man who interrupted

him. He was middle-aged, had a prominent mustache and a pot belly, and had a wide smile plastered on his face. Despite the fact that Zorian took several seconds to study him in silence, the man's smile never faltered. Judging by the clothes he was wearing, he seemed to be one of the more well-off residents – a small time merchant, perhaps, or one of the craftsman-mages that had stores in the town.

He was probably going to get another job offer, then.

"Sure," Zorian said, gesturing towards the empty chair on the other end of the table. "Help yourself."

He thought for a moment whether he should get rid of the map while he talked to the man, but then decided not to bother. There was nothing incriminating on it anyway – a couple of marked down locations that would mean nothing to the man without some kind of context and some equally unhelpful notes scribbled on the margins. Silverlake had given him a task of gathering rare magical plants all over the damn forest, but gave him only the vaguest clues about where they could be found, so he was reduced to deciphering her statements and consulting the local herbalists for more information. And the local herbalists weren't terribly cooperative. He had a feeling this was only the start of her demands, so he was trying to finish it quickly.

"Don't mind if I do, don't mind if I do," the man said happily, plopping down onto the offered spot. "These old bones just aren't what they once were, I'm afraid. Standing around does terrible things to my knees. I guess the years caught up to me, eh?"

"The pot belly probably doesn't help," Zorian thought inside his head, though outwardly he remained silent, waiting for the man to tell him what he wanted of him.

"I have to say, this looks like a nice place to relax in," the man said, idly looking at the sheet of paper that listed the prices of some of the meals and beverages. "A little pricy, but quiet and out of the

way. Private. Anyway, you don't mind if I order us a drink, do you?"

"I don't drink alcohol," said Zorian with a shake of his head. And he didn't trust any of the non-alcoholic beverages in a place like this, either – it wasn't that upscale of an establishment, regardless of what the man said. "I'm going to have to decline."

"Now that's just unfair," the man said. "Oh well, I guess I'll have to drink alone then. Forgive the impoliteness but I'm rather parched and it just feels wrong, having a conversation in a tavern without a mug of beer to sip on occasionally."

A few minutes later, the man took a swig from his mug and got to the point.

"Ah, that hits the spot," he said. "With that out of the way, allow me to introduce myself: I am Gurey Cwili, of Cwili and Rofoltin Equipment. Though I'm sad to say old Rofoltin passed away two years ago, so I'm the only owner now. I kept the name as it is, though. Tradition."

Zorian resisted the urge to tell him to get on with it.

"Anyway, I see you're a busy man so I'll get straight to the point – I've heard you've been going out into the forest to gather alchemical ingredients and hunting winter wolves. And also that you've been selling magic items on the side, too."

"Yes, what of it?" asked Zorian. Nothing he did was in any way illegal. The winter wolves had sizeable bounties for every pelt brought to the nearest guild station for the express purpose of encouraging people to hunt them, as they tended to prey on the livestock, children, and lone travelers, and selling magic items and alchemical ingredients was hardly a crime. Some places had arcane restrictions about what could and could not be sold and by whom, but those were usually the consequence of regional monopolies granted to someone and Knyazov Dveri was under no one's monopoly. He'd checked. "I'm a certified mage, if that's what's

bothering you.”

He even had a badge to prove it. It was pricy, but he interacted too often with mages in the town to risk getting caught doing business without a license. Especially since he had gotten an impression that a couple of shop owners resented the competition he represented and would love to report him to the guild if they could find an excuse.

”To put it bluntly, I want you to sell your alchemical ingredients and magic items to me instead of my competitors,” the man said. ”Don’t think this is some kind of threat or blackmail, though – I’m willing to pay you extra for the privilege.”

Zorian blinked. He didn’t expect *that*.

An hour later, the man had hashed out some sort of agreement with Zorian. The extra money didn’t mean all that much to Zorian, but the man did have something he wanted – a fully-equipped alchemical workshop that he wasn’t using all the time. In exchange for the right to use said workshop from time to time and the right to consult the man’s private library for botanical books, Zorian agreed to offer all his products to the man before he did to anyone else. The man seemed pretty pleased with himself at having closed such a deal. Honestly, so was Zorian – the local library had a miserable selection of books on plants and herbs, but Gurey claimed his own private library was not nearly so limited. Having access to a proper alchemical workshop was also convenient, and not something he could easily get elsewhere, unless he was willing to teleport to Korsa every time he wanted to make something. And he really didn’t have that much mana to burn.

”How come there is such a demand for potions and magic items here, anyway?” asked Zorian. ”This city seems a little too small for the amount of magic shops. I understand the workshops since they can always export their products elsewhere, but how do shops like yours achieve such volume on the local market?”

"Oh, that's easy," Gurey said. "Travelers. Or more accurately, settlers and adventurers. You see, this city is one of the last stops for settlers going further north as part of the 'Great Northern Push', as the government likes to call it. As one of the last centers of 'real civilization' on their journey, we get a lot of demand for critical supplies of all sorts."

"Great Northern Push?" asked Zorian.

"Not a regular reader of the newspapers, I take it? It's the whole thing with colonizing the Sarokian Highlands that the government has been pushing so hard lately. You must have noticed the posters around advertising free land and tax exemptions and what not. It's part of Eldemar's current strategy for achieving supremacy over Sulamnon and Falkrinea. The idea is that by taming the northern wilderness the country will get a major population and resource boost. All countries that have a border with the wilderness do this to a greater or lesser degree, but Eldemar has really invested a lot into this endeavor. Not sure whether it will be really worth it in the end, but I sure don't mind the traffic it gives me!"

Hmm, now that he thought about it, there were traces of that even back at the academy – it was nothing horribly blatant, but textbooks and class assignments often worked in mentions of the Sarokian Highlands far more than one would expect, considering their low population and current importance.

In any case, the man soon left and Zorian returned to staring at his map. Goddamn witch.



"I don't suppose that now that I have brought you the plants you asked for-"

"Don't be silly, boy," Silverlake said, snatching the bundle of plants from his hands. "You don't really think a silly little fetch

quest like this is all it takes to get my help? Think of this as an... elimination round. You were horribly slow, anyway."

"Slow..." Zorian repeated incredulously. "It took me only 3 days. The only reason I could get them all so quickly at all was that I could teleport from place to place. Not to mention the danger involved – you never even told me those 'redbell mushrooms' of yours exploded into clouds of paralyzing dust if handled improperly."

"Well that's just common knowledge," she said, waving her hand dismissively. "Everyone knows *that*. Here, grind these snail shells for me, please."

Zorian looked at the small leather bag full of colorful red-and-blue snail shells and frowned. He knew that species of snail. They were used in production of certain drugs, and were very much illegal to harvest. More important than that, their ground up shells were a powerful hallucinogen and inhaling even a handful of dust would leave him delirious and incapacitated. He threw the annoying old woman a brief glare before simply casting a 'dust shield' spell on himself – the same one he used to protect himself against the paralyzing mushrooms – before grabbing a mortar and pestle and getting down to work.

After he was done with that, the old witch promptly handed him the very bundle of plants he had spent three days gathering, rattled off a series of brief instructions and pointed him towards an old cauldron leaning on the wall of her cottage. Wonderful – apparently he was going to be making a potion the old way. He *had* been tutored by another witch as a child, so he wasn't totally lost here, but the potion she wanted him to make now was unfamiliar to him. Not to mention that there was a reason why traditional potion making was considered obsolete compared to modern alchemy – it was harder, less safe, and usually gave worse results to boot.

Hopefully the potion she was having him make wasn't the sort to explode in his face or poison him with fumes if he didn't get it right. Oh, who was he kidding, *of course* it was. Frankly, if it weren't for the time loop and the resulting immunity to simple death, he would be leaving at this point.

As he suspected, he botched that potion. Thankfully, every time he was about to make a particularly disastrous misstep, Silverlake stopped him. He just wished she found a better way to warn him he was about to make a mistake than hitting him with a willow branch. She could have poked his eye out with that thing!

He never thought he would say this, but he was starting to miss Xvim and his marbles. His old mentor was a saint compared to this crazy old woman.

"Well that's no good," said Silverlake, peering into the cauldron and idly stirring the foul-smelling purple gunk that Zorian ended up producing (it was supposed to be a viscous, sweet-smelling, totally transparent liquid). She gave him a bright smile. "I guess you'll have to go gather a whole new batch of ingredients before you can try again, won't you?"

Zorian stared blankly at the grinning woman, feeling her anticipation through his empathy. She fully expected him to explode at this and was looking forward to it! Sadistic bitch. Unfortunately for her, she was about to get disappointed. He wordlessly reached into his backpack and withdrew a fresh bundle of ingredients.

Her smile never faltered, but Zorian could *feel* her disappointment regardless. It made him smile inside, though he maintained his poker face.

"You gathered extra, huh?" she asked rhetorically.

"I have plenty of experience with abrasive teachers," Zorian said simply. "I have another bundle besides this one, too."

"Good. You'll need it," Silverlake said, knocking on the rim of the cauldron. "This was terrible. I don't think two attempts will

be enough. Hell, I'm skeptical you can get it in three! Go empty this crap you've made in the neutralization pit over there and start over."

Zorian sighed and levitated the cauldron onto a disc of force before marching off into the direction of the neutralization pit. It was really just an open pit that had been lined with stones and painted over with alchemical resin so that alchemical compounds poured into it didn't seep into the ground or nearby water supply. His alchemy teacher back at the academy would have been horrified at the mishandling of alchemical waste, but if the great Silverlake thinks an open pit is sufficient for disposal of alchemical sludge then who was Zorian to disagree?

That done, he placed the cauldron back over by the fireplace and started over. Silverlake was probably right that he wouldn't get it right in the next two times either, though – the potion clearly required fairly delicate temperature management, but that was a very hard variable to control when using wood burning and a regular fireplace. An old witch with lots of experience like Silverlake probably knew by instinct how to control the fire, but Zorian didn't have the faintest idea of how to do it.

That was generally the main problem of 'traditional alchemy', as it was sometimes called. It relied heavily on the ability of the practitioner to adjust their methods on the fly to produce a usable product. Unlike modern alchemy, which relied on standardized equipment and exact measurements, traditional alchemy was all about eyeballing it and improvisation. Expressions like 'a handful of leaves', 'a slow fire' and 'a moderate amount of time' were extremely common in traditional alchemical recipes. Zorian knew because he once broke into his grandmother's recipe cabinet to see if he could learn something from them. 'A pinch of salt' apparently meant very different things to him and his grandmother, if the results of his secret potion attempts were any indication.

A further problem for him was that he was only really proficient in producing potions one by one, and the cauldron method was designed for producing batches of potions. There were some very important differences between production methods for single potions and for batches, but hell if Zorian could remember what they were at the moment.

"Who taught you?" Silverlake asked suddenly.

"Huh?" Zorian mumbled. "What do you mean? You want to know my alchemy teacher?"

"I want to know your *potions* teacher," she corrected. "You're still pretty terrible, but you're not nearly as clueless around the cauldron as I thought you would be. Who taught you?"

"Err, that would be my grandmother, I guess," Zorian said.

"A witch or just a housewife that picked up a few recipes?" Silverlake asked.

"A witch," said Zorian. "Though not a particularly dedicated one, I think. She gave me some lessons when I was a kid, but it didn't last very long. My mother didn't really like her teaching me."

Actually, Zorian was pretty sure his mother didn't like his grandmother, period. Mother and daughter did not get along, in their case. Zorian always found it kind of hypocritical that mother spent so much time preaching to him about the value of family when she herself couldn't stand her own mother if her life depended on it.

"Huh. Interesting. Don't expect to get any fuzzy feelings out of me just because of that, though," Silverlake said.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Zorian said lightly.

"Good. You'll be happy to know I've decided on the price of my help for you."

"Oh?" said Zorian, suddenly perking up.

"Yes. You see, a little birdy told me you've been wandering around the forest, picking fights with the wildlife. So this should be something right up your alley. Tell me... have you heard of a something called 'the grey hunter'?

THE HUNTERS AND THE HUNTED

Considering the reputation the Great Northern Forest had among people living in more southern, civilized territories, one would expect the place to be a giant death trap, with every animal and a good portion of the plants trying to kill you at every turn. The truth, Zorian had found, was a little more complex. While yes, the forest was full of dangerous creatures – even the deer were kind of aggressive and had tried to gore him a couple of times instead of fleeing from his approach – it was entirely possible to spend an entire day without endangering your life if you knew what you were doing. Granted, Zorian had a somewhat unfair advantage in the form of his mind sense, which let him sense a lot of the dangers before they had the chance to detect him in turn. Furthermore, the region he was frequenting was a border area – thus a little friendlier to humans than the deep, untouched wilderness in the far north. Still, he was confident that even a skilled civilian could move through the forest unmolested, much less a mage. Hell, he was doing just fine at the moment, despite having less than a month of experience.

Usually, Zorian wouldn't have wanted to move through the forest undetected. The whole point of going here was to get combat experience, so avoiding danger was kind of missing the point.

This time, however, sneaking around was more or less mandatory. He really didn't want to get distracted around a threat on the level of a grey hunter, and he definitely didn't want to alert the monster that he was coming by engaging in a loud, flashy fight right next to its lair. He slowly circled the area around the grey hunter's lair, checking it for threats and hostile terrain that might inhibit him should he choose to retreat in any particular direction. In several places he carved clusters of explosive glyphs into the trees and exposed rocks – he doubted they were powerful enough to seriously hurt a grey hunter, but they might buy him a few seconds he needed to teleport away to safety.

He almost succeeded in reaching the lair without a fight. Thankfully the trio of fly-mosquito-whatever things that tried to ambush him were very easy to dispatch (they burned beautifully) and the fight didn't raise enough ruckus to attract the monstrous spider's attention. Zorian picked out a rather tall tree close (but not too close) to the grey hunter's lair and levitated himself to the upper branches, where he promptly took out the binoculars he enchanted earlier for the purpose and started studying his target.

The location was actually kind of picturesque – a small rocky gully surrounded by forest, with some pretty sediment lines criss-crossing the stone and a few strategically placed clumps of grass growing between the cracks. On one of the walls stood a perfectly circular hole that served as the entrance to the cave. It was pitch black and surprisingly unremarkable and unthreatening – if Silverlake hadn't told him it was there, it was entirely possible that Zorian would have missed it entirely if he had ever stumbled into the place in one of the restarts.

It would have been the last mistake he ever made, at least in that hypothetical restart – grey hunters were crazy good jumpers and possessed downright surreal speed. Zorian would bet anything that the one inside that cave could jump straight from the

cave entrance to the other side of the gully in a single leap and close in before Zorian could so much as realize what was happening.

The grey hunter was fundamentally a very simple monster. It was a grey, furry spider the size of an adult man... and it also happened to be incredibly fast, strong, durable and spell resistant. It could run faster than a hasted mage, jump incredible distances, shrug off regular firearms and lower-level attack spells like a duck shrugging off water, outright ignore most direct-effect spells and bite through steel. Oh, and it had a very nasty poison that, instead of destroying tissue or wrecking the nervous system like most poisons, utterly disrupted a mage's ability to shape and control their mana instead. Once bitten, you wouldn't be casting anything for a while, and it would take weeks for the poison to fully flush out of your system. Apparently it was a type of poison adapted specifically to bring down magical beings that were the grey hunter's typical prey, but it was just as effective against human mages. Basically, if you were fighting against a grey hunter alone and got bitten, you were done for.

These things were known for chewing through entire groups of battlemages sent specifically to get rid of them. Quite a feat for what is ostensibly an animal-level creature – most non-sapient monsters, no matter how impressive, were too easy to lure into traps to pose such a huge danger to a prepared hunting group. Naturally, Silverlake wanted him to tangle with said mage-killing super-spider as her price for her help. The good news was that she hadn't asked him to kill the thing, something that Zorian suspected might be beyond him at the moment. The bad news was that her request was only a smidgen easier than that. She wanted him to confront the female grey hunter who laired in the cave he was currently observing and steal some of her eggs.

The lifecycle of grey hunters was a total mystery, as they were considered too dangerous to study through anything other than

post-battle reports and vivisection, but Zorian was willing to bet that grey hunter mothers were fiercely protective of their spawn. Getting even a single egg was likely to be quite a challenge. In all likelihood, the mother would be reluctant to go far from her egg sack for any reason, so waiting for the chance to simply swipe some may be impractical, or even futile. For all he knew the female sat on her egg sack all day long and lived off her fat reserves until the young hatched.

Zorian placed the binoculars back into his bag and started jotting down notes in one of the notebooks he brought with him. The question of how to acquire the eggs without getting horribly murdered in the process was ultimately a question for another time – he was currently here just to scout out the situation and see if the task was even *possible*. As much as he wanted to prove the shriveled old witch wrong by completing her impossible quest, dying here would be incredibly stupid. He was on a time limit. A long time limit, but repeatedly dying because he decided to take on opponents way over his level would be an unforgivable waste. Every restart cut short was a restart he wasn't using to its full potential. If he couldn't think of a way to get the eggs that he was absolutely sure would work, he wouldn't do it. And even if he could think of a way, he would only try it out near the end of the restart, when the most he would lose was a couple of days.

"Alright," he mumbled, snapping the notebook shut. "Let's see what I'm dealing with."

The first thing he did was try to locate the grey hunter female to make sure she wasn't outside her lair at the moment. He had no way of tracking down grey hunters specifically through divination, as he had never seen one before and lacked any grey hunter body parts, but a simple locator spell searching for a 'giant spider' pointed him straight at the cave. Since the other two giant spider varieties that lived in the region – giant tree spider and giant trap-

door spider respectively – didn't live in caves, the conclusion was obvious. He then tried to scry the spider, which immediately failed. Well, the spell technically worked... but the cave was totally dark. There were no glowing crystals or ember moss that occasionally lit natural caverns – just an ordinary cave full of impenetrable darkness that hid everything.

Damn, he hadn't thought of that. Wracking his brains for a spell combination that would allow him to scout out the lair without having to go back into the city and hit the books, he decided to combine two different spells. First he cast the 'arcane eye' spell, creating a floating ectoplasmic eyeball through which he could see remotely. He then created a floating ball of light, functionally identical to the simple 'floating lantern' spell, except he altered the spell parameters so it would follow the ectoplasmic eye around instead of himself. He then sent the eye into the cave, closing his real eyes and connecting his sight to his remote sensor. There was a chance that the light would aggravate the grey hunter mother, but he doubted she would run out to confront him just for that, or that she could track him down on his tree for that matter.

As it happened, the grey hunter was either very, very bothered by his floating lantern or perhaps saw it as prey, because the eye had barely advanced into the cave, floating lantern in tow, when a grey blur slammed into it and Zorian's awareness was violently wrenched back into his body. Blinking in surprise at his sudden perspective shift, Zorian was then treated to the sight of the grey hunter leaping out of the cave and skittering around the area in search of something.

After 10 seconds or so of looking at the spider, Zorian noticed two things. First, the grey hunter female didn't have to sit on her egg sack all day long, *because she was freaking carrying it on the underside of her abdomen!* That was so freaking unfair. He withdrew everything he said about Silverlake's task being easier than killing

the thing – this was actually way harder, since he was only getting the eggs by taking them from the grey hunter's cooling corpse but had to be careful when killing her not to damage the (likely much frailer) egg sack.

The second thing he noticed was that the spider was steadily getting closer to his location.

It wasn't immediately noticeable. Rather than immediately making a beeline towards him, the spider shot off in a random direction for a second; stopped for a moment, as if reorienting herself; and then shot off in a seemingly random direction again. It repeated the same stop-and-skitter routine second after second, and though the movements seemed random at first, Zorian noted with dread that it was steadily getting closer to his tree as time passed.

So the murder-spider also had hypersensitive senses, now? This was such bullshit. How the hell had it noticed him anyway? He'd even taken the time to set up some camouflage spells and silencing wards around himself just to prevent stuff like this from happening. True, they were fairly weak, in order to conserve mana, but that shouldn't have-

He frowned. That was it, wasn't it? The grey hunter was tracking him through the wards. Its natural prey was said to be other magical creatures. It had a poison specifically designed to counter magic. It probably had some kind of innate magic sense that let it sense its prey over great distances. Rather than shielding him from the grey hunter, the wards he set up were revealing his location to it. The fact they were so weak was probably the only reason it hadn't divined his location instantly and was instead reduced to stumbling all over the place in an attempt to locate him.

If so, he was in trouble. He couldn't do *nothing*, as the monster would eventually sniff him out. On the other hand, the moment he tried to teleport away, his location would almost certainly be

completely blown.

10 seconds later, with the spider getting ever closer and no solution in sight, Zorian decided he would just have to work fast and pray for the best. Taking a deep breath to calm himself down, he started casting the teleport spell as fast as he could.

As he feared, the grey hunter reacted instantly. The moment the first word of the chant left his mouth, the spider surged towards him, abandoning its previous jerky, uncertain advance. As it sprinted towards him, it angled away from the explosive glyph cluster Zorian placed on one of the rocks in its path, somehow aware of its existence and function, and launched itself sideways into the air. It landed vertically on the trunk of a nearby tree and immediately launched itself sideways again, bouncing from tree to tree and gaining altitude with each jump, until at last it was both close and high enough to reach Zorian's location.

Zorian finished the teleport spell and was whisked away in the nick of time. The terrifying vision of a giant spider sailing through the air towards him, front legs extended and huge black fangs poised for a strike, would haunt his nightmares for days to come.



Following his almost-lethal encounter with the grey hunter, Zorian decided to put Silverlake's quest on indefinite hold. There were plenty of other people that Kael listed as possible help, after all, and maybe if he talked to her in some other restart and tried again she'd send him on a less suicidal quest.

It was very frustrating, though. The thought of how thoroughly he had been outclassed by what was fundamentally a dumb beast brought to mind the memory of that final restart in Cyoria when he clashed with Red Robe in the ruins of the aranean settlement. The fact that the grey hunter was a giant spider, just like the

aranae, further brought to mind uncomfortable parallels. Despite the fact that he knew intellectually that there was no shame in losing to a creature that even famous mages would balk at facing, and that he should in fact be happy to be even alive, he found himself very bothered at his ineffectiveness.

He spent the next day by tracking down giant trapdoor spiders, which were of similar size to grey hunters but brown-colored and a hell of a lot less dangerous, before smoking them out of their holes and then killing them in a variety of painful fashions. Their eyes and venom glands sold a lot better than winter wolf pelts, too. He should do that more often.

Still somewhat in a foul mood, he set out to see if any of Kael's other contacts were able and willing to help him. When he arrived in the village where his first candidate lived and was informed by the locals that the man hadn't been seen in the past two months, he was unconcerned. The man was a retired mage fascinated with familiars – he had six of them as well as a great number of more mundane pets, and was always looking to add another exotic creature to his menagerie. An absence of two months was a bit unusual, but not something to immediately raise an alarm about.

But then other disappearances started piling up. The old herbalist lady that also sometimes removed curses was simply gone, and her neighbors had no idea where she went. The two brothers that lived in a tower they built away from civilization and secretly studied soul magic were not present at their home, the gate to their tower broken and the insides stripped bare of anything worthwhile. The priest in the nearby town dedicated to studying the undead and ways to fight them had been found dead in his home 4 days ago, cause of death unknown. He was young and had no known medical problems or addictions, so foul play was suspected. An alchemist specializing in transformation magic was torn apart outside his village by a pack of unusually aggressive

boars. And so on. Only the priest and the alchemist were actually confirmed dead, the others having gone on sudden business trips or just plain gone missing one day, and the disappearances were in a sufficiently large area that no one seemed to have connected them in a single pattern, but Zorian knew this was not accidental.

Someone was deliberately targeting anyone who had some sort of knowledge on soul magic. The only question was whether the missing people were dead or just kidnapped for some purpose.

Thankfully, he finally managed to locate one of the people Kael mentioned to him. Unfortunately, the man in question didn't actually know any soul magic. Vani was 'just' a scholar, and according to Kael could probably point him towards someone who does. Probably. The only trick was that Vani liked to talk, meandering from topic to topic as he pleased, and he would refuse to help anyone who was in any way impolite with him. Thus, anyone seeking him out for advice had to be very patient and ready for frequent digressions.

Zorian could do patient. He knocked on the door to the man's home and was promptly ushered inside by Vani, a cheerful older man with a receding hairline who was not at all surprised that someone sought him out for advice.

The inside was... packed. That was the only word that fit, really. Almost every inch of the house was filled with boxes, shelves and pedestals that held books, statues big and small, plants and animals preserved in bottles, glass cases that held tiny models or buildings and other such things. Where the walls were visible, they were usually filled with paintings and drawings. As Vani led them both into his study, Zorian's view fell on a particularly large and lifelike statue of a naked woman with some rather... bountiful... assets and he quirked an amused eyebrow at the man.

"It's a, err, goddess of fertility sort of thing," the man hastened to explain. "Just a temporary thing, a friend of mine sent it to me

for safekeeping and you know how it goes. Fascinating stuff. Anyway! Don't think I don't know who *you* are, young man – you're the one who has been killing all the winter wolves in the region lately!"

"Err, is that a problem?" Zorian asked.

"Problem?" the man laughed. "Just the opposite! Finally someone did something to cull those awful beasts a little. They're not too bad right now, but come winter they get aggressive and start assaulting travelers and outlying communities. There's been a number of child disappearances the last few winters, and everyone knows it's probably the winter wolves at fault. Damn things get bolder with every passing year..."

"How come nobody organized a hunting party yet, then?" asked Zorian. The mage guild was pretty much founded to respond to situations like this, after all.

"It snows pretty heavily here in winter, and whole towns can sometimes get cut off from the rest of the world for days, so it's hard to marshal a response in time. Most of the time no one even finds out there was a crisis until days afterwards, when nothing can be done," Vani tapped the table with his fingers contemplatively, as if considering something. "Or at least, that's what the hunters and the authorities like to say. Personally, I just think they're afraid of the Silver One."

"Silver One?" asked Zorian curiously.

"It's a rumor. A few years back, when the winter wolves first started acting up, there was an attempt to organize a wide scale cull and a large hunting party was organized. It ended... poorly. According to stories, several winter wolf packs worked together to lure the hunters into traps, separating them into smaller groups that were then defeated in detail. They acted more like an army than a group of wild animals, and survivors claimed they were led by a huge winter wolf with a shiny silver pelt. The Silver One – an

alpha of alphas, as smart as any man and with the power to direct his lesser brothers against humans. There was an official attempt by the Eldemar's mage guild to locate and eliminate this winter wolf, but they found nothing – neither the silver wolf nor any evidence of multiple packs working together. A lot of the locals are still convinced he exists, though – they say that anyone who goes after the wolves ends up getting confronted by it sooner or later."

"I see," frowned Zorian. "And what do you think?"

"It's possible, I suppose," admitted Vani. "We live in a crazy world, and you can never really say that something is impossible. It could be a runaway experiment made by some crazy mage in the forest. It could be a new species originating from the Heart of Winter. It could even be a polymorphed mage on some deranged crusade to protect the bloodthirsty monsters from those terrible humans. All I know is that I'm glad someone is not getting intimidated by all the scaremongering floating around..."

It took another 15 minutes till Vani decided to even ask what Zorian came to him for.

"Kael sent me," Zorian said. "Or rather, he listed your name as a possible source of advice."

"Kael!" Vani said happily. "Oh, I remember him... shame about what happened to his wife and mother-in-law. The Weeping took so many great people from us. He still has his daughter, though, doesn't he?" Zorian nodded. "Good. Children are the greatest treasure. Tell him I said that. He helped me write a book, you know? Did he tell you that?"

"He did," Zorian confirmed. Kael had warned him that Vani was a little vain and loved discussing his books, and that it might be a good idea to read one or two. Zorian took this advice and read two of them. The first one, the one that Kael had helped the man write by gathering the accounts of various people in the region, was about the recent history of the region and was mostly a

collection of anecdotes, some interesting and amusing and some of them mind-numbingly boring. If it weren't for Kael's advice, he never would have gone past the first chapter. "I even read it, as well as one other book."

"Oh?"

"It was titled 'History of Pre-Ikosian Altazia'," Zorian said, considering whether to tell the man the truth or to simply flatter him. He decided to go with the truth for now. "I... it was kind of interesting, but I don't really agree with the lot of it. My principal complaint is that you keep talking about pre-Ikosian tribes living on Altazia as if they had lived in total vacuum, when the reality was that the entire southern coast of Altazia was dotted with Ikosian colonies and forts stretching back for at least a thousand years. Ikosians were hardly the total aliens to Altazia that you portray them as in your work."

"Ah, but the historical evidence clearly shows that the cultural influence of those coastal states didn't extend very far inland," pointed out Vani triumphantly.

"That may be strictly true, but Ikosians were vastly more technologically advanced than Altazian tribes in most areas, and I think you're greatly underestimating the effect of simple technological diffusion on people's culture..."

Yeah. This was probably going to take a while.



"Ah, thank you for that," Vani said. They had been talking for several hours at that point, and Vani seemed surprisingly pleased to have met someone who disagreed with his conclusions and was willing to talk about it. Zorian also found out that the man was incredibly well read and seemed to have memorized half a dozen encyclopedias, because he was a font of various trivia. Whatever

he thought about the man's conclusions, he clearly hadn't arrived on them on a whim. "It's been a while since I had this kind of discussion with someone. Usually the kind of people willing to talk to me don't know enough to challenge me, and the ones that do know enough aren't interested in talking."

"You flatter me. I don't really think my opinions have the same weight as yours. I certainly haven't done even a hundredth of the research you did," Zorian said. Never hurt to butter people up a little. "But I really shouldn't waste your time for much longer. I came to you because I wanted your advice on how to find an expert in soul magic."

"Soul magic?" the man asked with a frown.

"It's a personal issue that I'd rather not talk about," Zorian said. "Suffice to say I have been hit by a soul magic spell of unknown effects and want to talk to someone about finding out what exactly has been done to me and how to protect myself against any further such events."

"Hmm," Vani hummed. "And Kael sent you to me?"

"You were on the list of people he said could help me. However, you were the only one I could actually locate. The others were... well, it's very disturbing. Let me tell you about my last couple of days..."

Vani listened to Zorian's description of disappearances with growing unease, writing down the names and facts that Zorian uncovered on a piece of paper.

"That is indeed very disturbing," Vani agreed when Zorian was finished. "To think that such a thing could happen without everyone realizing it for so long... I will bring this matter to the attention of proper authorities, have no worry about that. It does make me wonder who I can recommend to you when so many of the obvious choices have become, err, unavailable. Let me think about this a little."

Five minutes later, Vani managed to think up a solution.

"Tell me," he asked. "What do you know about shifters?"

"That they're people who have the ability to turn into animals?" Zorian tried.

"Shifters are people with two souls," Vani said. "Long in the past, the ancestors of the shifters enacted rituals that fused their souls with the souls of their chosen animals, allowing them to take the forms of the animals in question and even access some of the abilities of said animals in their human form. It is a very old form of magic that predates the Ikosian invasion of Altazia, and I'm sad to say that most shifter tribes have lost the knowledge of the original rituals they used to create their kind. These days, they grow in numbers purely through mundane reproduction, with children of shifters inheriting their parent's dual soul. There exist, however, tribes that retain the knowledge of ritual magic and soul mechanics necessary to perform the ritual in the modern age. While the purpose of such expertise is to turn regular humans into new members of the tribe, it may very well be general enough to help you with your issue."

"I see. And where can I find these shifters?" Zorian asked.

"That," Vani said, spreading his arms in a helpless gesture, "I do not know. Shifter tribes have a checkered history with the, shall we say, *civilized* communities. They rarely want to be found. But! I do know that there is a fairly powerful wolf shifter tribe living in this region – a tribe that definitely has the expertise you seek. I do not know who you need to talk to in order to meet with their leadership, but I do know that the leader of the tribe sent his daughter to Cyoria to get an education in more modern forms of magic. Raynie is her name, I think. A redhead. Quite the looker, I'm told. Perhaps you can start there?"

Zorian blinked. Raynie is a *wolf shifter*? That... wow. Yeah, now that he thought about it, there were some things that could

point that way.

"Well," said Zorian rising from his seat. "You gave me a lot to think about. Thank you for your time."

"Think nothing of it," Vani smiled. "Go kill a few more winter wolves for me, is all I ask for."

"Wouldn't a tribe of wolf shifters kind of dislike me for killing so many wolves?" Zorian asked.

"They're wolf shifters, not *winter* wolf shifters," Vani said. "I'm pretty sure they don't like each other much. Winter wolves have a habit of killing their more mundane relatives and invading their territory."

Zorian left after that, unsure how to proceed further in the restart.



"Back already?" Silverlake asked him, not bothering to look up from her bundle of herbs while addressing him. "I'm not seeing any egg sack on you, though."

"That's because spider-mommy is carrying her eggs on her underbelly," he said. "The task is impossible. Why would you even send me on such a fool's errand? Kael said you were eccentric, but ultimately harmless. This isn't harmless. I almost died."

"If I thought you were the sort to rush in half-cocked and get your fool ass killed by something like that, I never would have sent you on that errand," Silverlake scoffed. "And anyway, isn't it a bit premature to declare failure after less than a week? I'm patient. I waited for years, I sure as hell can wait for a few months more till you think of something. You're a smart boy, I'm sure you'll figure out a way."

Zorian opened his mouth and then closed it. Suddenly, her logic sounded a lot more reasonable to him. She didn't know he

was on a month-long time limit, after all. As far as she was concerned, giving him a task that would take several months to complete was perfectly logical. Where was the hurry? As for the suicidal nature of the task she gave him... apparently she had more faith in his skills than he himself did. Did he really give up too soon?

"A few months is too late," he said. "Anything that happens after the summer festival might as well not exist for me."

Silverlake finally stopped fiddling with the herb pile and gave him a hard look, her eyes glowing brightly for a moment.

"You're not dying," she stated. "Not out of sickness, anyway? Someone hunting for you?"

Zorian hesitated, the image of Red Robe dancing before his eyes and opened his mouth to say 'yes'. Silverlake cut him off, though.

"No, not really," she stated, going back to her herbs. "You have an enemy, but then again who doesn't?"

Zorian exhaled in irritation and rose up, deciding to leave before he lost his cool and attacked her. He'd probably get stomped into the ground, anyway. Just before he teleported away, though, a thought struck him.

'To hell with it,' he thought. 'Why not?'

"Hypothetically speaking," he said. "If you were visited by a time traveler who claimed to know your future self, what would you ask of him as proof?"

"*Hypothetically speaking*," she said, her mouth stretching into a cruel grin, "I would have asked him to retrieve a grey hunter egg sack for me."

Throwing his hands in the air in defeat, Zorian teleported back to his inn in Knyazov Dveri, the cackling of a sadistic old woman echoing behind him.

In the safety of the room he rented at the inn, Zorian was sitting on the bed, dismantling a rifle he had bought earlier. It was kind of amusing how easy it was to procure a firearm compared to high-level combat magic aids, despite them being just as lethal, but there you had it. They were especially easy to procure here in Knyazov Dveri, which was so close to the wilderness and its dangers. In any case, he was trying to see how the things worked and, more importantly, how they could be enchanted.

Firearms were notoriously tricky to enhance with magic. Like all ranged weapons, they had the problem that you could only enchant the device to be more accurate and durable, and if you wanted the projectile to have any sort of magical effect upon striking the target you had to enchant the projectile itself. Bullets were unfortunately very hard to enchant, being much smaller than arrows and crossbow bolts and usually made from some very magically unsuitable materials. You also couldn't touch the bullet to channel mana into it once it was already in the gun... though maybe if he installed some crystal mana channels into the gun via alteration...

While he studied the device in front of him, Zorian idly considered ways to off the grey hunter from earlier. He had no intention of actually trying any of them, as they were each more implausible than the last, but there was no harm in coming up with scenarios.

Grey hunters had known weaknesses. First of all, they were purely melee opponents – if you could keep them at a distance, there was nothing they could do to you. The trouble was that they were really, *really* good at closing in on their target. Secondly, they were ultimately just magical animals so they could be lured into prepared traps and kill zones fairly easily. The problem here was that they were fast and tough enough to probably survive such a blunder. The magic sense the grey hunter demonstrated in Zorian's first encounter with it probably also helped it avoid the most

blatant of such traps.

He could think of a several ways to trap it, but most of them required knowledge of spells that he didn't have. If he knew how to make a simulacrum and open portals, he could simply send in his simulacrum as bait and then open a portal leading to wherever he set the trap up. Hell, simply knowing how to make a simulacrum would make things a million times easier since he could test his ideas without endangering himself. If he knew large terrain alteration spells he could simply seal it off in its lair and wait for it to suffocate. If he knew the spells to manipulate large amounts of water he might be able to drown it. And so on, and so on...

He also considered poisoning the thing or putting it to sleep or otherwise using some kind of alchemical concoction that would cripple or kill it... but anything potent enough to kill such a beast was heavily restricted, made out of super-rare ingredients and expensive as all hell. He didn't know how to make anything like that, and couldn't get his hands on something that valuable and forbidden through trade.

He could try for brute force and build a golem to take the spider down. Since they were machines animated by magic, they were immune to poison and could be extremely strong – strong enough to crush the stupid spider in a head-to-head fight. Unfortunately, he didn't know how to build a golem. Any golem at all, let alone one good enough to go toe-to-toe with a grey hunter. The art of golem making was complicated enough that several Houses were dedicated to mastering it, and not something to dabble in for a week or two. Or even a month or two.

Furthermore, even if he knew how to build it, the process of building would take at least a week and probably more, require a specialized workshop and consume a lot of expensive materials. He would likely bankrupt himself before he was even halfway finished.

Which brought him to firearms. The revolver worked well enough against Red Robe when his spells had failed him, after all. No regular firearm would do against the grey hunter, though – he needed something stronger than that. Unfortunately, higher calibers were usually reserved for the military and he would need to raid a military base and steal one if he wanted to go down that route. That could end very badly – who knew what kind of defenses a military base had, and being captured and interrogated by military investigators while drugged out of his mind on various truth serums was almost as bad as being discovered by a hostile mind mage or a necromancer. Plus, he was pretty sure they had a couple of mind mages and necromancers on the payroll anyway.

Oh, and even if he did find something suitable under a lax enough security, there was the matter that it would almost certainly still have to be enchanted and he couldn't even figure out how to effectively enchant a simple rifle at the moment. Probably wouldn't by the end of the restart, either.

A knock on his door woke him up from his musings and he quickly put the rifle into its box and hid it under the bed. Him owning the rifle wasn't illegal, but he'd still rather not let whomever was looking for him see him tinkering with it. He made sure his shielding bracelet was on, just in case, and then opened the door.

It was Gurey, which did not surprise Zorian all that much. The man had been dutifully buying off any of the various alchemical ingredients and assorted body parts Zorian had gathered in the forest and allowed Zorian to use his workshop when he needed to make some of the trickier potions and magic items. The man had already commissioned a couple of magic items from Zorian, so he expected Gurey's arrival to be about another commission.

As it turned out, Gurey had another kind of deal in mind. Once the pleasantries were exchanged, he skipped straight to the point.

"I want you to help me rob my rival."

A GAME OF SHOPS

"I want you to help me rob my rival."

Zorian blinked in surprise before giving the man an incredulous look. What?

"And... why the hell would I do that?" he asked the man curiously.

Gurey grinned triumphantly. "I knew I was right about you," he said. "You didn't even pretend to be outraged at the question."

Zorian frowned. "I'm just not a very excitable person, that's all. It doesn't mean I'm going to actually help you rob someone," he shot back crankily. "In fact, I can scarcely imagine a situation where I would agree to such a thing. I was just curious what possessed you to broach the topic at all. This isn't some kind of attempt at blackmail, is it?"

"Oh no, I'd have to be pretty stupid to try and blackmail a man who hunts winter wolves and giant trapdoor spiders for a living," Gurey assured him quickly. "Not that I have anything worthwhile to blackmail you with, anyway. No, I just felt I had an interesting deal for you and that I had nothing to lose by making an offer. You don't seem like the sort that would get all high and mighty on me just because I employ a few shady business practices. I figure the worst you'd do is say no."

Zorian was silent for a moment. He supposed that Gurey had him there – even if Zorian actually cared to turn Gurey in, it would still be his word against Gurey's. Proving the man's guilt would be a hassle, Gurey would likely get a mere slap on the wrist even if convicted, and it would lead to far greater scrutiny of Zorian's activities by nearby powers than he was comfortable with. All in all, it would mean an entire restart wasted on a pointless crusade that had no meaning inside the time loop and would quite possibly attract the attention of the academy authorities – previous restarts had made it clear they were very quick to involve themselves when one of their students had a brush with the law or the police, and he was still technically enrolled there. And if the academy found out about his whereabouts and activities, it was entirely possible Red Robe would also find out about it through cranium rats or his other spies...

No, even if Gurey was planning to murder someone, Zorian would not intervene. A simple theft... well, he wasn't sure he would actually care all that much even if he wasn't stuck in the time loop and he certainly didn't care at all *now*.

"Well, the answer is definitely no," said Zorian finally. "I know that wanderers like me have a reputation of being opportunistic, but I'm afraid my ethics aren't quite as flexible as that. I'm not going to stoop to banditry or burglary or whatever it is that you have in mind for this... 'deal' of yours."

"Ah, I don't think you quite understand what I'm talking about here," Gurey said. "You think I want you to steal something physical and that I'm offering you money in exchange, yes?"

Zorian raised an eyebrow at him.

"Nothing could be further from the truth," Gurey shook his head. "I know better than anyone that you're raking in too much money at the moment to be tempted by petty burglary. Ethics aside, that's too much risk for too little gain. No, if this operation

goes off without a hitch – and I think you’re capable enough to pull it off – there will be nothing missing and no indication that a crime has occurred at all.” He leaned towards Zorian conspiratorially and whispered the next part. ” You see, what I’m trying to steal is not material wealth, but *secrets*.”

Oh. Oh! Well that changed things considerably. He still didn’t want to have anything to do with Gurey’s deal, but he at least understood why the man felt comfortable discussing such an offer with him. Spying on other mages was technically illegal, but everyone knew it was a common and universal practice. Hell, according to some stories every Noble House worth its name had its own division dedicated just to that. You just had to make sure that you weren’t caught. Even the academy, which generally tried to give students a very rose-tinted version of mage culture, admitted that such ‘professional espionage’ occurred all the time. Some of it was entirely legal, such as analyzing a rival’s products and spellwork with divination spells, or poring over publically available documents to see if they’d let something sensitive slip by without noticing... but such legal methods were usually very limited and mages often resorted to shadier methods. Bribing assistants and apprentices into selling out their master’s secrets, hiring burglars to raid archives and research notes, dedicated scrying campaigns, seduction plots... the possibilities were endless, and new ones were devised every day. As well as countermeasures for such.

Zorian recalled a particular fable that spoke of two mages that spent years devising ways to steal each other’s secrets and thwarting the other’s attempts to do the same to them. Eventually, after a decade of back-and-forth, they both succeeded in reaching each other’s inner sanctum at the same time... only to find out that neither had any secrets worth stealing. They had spent so much time and effort trying to one-up each other that they’d never gotten any actual work done.

Well, that was an obvious exaggeration, but it honestly wouldn't surprise Zorian to find out that every magical business (and probably quite a few non-magical ones) in Knyazov Dveri did do at least a little bit of illegal espionage as a matter of course. The world of business was a cutthroat environment. Zorian knew from his parents' stories that even seemingly simple and honest farmers were willing to renege on their contracts if they thought they could get away with it. To someone like Gurey, this sort of thing was probably just business as usual.

But it wasn't business as usual for Zorian. And frankly, Gurey was completely right when he said that the whole thing was a huge risk for little gain. He opened his mouth to give Gurey a firm (but polite) refusal, but was interrupted when Gurey pushed a brown, leather-bound book in his hands.

Zorian looked at the book in surprise for a second, idly wondering why it had no title, before giving Gurey a searching look. The man motioned him to open it.

Zorian did, and promptly found himself leafing through pages of hand-written notes and complicated diagrams. It was a journal of some sort. That's why the book had no title or markings. A research journal of some mage, if he had to guess.

"What is this?" he asked, giving Gurey a suspicious look.

"A sample," Gurey said with a grin. "As I said, I know it would be foolish of you to do something like this for money – well, for the sums I am able to pay you, at least – so I came up with something that will hopefully be more attractive to you. Feel free to peruse that thing at your leisure and then come see me in my store tomorrow to give me an answer. Just remember, there is more where that came from!"

Gurey then immediately left, leaving Zorian alone with the mysterious journal/thing. Curious, he opened the book at the beginning so he could see if it perhaps had a title written on the first

page. The first few pages were blank, but he did reach the title page in the end.

'Breaking and bypassing wards and other magical defenses,' it said. 'By Aldwin Rofoltin.'

Rofoltin? That would be Gurey's deceased business partner, wouldn't it? Intrigued, Zorian sat down on the edge of his bed and began to read.



Having read through Rofoltin's book, Zorian had to admit he was feeling a little... underwhelmed? It wasn't a *bad* book by any means, but by the way Gurey had presented it, he'd expected more. As it was, the most useful thing he found inside was the step-by-step instruction of how to build your very own magic-analysis goggles, complete with a spell formula blueprint. That was convenient, as he had been meaning to build one of those for a while now and there were no publically available creation manuals on the topic that he could find – the spell formula blueprint alone probably saved him a restart-worth of work.

Other than that, there was little of real use in there... but perhaps that was what Gurey had been aiming for. It was a sample, as he said, meant to entice Zorian into cooperation by alluding to the possibility of granting Zorian access to the rest of Rofoltin's books. If Gurey's old partner had 5 other books like that, and each one had just one useful thing like the goggle thing, that was a couple of months of saved time right there. And if Gurey was keeping the good stuff for the end like Zorian suspected... tempting. Far more tempting than he'd thought this would be.

Shaking his head at his own greed, he locked his room behind him and set off in the direction of Gurey's shop. He would have to check with the man what exactly he expected of him, but... chances

were he was going to say yes. In truth, this sort of thing wasn't that far off from what he had been planning to do on his own at some point. Chances were that he was going to have to learn how to break into people's homes and spy on mages sooner or later – gathering information about the time loop, Red Robe and soul magic was bound to require it at some point. At least this way he would get some guidance from someone who'd done it before, get a chance to practice his skills on what was probably a far less difficult target, and get paid for it to boot.

Realizing he was in no hurry to actually confront Gurey, Zorian eventually slowed down and decided to take the scenic route to the place. He idly observed the people and buildings as he wandered the town, suddenly aware that he knew very little about the place, despite living in it for a while now. He had been so busy with other things that actually exploring Knyazov Dveri sort of slipped his mind. He didn't even peruse the town's Dungeon access, though that one was intentional – he had decided to hold back on doing that until he had a chance to judge how much of his time and attention his other tasks in this restart would take, and ultimately decided to leave that for some other restart. The Dungeon wasn't going anywhere. In any case, now that he had taken the time to explore the town a little, he could say with some certainty that he hadn't missed much. He had already visited most of the shops to determine what the best price for the ingredients he was gathering was, and aside from that the town was fairly average. It was similar to Cyoria in the sense that it was clearly a city that had experienced rapid growth in recent times – the old core of the city was easily recognizable by the single-story buildings painted in the traditional yellow color that usually signified Eldemar's native architecture, while subsequent layers radiating from it had newer, multi-story buildings. Other than that, he hadn't noticed anything particularly noteworthy, though he would have to set aside some

days for exploration just to be certain.

Finally, he reached the building that proudly proclaimed it housed a business establishment known as Cwili and Rofoltin Equipment and walked inside. The little bell attached to the door rang out as Zorian entered, notifying Gurey of his arrival – a solution surprisingly devoid of magic, for a magic store – and the portly man soon poked his head from the back room he was currently in to see what he was dealing with. His eyes lit up immediately when he recognized Zorian.

"I'll be with you in a second!" the man yelled before getting back to whatever he was working on in the back. Zorian took the chance to study the shop a bit while he waited.

Just like the first time he had been here, he was once again struck by how diverse the products sold by Gurey's store were: he offered everything from wilderness-appropriate attire to the various magic items, potions, survival guides, dried herbs and other magical materials used by alchemists and artificers, and so on. And actually, it was even more impressive than it first appeared – Zorian knew from his previous talks with the man that Gurey actually offered a great deal more than what was displayed at the shelves of his store, so long as the customer seeking them was properly vouched for or knew how to ask the right questions.

Gurey once told a story about a customer who tried to buy the decorative potted plants he strategically placed around the shop to liven up the place, and while Zorian understood Gurey's mirth at the incident, he also understood how someone might have decided they were for sale. With all the other things Gurey was selling, it really wouldn't have surprised Zorian to find out that he dealt in potted plants as well.

"Ah, Zorian, my friend..." said Gurey, walking out from the back and approaching him. "Did you read it? An interesting book, isn't it?" he prodded.

"It was... somewhat useful," said Zorian noncommittally. "Not much on its own, but if there really are a couple more where that came from, it might actually be worthwhile for me to work with you on your... problem."

Gurey frowned, apparently expecting him to be more impressed with his partner's work. He opened his mouth to speak, but Zorian interrupted him.

"Before we discuss this any further, I'd prefer if we move to somewhere more private. Do you have a room I could set up some basic privacy wards in?"

"I have better," Gurey said smugly, quickly shaking off his previous disappointment. "I have a room with privacy wards already present... and not just the basic ones, either. Follow me."

He led Zorian to a small, inconspicuous room with a single desk and two chairs... a room whose walls, floor and ceiling were full of magical glyphs and geometric shapes made out of crystalized mana. Gurey placed his hand on one of the circles and the whole complicated spell formula pulsed twice in bright blue light before becoming seemingly inert. Zorian wasn't fooled though – those pulses signified the more mana-intensive portions of the ward scheme becoming active. Much like many powerful warding schemes, the one he was looking at had two modes – the normal, mana-conserving one that could be powered indefinitely from its mana source and the advanced, super-charged one that burned through mana faster than the ambient mana levels could provide it with but was far more effective for the time it was active.

The sound of Gurey clearing his throat jolted him out of his thoughts and he realized he had been studying the wards for quite a while now. Oops.

"Is this one also 'somewhat useful'?" asked Gurey with a smirk when he realized he had Zorian's attention again.

"No, this is quite impressive," Zorian admitted. "Is this also

made by your former partner?"

"Yes," Gurey nodded. "He was quite good at this. Setting up wards, I mean. Also breaking and bypassing them, but I understand those two are related. Learn how to make a ward and you're 90% there to figuring out how to defeat it."

"That's the conventional wisdom, yes," agreed Zorian. He decided not to dance around the issue any longer. "So... I'm guessing your former partner was your go-to person for these kinds of deals in the past, and now that he's dead, you need to find someone else to do your dirty work."

"My, you're direct," Gurey laughed nervously. "But you've hit the nail on the head, more or less. You see... magic was never my thing, as strange as that may sound from an owner of a magic shop. That was always Aldwin's thing – he was the one that worried about the spellcasting part of the business while I was always more comfortable on the more mundane, civilian side of things. Making contacts, closing deals, finding new business partners, that kind of thing. I'm a really terrible mage when it comes down to it. I can barely cast anything at all."

Zorian gave him a curious look. "I'm pretty sure I saw you manipulate mana plenty of times, and activating the greater privacy mode of this room couldn't have possibly been a matter of just channeling mana into that circle."

"Oh, I was always very good at using magic items," Gurey said. "You don't need to be a proper mage to do that. Lots of practice and some specialized shaping exercises and you're set. If you're fairly wealthy like me and live on a mana well, you can even commission items that draw power from the ambient mana instead of from my own miniscule reserves... but we both know there are severe drawbacks to such items, and this sort of job really needs a proper spellcaster."

Zorian nodded. He had been considering the possibility of us-

ing 'self-casting' magic items to make up for his below-average mana reserves for a while now, but there were a lot of problems with it. The core, inescapable issue was that souls of spellcasters were pretty damn good at spellcasting, while even the best-made magic items... weren't. Making an item that allowed the caster to skip some of the steps during spellcasting was simple enough, but creating something that was capable of casting a spell entirely on its own upon command? Hard. Possibly very hard, or even impossible, depending on what spell you were trying to imprint into the item. Warding schemes and one-use magic items like his suicide explosive cubes got around the issue by having the maker cast the spell during creation, after which the spell formula simply stabilized it and kept it from degrading, but that workaround wasn't very useful for the majority of spells.

And then there was the issue of powering said items. Not every place had much in the way of ambient mana, and even places that did often couldn't provide the amount necessary for the spell at once. That meant that most self-casting items needed an internal mana battery, which brought a whole host of problems of its own. No battery was totally efficient and reliable – they all leaked mana in varying amounts, and could easily blow up if overcharged or poorly constructed. And that was without even getting into the number of actual combat spells that were specifically designed to make mana batteries blow up from internal pressure.

All in all, the creation of self-casting items was something that Zorian put squarely into the 'probably not worth it' category. He wasn't nearly good enough with spell formula currently to pull it off, and even if he were, it was still a very difficult sub-field of magic item creation that gave very dubious gains. Though he did eventually intend to track down a blueprint for a blasting rod – probably the simplest of self-casting items that blasted whatever it was pointed at with a torrent of barely-constrained energy, usu-

ally fire. A fittingly named item, and one of the few self-casting items that was known to be reliable and effective in actual combat, at least at close range. It was not a priority, however – such an item would be more of a last resort, side-arm sort of weapon than something to build his skills around.

"I'm not as useless at this sort of cloak-and-dagger stuff as you might think, though," Gurey said. "As I said, Aldwin was the spell-caster, but I was the one who identified the targets. You can't spy on a threat unless you know they are a threat, after all. And I was always very good at spotting who our competition was and keeping an eye on their activities. People underestimate how much information you can get simply by being well connected and giving a few expensive gifts to people."

"You mean bribes," said Zorian.

"Zorian, my friend, you have much to learn," Gurey said, shaking his head. "Bribes are illegal. There is no law against generosity. Giving that bottle of expensive wine to your drinking buddy or inviting someone to that fancy annual dance that they've always wanted to attend is just being nice and no one can prove otherwise."

"Right," Zorian sighed. "I guess I shouldn't talk, since I'm willing to go along with your plans. And speaking of which, why don't we get back to the reason we're here in the first place. What exactly do you want from me and what are you offering?"

"Very well. I presume you know about Vazen's General Store?"

"The biggest magic-related shop in town?" asked Zorian.

"That one, yes. Cwili and Rofoltin Equipment was once bigger and able to compete with them on a more equal footing, but since the death of my partner two years ago those days have passed. Recently they have closed a deal with another company from Cyoria, but they have been silent about the contents of the deal. Everyone knows they have bought a bunch of spell formula schematics,

alchemical recipes and production licenses, so it's obvious they intend to seriously branch out into the production side of the business, but the exact details have been successfully kept secret. That is a problem. Depending on what Vazen intends to produce, some things are going to decline sharply in value, while the price of the raw materials used to make them goes up to a similar degree."

"I see. You need to see what your rival will release so that you can prepare for the impact it will have on the market," mused Zorian.

"Well, that and so that I can see if it is possible to counter his move in some fashion," Gurey said.

"I suppose you know where I can find that information?" Zorian asked. "Not in the shop itself, I hope. That place is bound to be heavily warded."

"It's not nearly as warded as you might think – some basic counters to stop teleportation and divination, and that's about it. But the place is always manned, even during the night, so you're right that they're not something you'd want to tangle with. Fortunately, you don't have to. In the end, Vazen's own paranoia is his undoing – I have found out that instead of keeping the documents in his heavily guarded shop, he has brought them into his much less protected home. Apparently he doesn't even trust his own employees."

"How protected is his home?" asked Zorian.

"Well, my information might be a little outdated since I got it two and a half years ago, from my then-living partner who scouted the entire building, but I doubt much has changed. It has an anti-divination ward and all the doors and windows have intruder alarms and that's it. The documents themselves are kept in a safe, though, and *that* is bound to have much more serious defenses."

"Not too bad of a setup, to be honest," Zorian said after think-

ing about it for a minute. "The divination ward stops casual espionage and makes it impossible to just scry-and-teleport inside, while the alarms on entrances make it impossible to simply sneak inside without magic."

Covering only the entrances with the wards was a common mana-conserving measure. True, it made the wards useless if the attackers could phase through walls or were willing to make their own entrance by blowing a hole in the building, but thieves capable of phasing through solid matter had bigger fish to fry than robbing small-time shop owners and blasting holes in the walls would kind of defeat the point of trying to acquire the information undetected.

"You *can* teleport, though, right?" asked Gurey. "I mean, I'm sure you can – the speed of movement over large distances that you've demonstrated pretty much requires it – but how good are you at it?"

"I can teleport," Zorian said hesitantly. He didn't think he was making it that obvious, though he supposed he couldn't keep leaving in the morning and coming back before the sun set with things only found deep in the forest without someone questioning just how he was doing it. "I'm getting pretty good at it, in my opinion. It takes me a while to shape the spell, but I can consistently pull it off."

"Excellent. The intruder alarms shouldn't be much of a problem, then," Gurey said with a grin. "Aldwin had this neat trick where he could turn an item into a teleport beacon of sorts, and then simply teleport himself to its location without having to have been there in the past. I'm sure I can get some innocuous-seeming thing through the door, you just have to cast the spell on it. I don't know how to cast the spell myself, but Aldwin did write it down in one of his journals..."

"Spell, you say? No spell formula involved?" asked Zorian curiously.

"No. 'Spell of recall', I think it's called. It's a two-part spell – you first cast a personal teleport beacon on an item, and it immediately forges a connection between you and it. You can then cast the second spell at any time, causing yourself to be 'recalled' at the location of the item. According to Aldwin, it was meant to be used for rapid escape – you cast the first spell on a retreat point and then use the second spell to teleport there if you end up in a bind."

"Why not use a regular teleport for that?" frowned Zorian. "Sounds like a lot of trouble when a normal teleport will suffice. After all, you've already been to the location you're teleporting to if you're setting it up as a retreat point."

"I really don't know. You will have to find that out yourself if you're interested," Gurey said.

"Hm. So assuming this spell works as advertised and you can smuggle something in like you said you would, I 'just' have to defeat the protection on the safe to get to the documents."

"Yes. That part will be all you, since I have no idea where it is or what protections it has," confirmed Gurey.

Zorian stared at the man for a while before taking a deep breath.

"Lovely. Unfortunately for you, I am not the professional ward breaker you seem to think I am," he told Gurey. "When you said you wanted my help with this, I had thought I would just play support or something. Something like this is, to put it bluntly, out of my league. I'm sorry, but unless there is something you're not telling me, there is no way I'd be able to pull this off."

Gurey leaned forward and gave him a conspiratorial grin. "Even if I gave you Aldwin's spellbook and his notes on how the spells are meant to be used?"

Zorian blinked. "What?"

Two hours later, Zorian left Gurey's shop with three new books under his arm. They had agreed to make the attempt at the

documents three days before the summer festival, ostensibly to give Zorian the time he needed to practice the spells in Aldwin's spellbook but also because that way, should the whole thing go pear-shaped, Zorian would only lose three days of the restart.

Zorian hummed to himself in satisfaction as he walked back to the inn. It was nice to catch a windfall from time to time. After the whole annoyance with Silverlake and the mysterious disappearance of soul magic practitioners, he had begun to think that this whole restart had been a giant waste of time. Now... well, at least he'd gotten some shiny new spells out of it, ones of the sort that he could never have acquired through any legal avenue.

Things were looking up.



After his talk with Gurey, time passed quickly. It was difficult to practice the spells found in Aldwin's spellbook, as most of them only interacted with wards and required an actual warding scheme as a target. Thankfully, Zorian had managed to find a warded house whose owner had left on a trip, allowing Zorian to practice on it to his heart's content, provided he kept out of sight of the main road. He also occasionally warded objects himself for practice purposes, usually when practicing the more destructive spells, but that just wasn't the same as interacting with an unknown ward.

Surprisingly, Gurey was also willing to have Zorian practice the spells on his shop's warding scheme, so long as he didn't do anything permanent. Zorian wondered about that. All things considered, Gurey was being far too accommodating to him. He suspected that the portly man thought of him as an investment and hoped to turn him into a more long-term asset, and as such was rather more generous to Zorian than he otherwise would have been, but he had no way to be sure. There did not seem to be

anything malicious about it, so he mostly ignored it and tried to be simply grateful for his good fortune.

There were essentially three ways of dealing with wards. The first one was to starve the ward out, depriving it of mana until it simply fell apart. The second was to identify a way to disrupt its structure, causing it to fail on the spot. And finally, the third one was to trick it into not activating in the first place. 'Siphoning', 'breaking' and 'bypassing' were the terms used in literature for the three methods. Each one had its advantages and disadvantages, but for the task Gurey entrusted him, he would have to rely on bypassing the wards on the safe.

Siphoning had the advantage that it always worked – every ward could be siphoned to death with enough time and effort, it was just a question if the attacker was willing to devote the necessary resources for the task. Some wards could last for months after being isolated from their power sources, even when actively drained of mana during the isolation. Unfortunately, it required that the attacker have complete control of the area around the ward, as siphoning operations were difficult to set up and maintain – anything less than total control made it too easy for the defender to wreck the setup. It was mostly used for sieges and bringing down legacy wards that had outlived their usefulness.

Breaking was the fastest method of neutralizing wards – just disrupt the structure of the ward and let it collapse on itself. Unfortunately, many wards collapsed explosively or had other unpleasant side effects if simply broken, often resulting in the destruction of the warded thing and sometimes the one doing the breaking as well. A lot of wards were also simply too powerful to be broken by a single mage, or even a group of mages, unless the attacker had identified a particularly glaring weakness. So all in all, breaking a ward was often not possible, and, even more often, not desirable even if the possibility existed. Still, if one wanted to get rid of a

ward quickly and had power to spare, breaking the ward was the way to go.

Finally, there was bypassing the wards – the preferred way of dealing with them, if at all possible. If the attacker knew how the ward functioned, either because he had been given access to the schematics of the warding scheme or because he had analyzed its structure via divination spells, they could take care not to activate any of the triggers that made the ward recognize there was a problem to be countered. Depending on how the ward functioned, it might even be possible to put additional layers on top of it to neutralize it completely. If an attacker wanted to keep their intrusion secret, bypassing the wards was a must, as it was the only method that left the wards intact after they were done.

Since the idea was to leave no trace of his home invasion, he obviously couldn't break or siphon the wards on the safe – he had to trick his way past them and leave them intact. There were lots of ways to do that in the books Gurey had given him, since Aldwin was primarily interested in that sort of solution to the wards himself, but until Zorian took an actual look at the safe he couldn't tell which ones he should use. So he settled on simply practicing all of them.

As the date of the summer festival approached, Zorian decided to visit Vani one more time to see if the man had any news on the missing soul mages. He didn't, though he admitted he hadn't tried to find out anything about that very hard. It was a matter for law enforcement, Vani had claimed, and getting involved would just paint them as suspects. He was probably right, and Zorian knew there was no point in snooping around now that the case was being investigated by the police, but he definitely intended to launch a personal investigation in future restarts to see what was going on there.

Vani had asked him whether he had found the shifter tribe, but

Zorian admitted that he sort of gave up on that. He couldn't go to Raynie, as she was in Cyoria, and nobody else could direct him where to go. Or maybe they could, but didn't want to – the result was the same in either case. Besides, he was skeptical in regard to how much they could actually help with his issue.

Finally, the day had come. Gurey had managed to get a small plaque inside Vazen's house by stuffing it inside an envelope and mailing it to the man along with some ridiculous advertisement. Zorian couldn't believe that had actually worked, but it had, and now they just had to wait for the man to go to work before he could teleport inside and search for the safe. Vazen was a 40-year-old bachelor, so there was supposed to be no one in the house with him gone, but Zorian had prepared a set of concealing clothes for himself anyway (that he intended to throw away immediately after the operation) and was willing to teleport out at the first sign of trouble.

After an hour of waiting, Vazen left the house and Zorian teleported inside. Gurey remained outside under an invisibility field, acting as a lookout – if he spotted Vazen coming back, he would press a button on the stopwatch Zorian had given him, which would cause a ring on Zorian's hand to heat up.

The house was, thankfully, completely empty... but also completely lacking in safes, warded or otherwise. Even after he'd added an additional layer to the wards in order to exclude the inside of the house from the anti-divination ward, his spells still gave no results... probably because the safe was itself warded against divinations. Frustrating. It was obviously hidden behind something, but Zorian couldn't figure out where. There were no hollow walls, secret hatches beneath the carpet, places where the floor was scraped due to constant movement of furniture, and so on. Just as Zorian was about to give up and hit the books for an exotic divination spell that could work despite the ward, he finally found it. It was

in the fireplace, of all things – if he hadn't noticed how relatively clean it was (and reminisced about how much he hated cleaning the one back home in Cirin), it would have never occurred to him to look there.

The fireplace was not built for convenient access, so interacting with it was rather annoying – the safe was positioned to the left, making it impossible to actually see the lock without the use of a mirror. Still, that was just an inconvenience, not a real obstacle. He began casting analysis spells at the ward that protected the safe, trying to find a way past them.

He had just enough time to register that there was a very weak, localized ward present in the fireplace before he was forced to jump back and erect a shield in front of him. A deafening explosion erupted from the fireplace, enveloping the whole room in blinding, choking ash as the ward triggered the explosive trap in response to detecting his analysis spell. His shield protected him from the blast, but the ash cloud was hell on his lungs.

He teleported out, grabbed Gurey and then teleported again – this time away from Vazen's house. The operation was a bust.



In the aftermath of the botched operation, the whole idea had been scrapped. Security was bound to go up now that Vazen knew there was someone after the documents, and Zorian didn't fancy going against the new and improved defenses when even the old ones nearly killed him. Gurey was, if anything, even more shaken about the whole thing than Zorian was. He apologized profusely for the whole episode and ranted about how such lethal traps were illegal and how he couldn't believe Vazen would employ such a thing, which Zorian found more than a little amusing. It helped explain why Vazen seemingly didn't bother to report the break-in to the police, though.

Personally, Zorian was feeling pretty annoyed with himself. Despite what Gurey seemed to think, this was all on him. He really should have checked the fireplace for traps. Hell, he should have checked the whole house for those! Just because Gurey had said there were no other defenses didn't mean he should have taken it for granted. The man had even said his information was outdated...

Well, no matter – he got some nifty spells out of the whole thing and he knew what to watch out for in subsequent restarts.

He thought about confronting the grey hunter at the end of the restart, but then decided against it. He would have just died messily, and he'd had enough brushes with death in this particular restart.

He went to sleep and woke up with his sister wishing him a good morning.

Chapter Thirty-One

MARKED

Zorian stared at the grinning face of his opponent, his own face a blank, expressionless mask. This was it. This last round would decide who the victor was, no question about it. His opponent thought he had Zorian backed into a corner, but Zorian had a secret weapon – he had already peered into the man's thoughts and knew that he had already won.

The rules of the card game were pretty clear, after all.

"Twelve of pumpkins," Zorian said, placing his last card on the table. The man's face instantly lost its grin. Zorian tried to keep a cool façade, but he probably smiled at least a little.

"Motherf- How are you this lucky!?" the man cursed, slapping down his own card on top of the stack – a measly seven of oaks, not nearly enough to win – and taking a swig from the glass of hard liquor next to him. He drank way too much in Zorian's opinion, his thoughts steadily growing more and more muddled to Zorian's mental probes as time went by... and while that did make him harder to read via psychic powers, it also made him progressively worse at playing the game. He probably didn't even need to cheat to win the last two games, but cheating was kind of the whole point – he joined the card game to practice his mind reading skills in a real environment, not to win money off hapless victims.

"Well, this is it for me," Zorian said, standing up. "It was fun and all, but I really have to get going now."

"Hey, you can't just leave now," the man protested, frowning at him. "That's not how it's done! You have to give me a chance to win my money back!"

"Orinus, you're drunk," one of the other men at the table said. The two of them dropped out three games ago, but they still stuck around to talk, drink, and act as judges and money holders. "You didn't lose anything. It's the kid who just got back the money he lost to you in the previous game. Nobody has to pay anyone anything."

"Yeah, the last five games have basically been for nothing," the other man piped in.

Zorian nodded. Even with mind reading on his side, some hands were just unwinnable. Besides, he purposely threw a couple of games so as to not arouse suspicions of cheating in his partners. "We're both even at this point, and I really have to get going, so it's a perfect place to stop," he said. "Still, if you're that desperate for a rematch, I can always relieve you of your money some other day. I'll be staying in the town for a whole month anyway."

"You relieve *me* of *my* money, ha! The only reason you haven't ended up in your underwear is that you're immune to my secret technique!" Orinus half-shouted.

The other man snorted in amusement. "Getting the newbie drunk is a secret technique, now?"

"Hey man, don't reveal all my tricks to outsiders... what kind of friend are you?" Orinus protested.

After a few more minutes of bickering and refused offers of alcoholic beverages, Zorian finally managed to excuse himself. Ignoring Orinus's muttered questioning of Zorian's masculinity due to his refusal to drink anything remotely alcoholic, he left the inn and started searching the streets of Knyazov Dveri for an

out-of-the-way corner he could teleport from without being seen. The game had been both unexpectedly fun and useful for his mind magic training, but he hadn't been lying when he had said he had to get going. Timing was crucial for what he intended to do.

In the previous restart he learned that most of the soul mages on Kael's list had disappeared or died recently. That was, of course, highly suspicious – there was a good chance the whole thing was somehow connected to the time loop, which meant he had to know more about it. Sadly, during the last restart he had made the mistake of telling Vani about the disappearances, and he had raised enough of an alarm to have the police crawling everywhere around potential clue-sites. Consequently, Zorian had been forced to set the issue aside and wait for the next restart to conduct his own investigation.

Which is exactly what he did, the moment he woke up in Cirin and could leave without making Mother and Kirielle throw a fit. As he suspected, virtually all of the soul mages had been already gone, even on that very first day. Whatever had happened to them had been going on for far longer than the time loop existed, it seemed. There were only two exceptions: the two mages that were confirmed dead in the previous restart were alive and well at the start of the new one. The first one, a priest named Alanic Zosk specializing in fighting undead, had simply been found dead with no obvious cause a few days into the restart. The second one was Lukav Teklo, an alchemist specializing in transformation magic. He had been killed by boars not far from his home, on the evening of the second day of the restart.

Naturally, Zorian intended to talk with both of them, which necessitated saving their lives. The alchemist was a priority, as he died sooner and the cause of death was known and easily preventable. Thus his hurry to leave the game – if he timed things correctly, he would arrive at the man's home an hour or two be-

fore his fateful stroll outside the village. If he mistimed things or his actions somehow caused the alchemist to accelerate his schedule... well, there were always future restarts. It's not like the man would die for good.

He could have contacted the man sooner to warn him, he supposed, but how would he explain his knowledge of the attack? He'd just make himself look suspicious. And besides, he actually wanted the attack to happen. He doubted those were regular boars that attacked him, so he wanted to examine them up close... and also, the man was bound to be a lot more helpful if he met Zorian as a savior who protected him from a vicious pack of boars than if he just showed up at the man's door with no warning.

After teleporting just outside the man's house and making sure the alchemist was still in his house, Zorian settled in for a wait, making sure to keep out of sight of any windows. If there was anything that tiny villages like this one never had a shortage of, it was nosy old people who had nothing better to do except watch the streets for anything out of the ordinary. Honestly, some of the old women back in Cirin spent practically every waking moment glued to their window sills, making note of everyone that passed through their domain... he lost count of the number of times they got him into trouble with his parents when he had foolishly forgotten to account for their presence.

He didn't have to wait long. Barely half an hour after he had settled in to wait, the alchemist left his house. It was a good thing he had come early, then. Zorian promptly cast an invisibility spell on himself and then started following after the man some distance away. Hopefully he remained far enough that the man would not find it suspicious when Zorian burst onto the scene at the first sign of trouble, but that couldn't be helped. He didn't feel comfortable putting even more distance between the two of them, lest the man be killed before he could come to his aid. Depending on how obliv-

ious and combat capable the man was, he could get overwhelmed in seconds.

And the attack itself was bound to happen any moment now. The report he saw in the last restart said the man was killed just outside the village, and Lukav had immediately made a beeline towards the main road leading to the next settlement. Cautiously, Zorian drew his spell rod and strained his mind sense to the limit in order to find the attackers before they could strike.

He found nothing out of the ordinary, and was thus just as shocked as the alchemist when a bunch of boars burst out of the tree line and charged the man. They both froze for a second, and before either could react the boars had already closed half of the distance to the alchemist.

Embarrassingly enough, the alchemist reacted first. With a practiced movement, he threw a bottle of some sort into the path of the approaching horde and immediately dropped on the ground. Lacking the alchemist's reflexes and thinking himself too far to be affected by the bomb, Zorian opted to simply drop invisibility and erect a shield in front of him as a precaution. That turned out to be a mistake, as the deafening explosion of light and sound left him dazed and blinking spots out of his vision for the next few seconds.

When he did recover, he saw that the bomb's effect on the boars themselves had been underwhelming – they had been thrown about by the blast (as had the alchemist himself, having misjudged the distance somewhat in his panic), and the leading boar that had been caught in the center of the blast had been blown to bits, but the others were already up on their feet and converging on their target. Even the one with a broken leg was stubbornly stumbling towards the dazed, bleeding alchemist, undeterred by what should have been excruciating pain.

They made no sounds, they were unafraid of loud sounds and bright light, and completely ignored severe injuries like they were

nothing. So much for the idea that they were ordinary animals. Oh well, he kind of suspected it was something like this. Acting quickly to stop them from killing the other man, he cast a swarm of 5 magic missiles at the boars closest to the downed alchemist. Smashers instead of piercers; if he was right about what these things really were, holes in their bodies wouldn't even slow them down. The missiles were there just to knock them away from their target and give Zorian time to cast another, more unorthodox spell that he didn't put in his spell rod. Oh, and possibly shift their attention towards him instead, though he didn't think anything could make them switch targets. They were clearly sent to kill a specific man.

The smashers hit the boars in their flanks, sending them tumbling. As he suspected, they immediately scrambled to get up as if nothing happened, and the other four kept running towards the alchemist. He had finished his spell before they could reach him, however, causing a large shining disc of force to materialize between his hands.

The severing disc was a powerful cutting spell that was surprisingly mana efficient and allowed the caster to 'pilot' the disc, changing its flight path at will. Taiven had not thought much of it, as it was not a fire-and-forget sort of combat spell, requiring constant concentration from the mage to keep existing. And it moved pretty slowly for a magical projectile, too. According to Taiven, competent mages would dispel the disc before it could reach them or otherwise evade it, and the caster is something of a sitting duck while directing the disc.

But the boars couldn't dispel it, and had no ranged attacks to take advantage of his lack of shields. At Zorian's direction, the disc shot forward, flying close to the ground – at the height that Zorian judged to be around knee-height for the boars.

Zorian's fears that he had overestimated the power of the disc

and that it would not be able to cut through the bones of tough animals like the boars proved completely unfounded – the disc encountered the legs of the first boar and simply passed through with no visible resistance. In its wake, the boar fell apart, its legs separated from its torso. Directed by Zorian the disc continued towards the rest of them.

In the end, it was a close thing. On one hand, the boars didn't even try to dodge, charging in straight lines that made them easy to intercept with the disc. On the other hand, Zorian had not practiced the spell in question particularly heavily, so he missed two boars on his first pass. Thankfully, the alchemist had recovered by this point and helpfully dealt with the two stragglers by causing an arc of spear-like spikes to erupt from the ground in front of him with some kind of alteration spell. The boars were so insistent on getting to him as fast as possible that they impaled themselves on the makeshift rampart and got stuck.

Zorian let the disc dissipate with a sigh. That was a win, yes, but he wasn't satisfied with his performance. He'd frozen at the start, and his mastery of the severing disc spell left much to be desired. But what was done was done, and at least he achieved what he came here to do. Time to face the music. He set off towards the alchemist, who was kneeling on the ground and alternating between staring at approaching Zorian and at the still twitching, legless boars not far from him.

He frowned at them as he approached. They had no minds, he realized. That was why he didn't detect them until they attacked – as far as his mind sense was concerned, they didn't exist. Coupled with the fact they were still alive with their limbs cut off and that their wounds didn't bleed at all, the conclusion was obvious.

His hunch had been right: they were definitely undead. As far as he knew, the only beings that counted as 'mindless' for the purposes of mind magic were oozes, golems, creatures under the

Mind Blank spell, and the so-called 'mindless undead'. The boars were clearly neither golems or oozes, and he doubted Mind Blank was involved. It would also explain why they seemed to have no blood and felt no pain or hesitation.

"Are you alright there? You kind of took the worst of that blast," said Zorian, shifting his attention towards the man he came here to save. Now that he was close to the man, he could see that Lukav Teklo was a fairly handsome middle-aged man, sporting long black hair, a carefully sculpted beard and rather muscular physique. Zorian was a little surprised by this, as he had expected someone... wilder. After all, his fellow villagers had told him that the man disdained human contact and preferred to spend his time in the wilderness.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm alright," the man said, rising to his feet before swaying dangerously. Zorian quickly caught him and helped him regain his balance. "Dammit. Hoisted on my own petard, literally. Didn't even accomplish anything with it. Totally ignored my patented animal repellent. That's some compulsion they were under..."

"I'm pretty sure they're undead," Zorian said.

"What, really?" Lukav said, squinting at the closest boar. "My vision is a little blurry right now. Is it... is it really trying to *wriggle* towards me still?"

"I think so, yeah," Zorian confirmed.

Lukav barked out a stream of words in some Khusky language that Zorian didn't recognize. He was pretty sure they were swear words, though, so maybe it was better that way.

"I'm sorry," the man said after a few calming breaths. "I don't mean to be rude. I want to thank you, young man. I was lucky you happened upon me when you did. I surely would have died otherwise."

"Well, it wasn't entirely luck," Zorian said, causing the man to

give him a hard look. "You are Lukav Teklo, yes?" The man nodded. "I have been looking for you based on the recommendation you received from one of my friends, one Kael Tverinov."

"Ah, Kael!" Lukav immediately brightened. "Great kid, shame he stopped coming when he got engaged to that witch girl. I was hoping to recruit him as an apprentice, but I'm afraid Fria got to him first and unlike her, I didn't have a cute daughter of my own to tempt him away with. Talented alchemist, that boy. I'd ask you how he's doing, but we can do that in my house, when I calm down a little."

"That would be fine," Zorian said. "Though I want to take a look at these undead boars that attacked you, first. I'm pretty sure someone just tried to murder you. I don't think undead boars arise on their own."

"Oh no, definitely not," Lukav agreed. "Minor undead like that are basically flesh golems, only with an enslaved soul or spirit placed inside instead of an automation core. The only 'naturally' arising undead are ghosts and other soul entities. Alanic was always very clear on that. Not sure who would try to kill me, of all people, but apparently I pissed off a necromancer somewhere. Just my luck. I'll report this to the guild and have them deal with this, but feel free to examine these things as much as you want in the meantime. I'm kind of curious myself, but divinations were never my thing so..."

Zorian nodded and got to work, using an alteration spell to bind the legless torso of the nearest boar so it wouldn't thrash and move around before moving to analyze it.

As he feared, he didn't find out anything particularly useful and was forced to leave the scene to the guild investigators. At Lukav's advice he re-summoned the severing disk and chopped all of the downed boars except one into smaller pieces that no longer moved. Lukav claimed that one undead boar was enough for the guild in-

investigators and he didn't want to risk the attacker picking them up, sewing the legs back on and sending them after him again.

The last intact boar was buried deep into the soil via another alteration spell from Lukav, there to wait for guild investigators to arrive.

"Zombies, skeletons and other undead are not nearly as easy to make as stories make them out to be," Lukav explained as they made way towards his house. "Easier and cheaper to make than golems, sure, but still a significant expenditure of alchemical ingredients and time. Losing a dozen zombies like that has got to be a major loss for whoever is targeting me. No sense in letting them recuperate losses by leaving the zombie boars in fixable condition. Alanic told me to always destroy any disabled undead after the battle, just in case their maker is around to fix them back up. I didn't think I'd ever be in a position where that advice would be useful but there you go."

"Forgive me, but is the Alanic you're talking about Alanic Zosk?" Zorian asked.

"Why yes," Lukav confirmed. "I suppose Kael recommended him too?"

"Yes. He actually gave me a pretty long list of soul mages – you were just the first name on the list." He wasn't really, but it hardly mattered. The man motioned him to continue. "I need your help with a piece of soul magic I got hit with. I don't feel comfortable talking about it here in the open. I hope you'll hear me out when we get to your home."

"Fair enough. But unless you got hit by a transformation curse, I don't think there is much I can do for you. Alanic is actually a better bet – he's no curse-breaking specialist, but he knows the basics of the field at least. Of course, it would have been even better to seek the help of the guild, but I'm guessing you have a good reason for not wanting to get them involved."

"I do," confirmed Zorian. "And while I realize that the chance of you being able to help me is slim-

"Hey now, those are fighting words," Lukav warned.

"-I still hope you will hear me out and try to help me. It's entirely possible that you hold a crucial key to solving my problem, even if you are unable to give me a total solution. My problem is not a curse, exactly. It is exotic enough that Kael recommended Silverlake as a possible solution if all else fails."

"Say what?" Lukav asked incredulously. "He recommended that crazy old witch as a *solution* for something?"

"I know," Zorian sighed. "I heard from a reputable source that she asked for a grey hunter egg sack from the last guy who asked her for help."

"Now that's just ridiculous," Lukav snorted derisively. "Someone is pulling your leg. Not even Silverlake would do that. Anyway, I'll see what I can do. It's the least I can do for someone who saved my life."



After they had reached Lukav's house, the man penned a quick report to the nearest Mage Guild representative and paid one of the village boys to deliver it to Knyazov Dveri while they talked. Apparently the kid was a very good runner and had done such things for Lukav in the past. Regardless, it took a full hour for Lukav to tackle Zorian's problem, during which Zorian explained Kael's rather tragic situation to the man and Lukav gradually calmed down and waited for the potion he ingested to take care of his concussion.

"Horrible. I thought that hearing about Kael would cheer me up after this whole ordeal, but it only makes me feel even more depressed," Lukav said. Zorian stayed silent, content to

wait for Lukav to continue. After a few seconds of being lost in his thoughts, the man shook his head with a sigh. "Well, I think the potion did its work by now, since staring into the lamp no longer hurts my eyes and my head no longer feels like it's been stuffed with wool. Do you think you could tell me more about your problem now? The house has some basic wards to shut down scrying but it's not professional work, just something I had a friend make for me. The village doesn't have enough ambient mana to support anything substantial in terms of permanent wards, anyway. I guess we could go to Knyazov Dveri and hire a private room in one of the more expensive inns, but that would cost a pretty penny and I'm kind of averse to spending money like that."

"It's fine," said Zorian. He had already analyzed the man's warding scheme as practice and found it adequate. Slightly worse than Zorian could manage with a full day's work or so, but far better than a hastily erected privacy scheme that had been his original plan.

After a few seconds to collect his thoughts, he began to talk. Telling the man about the time loop was absolutely out of the question, of course, but that didn't mean he had to be totally vague about his situation. He told him how he stumbled upon a fight between a lich and an unknown mage, and was caught in the cross-fire, getting hit by an unknown soul magic spell in the process. The other mage dispelled it, but the damage had already been done. After spending several weeks sick, he seemingly recovered, only to find out later that the spell had left its mark on him after all. Here Zorian went a little vague, refusing to state what the consequences he noticed were, simply insisting that the issue was private.

"Difficult," Lukav said unhappily when Zorian was finished. "Knowing what the consequences were is a pretty crucial clue as to what the spell actually was, you know? You are sure it has noth-

ing to do with transformation?"

"Absolutely," Zorian confirmed.

"Not even partial transformations?" The man asked. "Remember, not all transformations are total or involve obvious physical changes. The vast majority of magical enhancements are actually transformation, even if they only do things like increase your strength and agility – they all call upon attributes of some other creature to do their thing, transforming the user in some non-obvious way."

"I didn't know that," Zorian admitted. "But no, it's still not a transformation effect. It's actually more of an out-of-body experience, with my soul periodically leaving the body and then snapping back to it. So magical augmentations are generally transformation magic? Is that why they always seem to ask for animal parts and the like?"

"Astral projection?" Lukav asked. "Hmm, makes sense. Some soul magic spells definitely weaken the links between the soul and the body if used incorrectly, and you said the spell the lich cast on you had been botched. Not that letting the spell run its course had been a good idea, mind you, but some of the necromantic arts are just as dangerous if dismissed incorrectly as they are in their raw form. You're definitely right to seek help over this. And yes, the parts of animals and magical creatures are there to provide an example of what you want to the transformation spell. 'Eagle Eye' spell literally gives you the eyes of an eagle, for instance. Transformation magic is very useful for such augmentation because it is very easy to reverse."

"It is? I thought transformation was dangerous," said Zorian. That was what they were taught in the academy.

"Well... maybe a little," the man admitted. "But compared to the alternatives, it is incredibly safe. You see, when you cast a regular transformation spell on yourself you are essentially putting

clothes on your soul. Don't look at me like that, it's what it is. Yes, the official term is 'transformation shell', but they're basically like soul clothes. You can put them on, see, and you can take them off. Even if you mess up the spell and can't turn back or you get locked into an alternate form by a malicious opponent, you are still just a dispel or a curse-breaking session away from returning to normal. Your soul is still intact and unchanged beneath the transformation shell, and once the spell is gone you revert to your base form. The problem is that sometimes people overreach and end up transforming too far, so you end up with a mage, say, transforming into a troll in both mind and body and killing his entire family before the spell runs out of mana and he reverts back to normal. Or they attach the transformation shell too firmly to their soul and can't change back, and are then stuck in the form of a sparrow or something and can't talk to people or meaningfully interact with their environment. That's why a lot of people don't do transformation via invocations and rituals any more, and just buy transformation potions from people like me who know what they're doing – no chance of messing up, just drink a potion made by an expert and you're golden."

"Ah."

"On the other hand, when you're literally messing with your body chemistry and using alteration on your flesh, you're usually doing something totally irreversible," Lukav continued. "The human body is a complex thing, and I don't think anyone really understands enough about it to meaningfully improve it. Most potions that aim to enhance the real body with some exotic concoction are basically stimulant drugs with addictive properties or cause hard-to-cure damage if used often. And alteration spells that aim to alter the flesh directly have heavy drawbacks that make them hardly worth the effort and are often a total bitch to undo. I should know, I got called in often to help out with the fallout created by such

magic. But we're getting off track. Come with me and I'll see if I can do something about your problem."

Lukav led him into his basement, past several locked doors, until they reached a spacious underground chamber. The huge spell formula on the floor in the form of two circles, one large one and one small one, each of which was ringed by lots and lots of magical glyphs, was a dead giveaway that this was some kind of ritual room. The fact that the room was perfectly cubical, with identical dimensions in all directions, was a further confirmation – flawless geometric shapes were always better for holding magic than anything remotely irregular, which was why Ikosian artifice featured a lot of circles, triangles, cubes, pyramids, cylinders, domes and so on.

Other than the ritual circle on the floor, the room was empty and featureless – likely to minimize magical interference from anything else. Zorian hoped he would not have to get naked for this – he had heard some of the more delicate magical scans were actually bothered by clothes and the like, and wasn't at all enthusiastic about that possibility.

Thankfully, Lukav's instructions didn't turn out to be that bad.

"Alright, leave any magical items on your person outside the room and then step into the center of the big circle, right into that big empty space," he told Zorian.

Zorian was more than a little apprehensive about leaving his magic items behind, since that would leave him totally defenseless. Especially the three innocuous-looking steel rings he had hanging on a necklace tucked into his shirt. Those rings were the latest iteration of his explosive suicide device that he had been steadily refining throughout the restarts. Anyone could make an explosive device with a bit of spell formula knowledge, of course, but making them stable enough not to go off by themselves yet capable of going off on a moment's notice whenever he gives a signal?

Shrouding the explosive mana core with enough divination blockers to make the bombs invisible to wards designed to detect those very kinds of devices, thus allowing him to take those things literally everywhere he went, including the tightly warded academy facilities? Making them small and convenient enough that they weren't a chore to carry around? Not everyone could do that, he was sure.

In the end he decided to remove everything except the necklace. Getting killed by betrayal would suck but ultimately just be an annoyance, whereas getting stuck in some kind of soul mutilation ritual without means of suicide would be irreparably catastrophic. He just didn't trust Lukav that much, even if his empathy was telling him the man was honest enough and harbored no hostile feelings towards him.

He quickly put his spell rod, shielding bracelet, bag of small explosive cubes (kept for offensive purposes) and the experimental automation core he had been fiddling with in his spare time into a small pile next to the door and walked inside. Lukav was already sitting inside the smaller circle, which also had an empty space in the center of it that could accommodate him easily. Zorian copied the man and promptly sat down on the stone floor inside the larger circle. He had a feeling this could take a while.

Apparently Lukav's magic couldn't detect the necklace, because he said nothing about it.

"You don't have any kind of soul shell on top of your soul," Lukav decreed after 15 minutes of examination. "I kind of expected that. The sickness you said followed the spell that hit you strongly hints that part of your actual soul was affected. Let's see if I can detect any foreign bits in your soul then..."

Now this was the part that Zorian definitely cared about. He had been wondering for quite some time how big of a chunk of Zach's soul did he end up with and whether it was having some

kind of effect on him that he was unaware of. Hopefully Lukav would be able to shed some light on that issue.

After more than half an hour of spellcasting and lots of frowning, Lukav was finally ready to give his report.

"Weird. You definitely have something woven into your soul, but it's not like anything I've ever seen. Actually, you have *two* somethings. One is some kind of complicated bit of spellwork woven incredibly tightly into your soul, definitely not soul-stuff but not something I recognize either. Very weird that something so complex could result from a botched spell. Not calling you a liar but it doesn't make sense to me. The other something... well, it's definitely a piece of foreign soul stuff fused into your own soul, but I don't think you have to worry about that much. It's not a spirit or some soul parasite, and it seems to have all but dissolved into your own soul. In a year or two it will be gone entirely, completely assimilated."

"What kind of consequences will that have?" Zorian asked worriedly.

"None, I think. Your soul appears to be converting it into just another piece of itself rather than trying to keep it distinct. So there shouldn't be any major personality shifts and you probably won't get any nifty abilities from whomever or whatever it was that donated a part of their soul to you. Though, I guess it is possible that the fragment had affected your personality to an extent when you first got it, before your soul had the chance to assimilate it sufficiently, and such influences may linger still. Do you think and act radically different ever since the incident?"

Zorian frowned. "To be perfectly honest, yes, I am *quite* different from how I used to be. But I'm not sure how much significance to attach to that. The incident was very traumatic, and so much has happened ever since then..."

"I understand," Lukav nodded sympathetically. "Your life has

taken a completely different course after your fateful encounter with the darker side of magic. You would have changed anyway, and any changes caused by the soul fragment would have been lost in the noise. If you want my advice, you should not worry about it. You are who you are right now, and the fragment is all but gone. If shifters can claim to be the same person after stapling an animal soul to their own, then I'm not sure why a little nudge from a soul fragment should worry you."

"It's in my nature to worry," Zorian said. "Though admittedly the fact the fragment will be gone soon does make me feel better."

"Well," said Lukav, rising to his feet with an audible pop of his joints. "I'm glad to have allayed at least some of your fears, but this is as much as I can personally help you, I'm afraid. For the strange spellwork in your soul, you will have to talk to Alanic. He tends to be very suspicious of strangers and unannounced visitors, but I'll accompany you to smooth things over since you did save my life and all. Is there anything else you wanted my help with?"

"Well, not really," said Zorian. "But if I can trouble you some more, what can you tell me about shifters? You mentioned them several times while we talked today. Are you in contact with the local wolf shifter tribe by any chance?"

"No, not really," said Lukav, shaking his head. "I mean, I could locate them if I had a week or so, but I'd really rather not. Talking to them is annoying, and they don't like me very much ever since I tried to buy the shifter ritual off of them that one time."

"Ah," said Zorian with some disappointment. "It's just that I also talked to Vani, the local scholar in Knyazov Dveri, and he recommended I try to contact the local wolf shifters for help. Do you think the idea has any merit?"

"In terms of whether their soul magic expertise could have helped you? Maybe, though I wouldn't bet on it," said Lukav. "But I really, *really* doubt they would agree to help you. The shifter

tribe he speaks of, the Red Fang tribe, is fiercely protective of their special magic and suspicious of anyone who takes an interest in it. Hell, they don't even talk to other shifter tribes about it! Having high-exclusive access to shifter magic is very prestigious for them, and they don't want to share it with anyone."

"Then why did you offer to buy it off of them?" asked Zorian curiously.

"Well I didn't know that then, did I? How the hell was I supposed to know these things when they barely talk to anyone in the mage community?" grouched Lukav. "Okay, yeah, I may have been a *little* too insistent, but they could have explained things to me politely instead of making such a big deal out of it."

"I see," said Zorian carefully. Lukav probably wasn't the best person to help him contact the shifters, it seemed. Just as well, since he had a much likelier lead right now in the form of Alanic.

He agreed he would drop by tomorrow in the evening to pick up Lukav, and that they would then go meet Alanic together. The two men were old friends according to Lukav, and Alanic would be easier to deal with if he was there to vouch for Zorian's character and honesty.

Zorian hoped that the priest would be as useful as Lukav claimed he would be.



The next day Zorian spent an entire morning practicing the severing disc to make sure he could actually control it properly the next time he used it, switching to various levitation exercises when he got bored or ran low on mana. As evening approached, Zorian teleported to Lukav's village and spent an hour or so in idle chitchat with the man. Zorian wasn't sure, but it seemed to him that the man had hinted at the possibility of teaching Zorian some

of his secrets. Of course, there would probably be an apprenticeship contract involved if he wanted to take Lukav upon that offer, but with the time loop in place, such entanglements wouldn't be permanent in nature. Perhaps he should set aside a future restart or two to see what the man had to offer, but transformation magic simply wasn't a priority right now. He needed information and defenses against soul magic before anything else.

Eventually, they both got on their way. Lukav had wanted to walk to Alanic's residence, but Zorian had vetoed the idea arguing that would be a waste of time when he could just teleport them next to the man's house instead. Admittedly his only experience in teleporting others had been when he had retreated from Vazen's house with Gurey in tow, but he was confident he could replicate that success. And as it turned out, he was right about that.

"I'm surprised someone as young as you can teleport," Lukav said conversationally, looking at their new surroundings to determine where exactly they ended up at. They were not far from the temple that Alanic worked at and which also served as his home, but Zorian opted not to teleport too close, as Lukav indicated that the man could be somewhat trigger happy about such things. "You're, what, 16? I guess I finally met one of those kid geniuses people talk about. You're not *that* Kazinski, are you?"

"No, I just happen to have the same last name as Daimen," Zorian lied.

"Figures," the man said. "You must get that question a lot."

"You have *no* idea," Zorian sighed. Thankfully, Kazinski wasn't that rare of a last name and no one had accused him of lying when he denied any connections.

Whatever Lukav had been trying to say next was promptly drowned out by the unmistakable sounds of explosions coming from the house in front of them, immediately followed by angry shouting in an unknown language and sounds of gunshots.

Zorian quickly drew his spell rod and scowled. He had been afraid of this. Whoever was behind the disappearance of the soul mages had noticed their assassination of Lukav had failed and decided to throw subtlety out of the window and move fast to eliminate their remaining target. They no doubt knew that Lukav and Alanic were friends and that Alanic would soon know all about the assassination attempt.

He cautiously advanced forward, Lukav trailing after him.

There were no undead this time, probably because the target was a well-known undead-hunter and was thus bound to be good against them. Instead, the attackers consisted of 15 men armed with rifles – probably non-magical mercenaries – and 2 mages acting like spell support. They were hesitant to simply storm Alanic's house for some reason, and instead waited outside for something to happen. Unwilling to charge into a group of riflemen like idiots, both Zorian and Lukav settled in behind some trees to observe the group.

"They're trying to bring down the wards before they move in," Zorian realized after a few seconds. "The mage on the right is trying to collapse the entire warding scheme, the one on the left is protecting him from all reprisals while he's busy and the riflemen are periodically shooting at the windows to keep Alanic from raining down offensive spells on them at will."

A ray of fire punctuated his whispered statement by erupting from one of the second story windows, aiming for the mage who was dismantling the wards. The other mage immediately shielded his companion from the attack, and the riflemen responded with a withering barrage of bullets at the offending opening.

"We have to help him," Lukav said firmly.

"The only option I see is waiting for a good opening," Zorian said. "I don't see a way to get involved right now that wouldn't immediately get us both killed."

"Can you deal with the two mages if I take care of the gun-toting idiots?" Lukav asked.

Zorian gave him a curious look. How did he intend to do that? Was he one of those idiots that still underestimated the effectiveness of guns even after the huge death toll they racked up against combat mages in the Splinter Wars?

"Well?" Lukav asked, a little more harshly.

Deciding to take some risk, Zorian skimmed the man's surface thoughts for a moment. He promptly realized that the man beside him cared deeply about Alanic and couldn't bear to see him killed if he could do something, *anything* about it. He was ready to move in with or without Zorian, but he honestly thought he could prevail against the riflemen. He was far less sure whether he could survive against them if he had to deal with the mage support as well, though.

"I can deal with them, yeah," said Zorian. "Wait for two minutes before you charge in."

He then promptly cast invisibility on himself and walked off in the direction of the two mages.

He wasn't walking for the sake of being dramatic – the invisibility spell he was using was a very delicate optical illusion that required his conscious attention to maintain. Any sort of distracting activity, such as fighting or casting spells, immediately unraveled it. He couldn't even run without turning into a shimmering humanoid outline that was far more attention grabbing than simply walking up to the mages with no cloaking attempts.

But a fast walk turned out to be sufficient. He was practically on top of the two mages when Lukav finally grew sick of waiting and charged into the fray with a battle cry.

At least he thought the creature that came charging in was Lukav. The huge bull covered in dark green, fishlike scales, its eyes glowing with malevolent red light, seemed like something a

transformation expert would use and it sure as hell wasn't aligned with the attackers. The beast let loose a loud bellow that was laced with some kind of magical fear effect. Zorian ignored the mental attack easily enough, but three of the riflemen weren't as fearless and immediately fled screaming. The rest were shaken enough by the fear effect that they gave the bull a few crucial moments to close in before they started firing.

As Zorian expected, those scales weren't just for show, and the bullets didn't do much. The two hostile mages beside him seemed to realize their forces weren't going to fare well against this new threat because the defender suddenly started to cast a spell and the ward breaker sped up his work. Deciding that the defender was the bigger threat, Zorian decided to forgo any fancy spellwork and simply pulled out a knife from his belt and rammed it harshly into the man's neck, dropping his own invisibility in the process.

The other mage didn't react fast enough, too shocked at Zorian's sudden appearance, and received a swift kick in the groin a moment later. He immediately collapsed on the ground with a keening wail. After checking to see if any of the riflemen were gunning for him (they weren't, as they were too busy being trampled by the bull beast that Lukav had transformed into) Zorian reached into the mage's mind and blasted it with a crude telepathic assault. The man went unconscious like Zorian had been hoping he would, out of the fight.

Before Zorian could decide whether he should get involved in the fight against the riflemen (it seemed unnecessary, and he wasn't largely immune to gunfire like Lukav was), a trio of flaming projectiles rained down from the second floor and incinerated three of the riflemen that had been trying to rally the others. The bull-beast let loose another fear-laced bellow at this, and the survivors promptly fled.

Zorian watched them go, ready to erect a shield around himself

if one of them decided to let loose a few parting shots. None of them did.

The bull beast let out a derisive snort and kicked the ground a few times before suddenly... folding upon itself, for the lack of a better word, and becoming a man. Specifically, Lukav.

Man, transformation was more useful than he had figured it was. He understood why Lukav had been reluctant to engage the attackers without someone to take out the mages though – without hands, the alchemist could not cast any defensive spells himself, and was very vulnerable to hostile magic.

Any conversation was postponed when a short, bald, muscular man literally dropped out of the sky in front of them. It took Zorian almost a second to realize that this was probably Alanic Zosk and that he had *jumped down from the freaking two story window!*

He looked unaffected by the fall, but still!

"Al, you idiot, I told you not to do that shit!" Lukav yelled. "I almost firebombed you before I realized it was you!"

"You, boy," Alanic said to Zorian, completely ignoring Lukav's anger. "Why did you let those men go? You could have picked them off as they fled."

"I... didn't think it was okay to kill fleeing opponents?" Zorian said, surprised at being put on the spot like that. "I don't know, it just seemed too bloodthirsty to just shoot them in the back while they ran."

A short silence ensued as Alanic gave him a blank look. His mind, though unshielded, was incredibly disciplined and gave Zorian no insight to the man's personality and mood. He idly noted that one of the man's eyes was blue, while the other one was brown. There was a horrid vertical scar over his blue eye, which really looked like it should have destroyed it as well when it was made.

"I see," he said finally. "You're young."

"What has that got to do with anything?" Zorian protested, annoyed at the man's attitude. They just saved the man's life, for god's sake!

"You haven't been fighting for long," he simply said. "You're inexperienced."

'Yeah, well, you're an asshole,' thought Zorian. But outwardly he just frowned instead.

Yeah, Zorian could already see Alanic would be one of *those* people. He really had the damndest luck.



Alanic Zosk turned out to be pretty calm about the full blown assault on his temple by two dozen gun-wielding mercenaries, refusing Lukav's demand that they go and report the thing to the nearest Guild station right away with a dismissive statement that it was 'too soon to involve them'. He even had the unconscious mage that Zorian had disabled transferred to the dungeon in the temple's basement (why exactly did a temple have a dungeon, Zorian wondered but was afraid to ask), openly admitting he intended to have the man interrogated later.

In the meantime, he wanted to know what Zorian and Lukav came to him for. No, he didn't need time to calm down, why do you ask?

Zorian had to admit he admired the man's composure, even if he was a rude ass.

"Interesting," Alanic said after Zorian repeated the story he told Lukav. "Very well, I will see what has been done to you. Lukav, please leave the room while I examine mister Kazinski here."

Just like that? Apparently yes. Unlike Lukav, Alanic didn't use any fancy ritual rooms, and the examination took all of five minutes before the man had pronounced his verdict.

"You have a marker stamped into your soul," Alanic told him bluntly.

"A what?" Zorian asked.

"A marker is a combination of a beacon and an identification tag. It allows certain spells to find the marker very easily across great distances and unambiguously identifies whatever is tagged by the marker. They are often used by shopkeepers in fancier shops to track stolen wares, by high-security prisons and spies to track movements of marked individuals and in construction of certain wards that allow people to be 'keyed in' and therefore free of some or all of the restrictions that all other visitors labor under. Among other things. They are usually placed on items, as placing permanent markers on people is iffy and requires tattoos and such. Yours though, is stamped directly into your soul."

Zorian remained quiet, his thoughts churning. A marker. That was why he ended up caught in the time loop along with Zach, wasn't it? The spell wasn't keyed in to the originator's soul or some such, since those things were ambiguous and could fail – the original looper could end up with his soul damaged or slightly altered, much like what happened to him and Zach in the end, and then the spell could glitch and fail to loop them back like it's supposed to. No, the makers of the loop instead stamped Zach's soul with something unchangeable and unmistakable.

And then Red Robe and Zorian inherited it, because the makers of the loop were a little too smart for their own good..

"Removing the marker-" Alanic began, oblivious or uncaring about Zorian's obvious state of deep thought.

"I don't want it removed!" Zorian immediately protested, broken out of his thoughts.

Alanic gave him a considering look.

"I suppose you are fortunate then, because I do not think I could remove it even if I wanted to," Alanic said. "It is unlike any-

thing I have ever seen. The marker is woven incredibly tightly into your soul, suffusing every corner of it. It is as if a chunk of your soul was replaced with it and it then grew to fill every nook and cranny it could find to root itself in as firmly as possible."

Oh hell...

He rose from his seat in agitation, pacing around the room. Alanic watched him impassively, silent and expressionless, until Zorian calmed down a little and sat back down.

"I need more information," he said. "And I need a way to protect myself from things like this in the future. Can you help me?"

Alanic nodded.

"But tomorrow," he added. "For now I have a prisoner to interrogate."

ALTERNATIVES

Despite Alanic's proclamation that he was going to interrogate the prisoner, he did not immediately descend into the temple dungeon. Instead he started rummaging through a nearby cabinet full of potion bottles while Zorian slowly absorbed today's newest revelations, opting to remain in the room for the moment. He was not in the mood for answering questions that Lukav would have for him once he got outside, and Alanic seemed like the sort of person who would warn him if he was being bothersome. Since Alanic said nothing about his continued presence, Zorian felt he had tacit permission to stay.

He had a piece of propagating, self-repairing magic lodged in his soul. Part of him marveled at the magical expertise of the person or thing that created the time loop system, but the greater part of him couldn't help but wonder what exactly was crammed into said wonder of magical spell design. Alanic's description, as well as Lukav's inability to identify the spell despite his advanced-looking ritual, painted a picture of something far too complex and lifelike to be a mere identification tag.

This was important, he could feel it – he needed to know how the marker functioned as soon as possible. For one thing, if there was some kind of hostile contingency woven inside it, ready to

screw him over once he tripped over some esoteric activation condition, he wanted to know about it. Not to mention that this particular piece of magic could very well be a key clue to understanding the time loop. What kind of secrets were locked inside of it? Kael had speculated that whatever spell had been placed on Zach to initiate the time loop had all sorts of safeguards and contingencies woven into it, and while the marker clearly wasn't the source of the looping magic itself, it sounded like the perfect place to put those safeguards in. Maybe it had the time loop instructions manual encoded somewhere in its structure? Well, probably nothing so convenient, but still.

There was one thing that still bothered him greatly – if he had a marker in his soul that uniquely identified him as a time looper, why the hell hadn't Red Robe tracked him down by now? His enemy was a proficient soul mage, after all. Zorian found it difficult to believe he was ignorant of the marker mechanism. With that in mind, he should have had little trouble locating every single time looper, Zorian included. But he didn't. Why was that?

"Mister Zosk?" Zorian spoke up. "Could you spare a moment, please?"

"Call me Alanic," the priest said, stopping his inspection of the cabinet with an annoyed huff. Zorian got the impression the annoyance was directed more at the cabinet than at Zorian, though. "What is it?"

"I know you said we'd speak tomorrow, but I'd just like to know how difficult it is to locate a marker like mine. How hard would it be for you to track me down with the best magic at your disposal?"

"By tracking your marker? Almost impossible," Alanic immediately stated. "I'd need the original keystone from the maker of the spell to define the search criteria properly. That thing is far too complex for anything else."

Zorian frowned. "Wouldn't having my own copy of the

marker sidestep that?" he asked.

"Well yes, but that would require you to be right beside me and serve as a willing focus of the spell. A tracking spell that requires you to be right next to the target is functionally useless, wouldn't you think?" He suddenly gave Zorian a shrewd look. "But what you're really wondering about is not you tracking down the person whose soul fragment gave you the marker, but them tracking you, aren't you, Mister Kazinski?"

"Call me Zorian," he said. If the man wanted Zorian to be casual with him, he should show the same courtesy. "And yes, that is basically what I'm worried about. How easy would it be for another holder of the marker to track me down?"

Alanic quickly walked over to a nearby bookshelf, plucked a plain brown book from its shelf and handed it to Zorian.

"The spell you want is on page 43," Alanic told him.

Zorian quickly leafed through the book until he reached the indicated page. The spell in question was not an invocation, but rather a 10-minute ritual. It allowed the caster to locate a specified marker based on the copy of the marker in the caster's possession, and it had a downright jaw-dropping range. If Zorian was reading this correctly, it could locate any and all copies of the marker over a circular area that extended well beyond Eldemar's borders!

Yeah, it was not cheap in terms of mana use – it required enough mana that Zorian wouldn't have been able to cast it at all before the time loop, and even now, after 3 years of restarts, it would take a sizeable chunk of his reserves. But still, for a nation-wide search spell it was shockingly accessible. He supposed its very narrow search focus allowed it to be hyper-efficient about mana use. Really, the only possible deal breaker was that the spell assumed the caster had a keystone imprinted with the copy of the marker, and would have to be slightly modified to switch the reference target of the spell from a stone held in the caster's hand

to a marker stamped on their soul.

Zorian sincerely doubted Red Robe was incapable of making such minor alterations to spells, though.

"I could be tracked from one end of the country to another," Zorian mumbled disbelievingly to himself.

"Yes," Alanic agreed. "Possibly even further. I don't claim to have comprehensive knowledge of tracking spells so there may be a version with even greater range. Your insistence that the marker must stay on was quite surprising. I hope you have a good reason for leaving a giant target painted on your soul."

"Ugh. I'm not happy about the situation, but I do. I really, really do. I'd also like to cast this tracking spell myself to see how many other people turn up in results, but we can deal with that tomorrow. I've already kept you from your interrogation long enough."

"Unfortunately, I seem to have run out of truth potions," the priest said unhappily, throwing a glare at his potion cabinet. "Annoying. You can't buy those on the open market and it takes days for Lukav to make a batch. It seems I won't be interrogating anyone today..."

Oh. He agreed with Alanic, that really was annoying – he wanted to know who the guy was working for just as much as the priest did. He thought about offering his services as a mind reader to the priest but quickly shelved that idea. Aside from the very likely possibility he would make Alanic too suspicious of Zorian to help him with his soul magic problems, there was the fact that he wasn't sure how much help he would be anyway. His mind reading skills were still very unreliable at this point. He'd feel pretty stupid if he outed himself as a mind mage and then failed to achieve anything of note – better try that in some later restart, after he gave his telepathic abilities some polish.

"No matter. I will figure something out. I'm afraid I'll have to

postpone our meeting for a day or two because of this, though. I'll send a message through Lukav once I have sorted my business in order. Agreeable?"

"Sure," Zorian shrugged. "Just don't die before we meet again. Whoever wants you and Lukav dead can clearly throw a lot of resources at the problem so they're unlikely to stop now."

"The same goes for you, young man," Alanic scoffed. "You seem to have an uncanny ability to be in the right place at the right time. Suspicious, that. If I were in the attacker's place, I would definitely make sure to get rid of you before trying again. And no offense, but you look like a much softer target than me."

Not having much to say to that, Zorian simply bid the man goodbye, had a brief conversation with Lukav outside the room to inform him of everything and then went back to his room at the inn. He would sleep on things before making any decisions.



With the next several days freed up for his own activities, Zorian decided to go visit Silverlake and see if the capricious old witch was in a better mood to help this time. The trouble was, he could no longer find her cottage. His memory was extremely good, and he remembered exactly where it was in relation to surrounding natural landmarks, but when he physically got to the location there was nothing there. No cottage, no witch, no nothing. As far as Zorian could tell, it wasn't an illusion and there was no ward in place messing with his mind to stop him from noticing it – he detected no mental tampering, his area-wide dispels revealed no optical flickering, and he physically passed through the area that the cottage stood on in the previous restart and met no resistance whatsoever.

How the hell did she do that? Dimensional shenanigans, maybe? Like a pocket dimension that can intersect with reality under some circumstance or something?

Whatever the exact mechanics, he clearly wasn't going to reach Silverlake's place without her inviting him first. Considering that last time it took him several days of wandering around and almost dying to get her attention, he decided to not bother with that and find something else to do.

Namely, investigating the rest of the disappeared soul mages. While it was true that Alanic seemed to be his best clue at the moment, it wouldn't hurt to check the other locations as well. Thus, while waiting for Alanic to contact him again, Zorian proceeded to break into the homes of each of his targets before combing through them with every divination spell in his arsenal. The knowledge he picked up from Gurey's little escapade was quite useful here, as a number of those homes were warded against entry and divinations, and that would have given him quite a bit of trouble in the past.

What he found out wasn't much, but it did put at least one question to rest – the attackers had indeed been active long before the time loop started. Two of the houses showed signs of a struggle, and forensic spells dated those signs about a month to a month and a half before the start of the time loop. In addition, the house of the old curse-breaking herbalist lady looked pristine on first glance, but Zorian easily detected evidence of repair magic used on furniture and sloppily erased blood splatter on the walls – both dated 3 days before the start of the loop.

Zorian silently thanked Haslush for his divination instructions – without them, he would have never been able to tell such things with any degree of certainty.

He also made sure to search the houses for anything personally interesting while he was at it, and here he had greater success. The herbalist lady had intact notes about her curse-breaking side-

business – Zorian pocketed those, even if he wasn't able to make use of them at the moment. She also had a pretty extensive journal that listed where to find rare plants in the nearby forest as well as detailed some of her rare recipes. Zorian left that alone for now, but made a mental note to show it to Kael at some point and see if it was worth something. The ransacked tower turned out to have been imperfectly ransacked, and Zorian managed to find two different secret compartments that the attackers missed. One held a trio of high-quality combat staves and a stack of blasting rods. The other held a bunch of spellbooks containing combat spells – specifically, the sort of combat spells you couldn't buy legally anywhere because they were far too effective and lethal for the Mage Guild's tastes. Naturally, Zorian swiped all of it for his personal use. He found more interesting stuff in other houses, but nothing he felt like taking at the moment. The familiar-obsessed guy, for instance, had mountains and mountains of books and journals dedicated to soul bonds, magical creatures, and familiar-related magics. It was interesting, but not something he needed at the moment.

In the end it was five days before Alanic finally contacted Zorian again. If Lukav didn't insist that his friend was alive and well, just unusually occupied with something, Zorian would have feared the attackers got him.

Regardless, Zorian soon found himself seated in front of Alanic, ready to finally discuss things.

"I apologize for the wait," Alanic said. "I'm afraid that the confessions I managed to force out of the prisoner had far more far-reaching consequences than I had initially suspected."

"Oh? I don't suppose you could tell me what those are?" asked Zorian.

"I'm afraid not. It's not something you should concern yourself with," Alanic said, leveling him a mild glare.

"Fine, fine, I get it," Zorian said, raising his hands in a placat-

ing gesture. Truthfully, it did not matter much because he already knew what Alanic had found out. While the priest seemed to have some sort of natural mental defense, his friend Lukav didn't. Zorian had simply pestered the transformation expert about the prisoner and read the man's thoughts wherever he refused to answer.

Basically, the mage Zorian incapacitated was hired by none other than Vazen – the man who Gurey wanted him to rob (well, spy on) in the previous restart. Worse, the man appeared to be just an underling himself, with the real ringleader being someone more highly placed in the local hierarchy. Someone capable of interfering with the police and guild investigations.

It was certainly an interesting piece of information, and Zorian had some suspicions of his own about Vazen now. The man had concluded some kind of deal with a company in Cyoria, so it was entirely possible he was connected to the invaders somehow. He had intended to have another go at those documents anyway, but now they acquired a whole new importance.

"Good," Alanic nodded. "What did you want to start with?"

"Well, first of all I'd like to know if you could help me defend myself against soul magic in the future," said Zorian.

"Why wouldn't I be able to help you with that?" asked Alanic curiously, cocking his head to the side slightly.

"I was told that spellcasters without some measure of soul perception can only cast the most rudimentary of soul magic," said Zorian. And from his attempts to duplicate Kael's spells, he knew that to be largely true – the only spell he managed to learn from Kael was the one that cloaked him from the soul perception of other necromancers, and Kael claimed that was baby stuff.

"Ah. You've been talking to a necromancer, I see," Alanic said.

Zorian winced. "It... seemed like a logical course of action. I had a soul magic problem, and he was a soul mage."

"Hmph. *Necromancers*," began Alanic, taking pains to stress

the word, "have a habit of targeting others with their spells, so of course they consider soul perception to be absolutely essential for their craft. If you just want to cloak your soul in some protective effect, it is hardly necessary to go to such lengths."

Oh, is that why he could cast Kael's soul sight invisibility spell but not the rest of his arsenal?

"Even for other things, it is possible to use lengthy rituals to get around that requirement. I believe you've already experienced an example of such a ritual when Lukav tried to determine what is wrong with you. Don't be fooled by his lack of skill – Lukav is but a dabbler in this branch of magic, and if you dedicate yourself to the discipline you could end up much more impressive than he is."

"But I'm never going to progress beyond unwieldy ritual setups without soul sight, am I?" guessed Zorian.

Alanic sighed. "Yes. But soul sight is too much of a temptation. It makes soul magic *too easy*. For the sake of your immortal soul, I implore you to turn away from that path. It is not necessary to go that far just to protect yourself."

"I see," said Zorian. "Out of curiosity, do *you* have soul perception?"

For the first time since Zorian met him, Alanic looked uncomfortable. "Yes. But that's... different."

'Of course it is,' Zorian thought. 'Do as I say, not as I do, just like it always was.'

But he didn't say that. Instead he asked Alanic what exactly he was willing to teach him.

"There are two ways I can see this going," said Alanic, quickly regaining his composure. "Option one is that I teach you how to perform a plethora of protective rituals to foil hostile soul magic. They are, as you say, *cumbersome* – casting times can be up to 2 hours long in some cases, and setting up a ritual isn't easy. They

last a long time, though. Weeks if you perform them correctly. The advantage of this path is that you get a way to defend yourself right away – I’m fairly certain you could do the beginning rituals as you are now. Also, some of the rituals will allow you to affect souls other than yours, though none of the rituals I’m willing to teach you can be used on an unwilling target.”

”And the disadvantage is that if I’m ever caught unaware by the enemy, I’m screwed because there’s no way to shield myself on a moment’s notice,” finished Zorian.

”Exactly. That’s where option number two comes in. With the help of some meditation exercises and special potions, I can teach you how to ‘feel’ your own soul. If you hone the skill to a required level, this skill will allow you to cast any soul magic that has you as its target. You’ll be able to shield and analyze your soul with invocation spells, and it might even allow you to passively notice when someone is messing with your soul in some fashion.”

”I like that option,” Zorian said.

”I figured you might,” Alanic scoffed. ”The problem is that this option isn’t some quick power up. It will take you months to reach useable levels in this skill, and that’s assuming you have the patience and willpower required to perform the exercises every single day for months on end.”

”I do,” said Zorian curtly.

”We’ll see. I should also mention that until you master the skill of sensing your own soul, this option will leave you just as helpless to soul magic as you are currently.”

”Yeah, that’s a little dangerous,” Zorian admitted. Still, the second option sounded way more useful and functional than the first one. Maybe if he wasn’t stuck in the time loop he would blanch at the idea of spending months of his life like that, but right now it was looking like a bargain. ”I suppose there is a reason why I can’t learn both at the same time?”

"They're both demanding skills in their own way, and I don't trust you to be capable of juggling them both effectively," Alanic said, his tone brooking no disagreement.

"Fair enough," Zorian said. He was going to visit the man in future restarts anyway, so he could potentially just pick different options on different restarts. "How about this: you teach me the very basics of the soul rituals, the things I can pick up well enough as I am now, and then we immediately switch to the personal soul awareness project."

"I suppose I can live with that. You should note that the basics of soul rituals won't do much for you," Alanic noted.

"That's fine. I'm mostly interested in option number two anyway. The reason I want the basics of soul rituals is because I still want to cast that marker tracking ritual you showed me, and modifying it to work with the thing attached to my soul is probably going to require some working knowledge of soul magic."

"Probably," Alanic agreed.

"Well. Now we come to the 'make it or break it' question," Zorian sighed, fixing a weary gaze at Alanic. "What exactly are you asking of me in exchange for all this?"

Analic rolled his eyes. "Don't be so dramatic, boy. Teaching people how to defend themselves against necromancers and hostile spirits is a part of my calling, as far as I'm concerned. I'd take a whole class to teach if people were actually interested. Unfortunately, such threats are considered something of a minor issue in the aftermath of the Necromancer's War. So while yes, I do intend to send you on an errand or two, it isn't going to be anything too onerous. Lukav tells me you can teleport?"

"I can, yes."

"Excellent. I was thinking of sending you out as a courier from time to time to some of my more distant contacts. Nothing difficult or dangerous – just delivering some letters and packages for free."

Half an hour later, Zorian had managed to hammer out some kind of agreement with Alanic.

Overall, Zorian felt the priest had been quite generous in his terms – his principal demand was that Zorian had to show dedication, or else Alanic would unceremoniously terminate the lessons and kick him out. Specifically, he had to show up at the temple every evening like clockwork, and show 'diligence and enthusiasm' for the lessons. Right. Oh, and there was the whole business with him being a courier from the priest on occasion, which was of little concern to Zorian – he thought of it as teleportation practice more than anything.

"Well then," Alanic said, leaning back in his chair. "Now that this is all done, we can begin with our first lesson."

"What, now?" Zorian asked in surprise.

"Is there a reason to postpone things?"

"No, no, I'm just surprised. Most of my previous teachers have been... well, no matter. What are we starting with?"



Over the next two weeks Zorian continued studying the other disappearances while attending Alanic's lessons. He absorbed the basics of soul protection rituals in a few days and then moved onto the meditation exercises needed for personal soul sight, only to find out two things. First, the meditation exercises were incredibly, mind-numbingly *boring*. No wonder the man was worried about Zorian's dedication, he could easily imagine someone dropping that after only a few days. But no, Zorian was stronger than that... and besides, he really needed that skill.

Secondly, those 'special potions' Alanic mentioned? What the priest hadn't clarified at the time – and indeed, hadn't explained before Zorian actually drank one – was that they were extremely

powerful hallucinogens. Almost immediately after downing one, Zorian was assaulted with a cacophony of strange, incomprehensible sights and smells, sounds become distorted and unrecognizable, and his thoughts degenerated into a chaotic mess. It was a profoundly unpleasant experience, and once Zorian finally came to his senses and stopped drooling all over the floor of the temple (the jerk could have at least put a pillow under him!) he felt a powerful desire to punch Alanic in the face. The man had effectively drugged him helpless and was completely unrepentant about it too, claiming that without the help of those potions the entire process could take years. He would have to drink one of those once a week, apparently.

Which was all well and good, but it still didn't explain why the man hadn't warned him what would happen when he drank that potion. Personally, Zorian suspected *schadenfreude*.

Aside from the whole 'potion incident' thing, there was one tiny little detail he had failed to consider when he decided to accept Alanic as his newest personal tutor.

Alanic was a priest. Priests were, generally speaking, very religious people. It stood to reason, then, that they'd be very bothered by people who don't care much about their own religion or have some gaping holes in their understanding of religious dogma. And with Zorian spending every evening in the temple, it really was too much to expect that Alanic wouldn't notice just how... lacking... Zorian's religious credentials were.

The good news was that Alanic wasn't going to get rid of him because of this. The bad news was that he took it upon himself to correct this glaring deficiency. Thus, not only did Zorian have to suffer through boring meditation sessions every evening, they were now interspersed with longwinded lectures about the gods, angels, spirits, and man's place in the natural order.

Heaven help him. Or not, he supposed. He doubted the angels

would have a lot of compassion for someone in his position.

"...and thus, with the evidence that the gods have fallen silent no longer possible to ignore, and the unescapable fact that no more miracles would be forthcoming, the Holy Triumvirate decided to loosen the limitations on soul magic – a decision that did much to soften the blow of the Silence, but one that would have far-reaching negative consequences. But I can see that you are starting to lose focus so we will continue this tomorrow."

Thank the gods. Zorian quickly vacated the temple before the man could have a chance to change his mind.

He was barely out of the temple gates when he realized he was walking into an ambush.

It was a crow that tipped him off. It looked normal enough, though it was curiously brave in not fleeing at his approach. He had, however, gotten into a habit of automatically scanning the minds of every animal he saw as telepathic practice, and the crow in question didn't have any. That immediately raised an alarm in his head and he stopped, expanding his mind sense to maximum range.

In the next second he threw himself to the side, narrowly avoiding a hail of bullets that ripped through his previous location. Almost reflexively, he fired two force missiles in quick succession: one at the undead crow that had taken flight while he dodged – he didn't need that thing pecking his eyes out while he was busy elsewhere – and another one straight into the air, seemingly at nothing. That one was what Taiven called a 'screamer' – a missile that produced a loud, shrill scream as it flew through the air. Zorian hoped that the noise would give pause to the ambushers, at least for a moment, but the real purpose of it was to attract Alanic's attention and tell him there was a fight going on outside of his temple.

You know, just in case the gunshots weren't clear enough on

that.

The first bolt collided with the crow, causing it to erupt into a shower of feathers and fleshy bits (but no blood), but the second one didn't have much effect on the attackers. Zorian was forced to immediately erect a shield in front of himself to tank a powerful beam of shining force, and was then pinned in place by a withering hail of bullets. He had to pour half of his mana reserves into strengthening the shield, but it thankfully held.

Also thankfully, the attackers had a piss poor sense of tactics – apparently the entire force wasted their ammo on the initial barrage, and thus couldn't provide any further fire to keep him pinned in place while they reloaded. Zorian promptly took advantage of this to take cover behind a nearby tree, become invisible and then vacate the area as fast as he could without breaking the optical cloak.

It was a good thing he did, because the tree he had been hiding behind soon became a target of a massive fireball that reduced it to charcoal and did horrible things to everything around it.

These people really didn't pull any punches, did they?

Tracking his attackers' movements with his mind sense, Zorian could tell they weren't fooled with his maneuver. They knew he wasn't dead, and they were coming after him. Whelp, time to exercise the better part of valor and teleport away to safety!

A few seconds later, he sighed in resignation. Of course they erected a teleport ward around the area. Well, if that's how they wanted to play then so be it! Closing his eyes, he located the nearest gunman with his mind sense, connected with his mind and then hit him with the best telepathic attack he could manage.

He felt the target stop immediately, but apparently he'd failed to knock the man out. No matter. He disconnected from the man's mind and moved on the next one and repeated the procedure. He grinned nastily when he felt the man's mind shut down from the

strain, the gunman falling unconscious.

Then he moved onto the rest of the ambushing force, attacking their minds one by one. Two thirds of them were strong enough to weather the attack, though they would likely be dazed for a while and suffer a nasty headache for the rest of the day, but a full third found Zorian's telepathic attack too much for them. Sadly, the mage that supported them figured out what was happening and shielded his own mind against the tactic. Still, even if he didn't get them all, he succeeded in taking away their momentum and slowing them down.

It cost him, though. His telepathic powers, exotic as they may be, were still magic... and like all magic, they used mana to power themselves. His empathy and mind sense didn't seem to cost him anything that he could detect, and establishing a telepathic link with another was trivial in terms of mana expenditure – even for him, it was so minute as to be unnoticeable. But these telepathic attacks he had been doing? They were incredibly cheap, especially considering their effectiveness, but he had performed a lot of them in quick succession. He was almost spent.

He sure hoped Alanic got off his ass sometime soon, preferably before the mage could rally his forces and come after him again.

Suddenly, just as Zorian was about to start booby-trapping the place like crazy, another group of people teleported in and his heart sank. Well that just wasn't f- wait, they were fighting the first group. Huh. It seemed Alanic had called for the cavalry.

The sound of gunshots and flashes of spellfire filled the air again, but this time Zorian wasn't the target. Zorian wisely decided to sit this one out, being mostly out of mana and not wanting for one of the newcomers to confuse him for an enemy and put a bullet in his head before he had a chance to explain.

Ten minutes later, the noise quieted down and Zorian made his way back to the temple. There he found Alanic talking with a

mixed group composed of a four-man group of Guild battlemages and a small contingent of Eldemar soldiers. He was questioned on his role in the battle, but the fact that Alanic vouched for him kept the man in charge of the group from dragging him back to the Guild station for questioning. Apparently Alanic had quite a lot of pull with the Mage Guild.

He was worried the attackers would blab about Zorian's telepathic abilities, but apparently they were under the impression Zorian cast some kind of area-wide knockout spell rather than assaulting their minds directly. The leader of the Guild force even commended him on his restraint when faced with deadly force. Alanic gave him a severe look though. Zorian wasn't sure if he did that because he figured out there was something fishy about the whole story or because he disapproved of Zorian's 'soft' approach. He knew from previous conversations with the man that Alanic firmly believed in tough justice and striking back at threats as effectively as possible, so he might just be annoyed that Zorian had not used something more lethal.

Eventually he was given permission to leave (though warned not to leave his current accommodations in Knyazov Dveri for the foreseeable future) and beat a hasty retreat back to his room.



When Zorian reached his room, he felt totally drained and wanted to do nothing more than to crawl into his bed and sleep until tomorrow. That had been... intense. He thought he'd have gotten used to having his life targeted and being in life-and-death situations, but he apparently wasn't anywhere near that mindset yet. The questioning that followed wasn't really pleasant either, and he suspected he had overextended his mind a bit with his last stunt because his thoughts felt slightly more sluggish and fuzzy than they should, even taking his tiredness into account.

But no, he couldn't go to sleep yet. Today was significant in that he had finally finished modifying the marker tracking spell with Alanic's help, and he wanted to test it right away. His mana reserves had recovered by now, so he was good for a try. He quickly fished out one of the wakefulness potions he had made over the last week and downed it in one go. His head cleared out almost immediately, and so he promptly started creating the ritual circle with the handful of salt and powdered quartz.

After the circle was made and triple-checked for faults, he slowly went through the ritual, mindful not to mess it up since it would take a large chunk of his mana reserves whether it succeeded or failed.

The moment he spoke the last line of the ritual, Zorian was suddenly given a sense of the location and distance of all markers within the range of the spell.

All two of them. One was in the very center of the search area – that was him, obviously – and the other was far to the south, somewhere along Eldemar's southern border.

Zorian freely admitted he had not expected that. He had expected the ritual to locate either three markers or just one (himself). How can there be just two? Was one of the other time travelers out of range? Did he misunderstand something?

He would have to repeat the ritual at different intervals to see if another marker popped up at some point. On the very beginning of the next restart, certainly. But if the number of markers remained stubbornly at two, then that would mean that at least one of the time travelers didn't *have* the marker. Probably Red Robe, because Zorian was sure that Zach had one. It would explain why Red Robe didn't just make a beeline for Zorian when he realized he existed, and why he felt the need to ask Zorian how many other time travelers there were and who they were.

But that would mean that Red Robe became a time looper

through some other mechanism than Zorian did, wouldn't it?

"Nothing can ever be simple about this, can it?" he sighed, rubbing his eyes.

No matter. His immediate goals remained unchanged by this new complication – learn how to protect his soul, become a better fighter, and polish his mind magic into something usable and reliable. His mind drifted to the battle he was caught in today and he nodded to himself. His performance wasn't flawless, but he got out of it alive and the growth of his skills was undeniable.

Despite all the issues he encountered, he seemed well on his way to achieving his goals.

Chapter Thirty-Three

GATEWAYS

Standing still in the empty living room inside Vazen's house, Zorian stared unhappily at the splatter of green gunk in front of him that was currently eating through the floor with an audible sizzle. One could hardly tell that, not too long ago, the acid slime in front of him used to be a stack of important documents stored in Vazen's safe. The merchant *really* didn't want anyone to take a look at these, it seemed.

The operation started well. Everything started well. Not seeing the point of reinventing the wheel, Zorian used his past method of entering Vazen's home, then began dismantling the protections on the safe. Aside from the already familiar explosion trap, he also found a sleep trap which aimed to knock any prospective thieves unconscious the moment they touched the safe. He disabled both traps and, having found no further spellwork protecting the safe, immediately tried to remove the documents.

He promptly triggered a mechanical mechanism that dumped some kind of powerful acidic mixture on top of the safe's contents. The good news was that he managed to avoid getting any of the gunk on his hands – considering what the stuff was doing to the floor at the moment, it would have probably eaten right through

his bones before he managed to get it off of him. The bad news was that he failed to salvage any of the safe's contents before the gunk ruined it. He managed to levitate the contents out of the safe, yes, but the gunk was almost like glue in the way it clung to the papers. He was unable to separate it from the surviving documents before it ate through them all and then happily continued to dissolve the floor beneath them.

He shuddered. He was really, really glad he managed to yank his hands away in time to avoid getting any of that stuff on them.

Once again, Zorian was forced to leave Vazen's place empty-handed. He was sorely tempted to rig the entire place to explode in Vazen's face the moment he came back home as revenge, but that would be petty and stupid. A murder of such an influential man would attract a lot of attention, plus Alanic was probably paying very close attention to the man. And he had tried to rob the man after all, so he had no right to be particularly outraged anyway.

Still... Zorian was now absolutely certain that Vazen was involved in some very shady things, and he wasn't talking about tax fraud or industrial espionage. There was no way that Vazen would rig his safe to destroy things like business contracts and production blueprints in the event of discovery – the sheer amount of money he'd lost doing that must have been exorbitant. There had to be something more in there among those papers. Something incredibly illegal and incriminating, to the point where Vazen would rather lose everything than be discovered possessing it.

He was definitely coming back in the next restart. Maybe the man's misdeeds were unconnected to the Ibasan invaders gunning after Cyoria or the group targeting soul mages around Knyazov Dveri, but somehow Zorian doubted it. It cost him nothing to check, in any case.

Well, unless Vazen had even more horrifying surprises waiting for him should he overcome the second layer of his defenses.

Next time he was bringing a 10-foot pole with him, because there was no way he was putting his hands into that safe anymore.



The day after he had survived the failed ambush just outside Alanic's temple, Zorian arrived at his next meditation session feeling more than a little bit apprehensive. And not just about the possibility of another ambush – he did not like the looks Alanic had been giving him when he was giving his statement and Zorian was worried about what that meant for him. However, the lesson that day had been wholly unremarkable – there had been no second ambush, and Alanic gave no indication he was upset or suspicious of him. Thus, he put it out of his mind and decided to follow Alanic's example by carrying on as if nothing happened.

Now, three days later, Zorian could safely say that had been a mistake. Being dragged into the temple courtyard for a 'test of his combat skills' sounded suspiciously like punishment to his ears.

As an aside, why did a temple have a battle arena in its courtyard instead of a nice, peaceful garden or something? Between that and the dungeons in the basement he was starting to get really dubious about this building's spiritual credentials.

"Err, not that I don't appreciate your help in shoring up my modest combat capabilities, but we really should be focusing on getting my inner soul sight functioning," said Zorian, shuffling uncomfortably in place. "You told me yourself that this skill requires total focus from me to master correctly."

Alanic simply continued staring at him, silent and impassive, from his corner of the arena.

And then he gestured with his staff at Zorian and threw a fireball at him.

Zorian was not surprised at the attack. He had been expecting something like that, to be honest. What did throw him for a loop

was that he chose that particular spell to open combat with. Fireball wasn't something you threw at a junior mage to test them – it was far too lethal for that! Even a stunted one was capable of killing a human on a direct hit, and a regular shield spell could not protect against it. No matter how powerful, it was still just a disc of force in front of the caster – the expanding sphere of fiery energy would just flow around it and envelop the caster behind it.

The shock lasted for but a moment, however, and then he immediately erected a dome of force around himself – not just a shield, but a full-blown aegis that protected him from all sides at once. The fireball hit the dome not long after, and Zorian's view was momentarily blanked out by a blanket of fire.

When the fire cleared, he found himself standing in front of Alanic again, the priest as silent and unmoving as he had ever been. His apprehension at the situation dropped slightly. The fireball had been a very weak one. He knew because one of the retired mages he'd helped in his aimless wanderings prior to his arrival in Knyazov Dveri had taught him how to get feedback from his defensive spells, and his aegis had held strong against a spell that should have taxed it to its limit. Zorian was sure the man in front of him could have done much better than that if he had wanted to. The fact he hadn't immediately followed up on his fireball with something to finish him off enforced the idea that this really was some kind of test.

A very messed up, dangerous test, but he was kind of used to such things at this point.

He sent a single magic missile towards Alanic. He could see the man scoff as he lazily raised his arm to block the puny attack, and suppressed a smile. Though it looked like a magic missile spell, the projectile was anything but – it didn't so much smash into things as erupt into a spherical wave of force, much like a fireball that used force instead of fire. A forceball, if you will. Alanic will almost

certainly use a regular shield instead of a full aegis against a puny magic missile, and then the forceball will-

The space in front of Alanic suddenly warped and shimmered, and Zorian's forceball promptly winked out of existence. A dispelling wave of some sort, if he guessed correctly. Dammit. Then Alanic decided it was his turn again, and Zorian was too busy dodging bolts of fire and incineration rays to focus on internal cursing.

Zorian quickly learned that Alanic loved fire spells. Even after Zorian switched from all-purpose shields to variants specifically designed to tank fire magic at the expense of performance against other damage types, he persisted in using them. After his initial barrage of weak, fast-casting, numerous fire projectiles failed to overwhelm Zorian, he switched to trying to steamroll him with gigantic, slow-moving spheres of fire that didn't explode and instead simply tried to envelop him in their flames. After Zorian managed to dispel them, he responded with more fireballs – and this time he wasn't holding back.

Zorian tried to counter-attack whenever he spotted an opening, but all of his attacks were neutralized with contemptuous ease. Trying to kick up dust and other visibility obstacles failed because Alanic could somehow cause a gust of wind to disperse such attacks away from him without making a single gesture or visibly exerting himself. Items were useless because he could telekinetically hurl all projectiles away from him with a simple sweeping gesture, and any magical projectiles were blocked, intercepted or dispelled. Even after Zorian started launching projectiles in complicated parabolic, zigzagging or spiral trajectories, the priest seemed to have no problems tracking them and responding.

Finally, Zorian was nearly out of mana and decided to go out with a bang. He put most of his remaining mana into a ray of force that he promptly fired at Alanic's face. The attack would have killed the priest had it really connected, though Zorian knew it

would never connect. Sure enough, the man simply side-stepped it and Zorian collapsed on the ground in exhaustion, his arms raised in surrender.

"I give up," he panted. "Whatever point you wanted to make to me, you've done it. Though if this was all for the sake of showing me I'm not the biggest fish in the pond, you needn't have bothered – I'm well aware how screwed I'd be in a face-off against a veteran battle mage."

"The point was seeing how long it would take before you started resorting to lethal moves," Alanic said, walking up to him and offering him a hand. Zorian internally debated the merits of casting the 'shocking grasp' spell and electrocuting the jerk, but in the end decided to be a bigger man and simply accepted his help in getting up. It probably wouldn't have worked, anyway. "I'm rather disappointed it took until you were on your last legs to go for the killing blow."

"Oh screw you, Alanic!" snapped Zorian. "What kind of nutjob tries to kill their opponent in a freaking spar!?"

"You?" Alanic tried, a smirk dancing on his lips. "You did try to kill me at the end, didn't you?"

"That's... I knew it had no chance of actually succeeding."

"Yes, and I'm certain you realized that a minute or two into the test. You should have stopped holding back at that point, or at least followed my lead in what is an acceptable level of force."

"Actually, let's refocus on that issue instead," Zorian said. "What if *you* had ended up killing *me*? Some of those spells you tried to hit me with would have put me into a hospital for months if I hadn't tanked them. Possibly kill me outright! The skills I used to survive your 'test' aren't something you had any right to expect of me!"

"I can control what my fires burn," Alanic said matter-of-factly. Zorian was honestly stumped at that. That kind of thing was pos-

sible? "I also have a divine artifact that can heal any burns so long as the victim is still alive. Regardless of how things looked to you, you were in very little danger. Still, you clearly thought I was being excessively aggressive and you *still* held back against me. That kind of hesitation will get you killed some day. As it almost did a few days ago."

"I knew this was about those riflemen I disabled," Zorian mumbled.

"Yes. Disabled. They tried to kill you, with an ambush, no less, and you went out of the way to simply knock them out. There is being merciful and there is being stupid."

"Are you sure you're a priest?" grumbled Zorian.

"A warrior-priest," Alanic clarified. "Not every religious order is about peace and forgiveness. And even those that are usually make exceptions for self-defense, in practice if not in theory."

"Fine, fair enough," Zorian conceded. "But why do you care? Why is this so upsetting to you?"

"That's a stupid question. I don't want you to die, that's why."

"Um," Zorian paused, momentarily stumped for a response. What the hell was that supposed to mean? He really wished Alanic wasn't so utterly unreadable to his empathy. "Look, I'll be honest with you – I wasn't really being merciful. You're misreading the whole thing. I simply attacked them in the best manner I had available."

"Please," Alanic scoffed. "I know very well how difficult it would be to take down a group that large non-lethally. Do you really expect me to believe that was the method of attack least dangerous for yourself that you had available?"

"Well, yes," Zorian said. "I guess it would help to know that I'm a natural mind mage. I sense all minds around me, regardless of physical obstacles or line of sight, and I can launch a crude mental assault on them if I so wish. Using that, I could knock them out

outside of their shooting range, before they could pin-point my position. Actually killing them would have entailed entering their attack range so I could cast something more deadly at them. Which I felt was rather suicidal at the time."

Alanic gave him a curious look. "An interesting ability. I note that not all of the attackers had been disabled by the time the Guild taskforce had arrived. Did you simply not have time to go through them all or...?"

"It's a weak attack," said Zorian. "It's not hard to resist."

Alanic nodded. Zorian hoped the priest would not question him on the exact mechanics of his ability, as he was not sure he could deceive the man convincingly. Thankfully, it did not seem he would push the issue at the moment.

"What would you have done if no reinforcements had arrived?" Alanic asked.

"Tried to lure them into a mine field," Zorian shrugged. "So yeah. I was fully prepared to blow them up into tiny pieces if they continued to go after me. There's a lot you can accuse me of, but being suicidally merciful isn't one of them. You don't have to worry about me."

"I'm not so sure about that," Alanic groused. "But it does seem I have misjudged you somewhat. Walk with me."

Alanic walked back into the temple proper and Zorian followed him. He soon found himself sitting in a small kitchen that he had never seen before, though that wasn't saying much. He had never really explored the site, fearful of drawing Alanic's ire if he stepped foot in some private sanctum that non-clergy were supposed to never witness. Most temples had at least a couple of those as far as Zorian knew.

"Misunderstandings aside, the test was quite real," said Alanic once they were seated. "I really did want to see what you were capable of combat-wise."

"And?" asked Zorian curiously.

"You are better than I thought you'd be," said Alanic. Zorian preened at the praise. Alanic didn't seem like the sort of hand it out lightly. "But it's clear to me you're no legend in the making. I estimate that your natural mana reserves are average at best, perhaps even below-average, and your spells have the feel of a mage who has practiced a lot rather than those of a talented beginner."

Zorian scowled, his earlier pride forgotten.

"A mage as young as you should not have experience in fighting that extensive," continued Alanic. Uh oh. "I had suspected it for a while now and now I am certain – you are not some recent graduate going for a round of wandering before settling down. Or a traveling mage who stumbled onto something way over his head. You are someone who actively looks for trouble. Had been looking for trouble for a while now..."

Zorian said nothing. He *was* about to claim that it was trouble that looked for him, not the other way around... but when he really thought about it, that wasn't really true at the moment. He really *was* looking for trouble right now. It was one of his core goals in Knyazov Dveri. He had a good reason for it, but still.

"I'm not going to ask you to tell me who you are. People who start fighting as young as you must have started to get as good as you are aren't usually the trusting sort. You'd never tell me, and truthfully I have no reason to push you in that regard. No, what I want to know is what your immediate goal is here. I don't believe that you really stumbled upon Lukav's encounter with the boars accidentally, or that the soul marker stamped on your soul is really unconnected to the enemies after our heads. Considering how helpful both me and Lukav have been to you in this past several weeks, I believe we both deserve a little more honesty from you. What is really going on here, Zorian?"

"Regardless of what you may think, my reasons for coming

here were exactly as I told them to you," Zorian said. "I really did get caught in the aftermath of a soul magic spell. I really did come to Lukav, and by extension you, because I wanted to understand what had happened to me. None of those were fabrications. But..."

"Yes?" Alanic prompted.

"I had done some research on the people behind my attack – the original attack that resulted in the marker on my soul, I mean – and uncovered some pretty heavy stuff. They are connected to Cyoria's leadership somehow, and have links to the local branch of the Cult of Dragon. As far as I can see, they are Ibasan in origin. One of the reasons I had for coming here, aside from seeking out your help, was that I wanted to get out of their territory."

"And you think our attackers belong to that group?" surmised Alanic.

"Considering how large and organized the Ibasan group was, I wouldn't be surprised if they had some kind of organization branch here. And the fact both groups make use of undead and soul magic is kind of indicative to my eyes. But I don't actually have any proof, and I'm far from certain."

Zorian wasn't comfortable about sharing everything with Alanic. For instance, telling him about the invasion or the primordial 'summoning' plot was out of the question, as Alanic would no doubt insist on notifying the Cyoria authorities about those and that could alert Red Robe about Zorian's whereabouts. He did, however, tell him about a lot of other things... like the other disappearances in the area. His own investigation into them had pretty much stalled for the moment, so he had little to lose by telling him about them at this point.

After several exhausting hours of back and forth, Alanic all but threw him out of the temple, claiming he had to think about things. Zorian was glad for that, as he was thoroughly sick of the entire conversation by that point... even if there was a good chance

Alanic would want to have nothing to do with him by tomorrow.

Oh well, even if the man refused to see him after this, there was always the next restart. There wasn't that much time left in this restart anyway.



Zorian was in the process of affixing a left arm to the wooden golem he was building when a human mind suddenly appeared in his room. He would like to say that he reacted immediately and decisively, but the truth was that he was momentarily paralyzed by surprise and fear, spent several moments fumbling for a response, and then realized that his mysterious 'attacker' was actually Alanic.

He glared at the priest that had just teleported into his room without warning, trying to set him on fire with his eyes. Sadly, that ability wasn't one of the things in his repertoire, and Alanic was completely unfazed at his glare.

Note to self: find a spell that lets you set whatever you're looking at on fire.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Alanic?" Zorian snapped. "I could have shot you if I hadn't realized who you were in time."

Alanic glanced at the half-disassembled rifle on Zorian's bed and raised an eyebrow at him.

"Well not with that, obviously," Zorian grouched.

"You didn't turn up for your evening lesson," Alanic said with disapproval. "I felt it prudent to check up on you."

"I kind of thought I should give you some time," Zorian said defensively. "You seemed pretty annoyed yesterday."

"I was disturbed, not angry," Alanic said. "I needed some time to think. If I wanted you to skip on your lesson I would have said so." He looked at the half-finished golem and raised his eyebrow at Zorian. "A curious choice of materials for a golem."

"It's a prototype," Zorian said. "I don't expect much from my first golem, so I wanted to make it out of something cheap and easy to work with."

Alanic shook his head. "It doesn't matter, really. I suppose I can give you a day off from lessons for one day. Tell me, though – is there anything else you forgot to mention to me yesterday?"

"Not really, no," said Zorian. Nothing except things he had purposely kept to himself, anyway. "Although I'd like to ask you a question, if I may. As a soul magic expert, do you think it's possible to kill a soul?"

"No," Alanic said immediately. "What kind of question is that? Do I need to read you passages from the Book of Zikiel again?"

"No!" Zorian protested. "No, that will not be necessary. Yes, I know that's what the books say, but... the necromancer I told you about, the one who killed my informants?"

Alanic nodded, indicating he knew what Zorian was talking about. In truth he didn't know the half of it. For one thing, Zorian had never explained to the priest that those informants had been giant talking spiders. Still, Zorian had told enough of the story for Alanic to follow along.

"He claimed to have done more than just kill them. He said he killed their very souls to ensure they were never coming back."

"An empty boast. He was just trying to demoralize you," Alanic scoffed. "Souls are unkillable. Corruptible certainly, but you can't destroy them."

"Even if he had effectively unlimited time to figure something out?" Zorian pressed. "He did mention he spent decades within a time dilation field while he was ranting at me."

"Necromancers have been trying to destroy a soul for a millennium without much luck," Alanic said. "Finding a way to crack open the indestructible core of the soul to see what makes them tick and if it can be manipulated and duplicated has been the goal

of many a necromancer over the ages. And many of those necromancers spent *centuries* pursuing their grisly work with little regards to morality or pity for the people they experimented upon. I sincerely doubt this one mage can do what a thousand years of necromantic tradition has failed at just because he spent a couple of months in a time dilation chamber. Provided he made use of such facilities at all, that is. Personally, I find it much more likely he's making things up."

"What if it's more than just months, though?" Zorian pressed. "Years, even decades?"

"You mean like that old drivel about Black Rooms that various organizations supposedly have?" asked Alanic. "Those rumors are almost certainly false. They are not impossible in theory, but much harder than they sound in practice. The logistics of time dilation chambers is very complex and requires more than just capability to speed up the passage of time in an area. And that's especially true for things like necromantic experiments, which require a constant stream of victims to serve as experiment subjects. Unless your boasting necromancer has access to something like the Sovereign Gate, his claims are laughable."

"Sovereign Gate?" asked Zorian.

"Never heard of that story?" Alanic asked. Zorian shook his head in negative. "Well, do you at least know who Shutur-Tarana Ihilkush was?"

"How could I not?" Zorian scowled. "My history teacher made us all memorize the first three chapters of 'The 13 Cities of Salaw' by heart. That would be the last king of Ikos, yes? The man who conquered all of the city states around the Umani-Re river and created the Ikosian Empire. What does he have to do with anything?"

"The Sovereign Gate is an artifact supposedly dating back from his time," Alanic said. "Like many great rulers, Shutur-Tarana has a great many fanciful stories and grandiose claims associated with

him, and this particular one claims he either made or found a doorway into another world. Having found he did not age at all while on the other side, he spent '11 lifetimes' there, learning their secrets and honing his skills. Eventually, he grew homesick and decided to go back home. Once he was back in his own world, however, he found the doors forever barred to him. He stored the Sovereign Gate in his royal vault, there to wait for a worthy successor who would repeat his feat and usher the empire into a new age with the wisdom gained from the other side. Or, well, resurrect it... since it is thoroughly dead at this point."

"An interesting story," Zorian said.

"But probably just that – a story," said Alanic. "It would have probably remained half-forgotten in some decaying tome as one of the many obscure tales surrounding the first emperor, but Eldemar's royal family is very fond of it, since they claim to have the Sovereign Gate in their possession."

"Oh?"

"Yes, though in all honesty I'm not the best person to ask about that topic. Personally, I think the whole thing is fabricated drivel which Eldemar royals thought up to give themselves some additional legitimacy. They never mentioned the Gate or any of the other Ikosian artifacts they apparently had until they had their ambitions and reputation dashed in the Splinter Wars. They probably just swiped one of the Bakora gates from somewhere and are trying to pass it off as a genuine Ikosian artifact with fanciful stories. You should probably find an actual historian for a proper discussion on the subject."

"Fair enough," said Zorian. "I was just curious. What are Bakora gates, though?"

"Also something you should ask a historian about," said Alanic. "To put it simply, they are some kind of ancient teleportation network that predates Ikosian civilization by a fair margin. No one

knows much about the Bakora, since they only left their gate network and a handful of other artifacts behind, but their reach was vast – the gates can be found all over Miasina, Altazia and even Blantyrre. Sadly, the art of actually activating the gates has been lost to the sands of time... or maybe their magic simply broke down a long time ago and they no longer work. Regardless of the truth, they are mostly just historical curiosities now – modern mages have their own teleportation network up and functioning, so most of the interest in the Bakora gates has dried up, at least on the mage side.”

After reminding Zorian not to skip the lesson tomorrow as well, Alanic decided to leave in the same manner he arrived – by teleporting out. Zorian shook his head to clear it of fanciful tales of ancient artifacts and continued working on his golem prototype. He would go ask Vani about the Sovereign Gate and the Bakora gate network tomorrow, though he didn’t expect that to go anywhere. While the story about the first emperor of Ikosia could be sort of interpreted as an account of the time loop, it made no sense that an artifact that was supposedly stored in the capital would cause an effect centered around Zach and Cyoria. Oh well, it hurt him nothing to ask.

It was only half an hour later that Zorian realized that Alanic had teleported inside his room despite the fact he had warded it against teleportation.

Frowning, Zorian wrote down a reminder for himself to tear down his current ward scheme in the coming days and put up something stronger. And a second reminder to ask Alanic how the hell he had done that.



Zorian had been worried that Vani might not welcome him into his home the way he had the last time they’d spoken in the pre-

vious restart. After all, he hadn't spent the month visibly culling the winter wolf population like he had last time, and that seemed to have had great influence on him.

As it turned out, he need not have worried. The man was as friendly and helpful as ever, though also just as talkative and prone to digressions.

"Ah, Ulquaan Ibas, the isle of the exiles," said Vani. "A fascinating place and a fascinating topic. I wrote a book on the Necromancer's War, you know? Not an easy topic to write about in an objective manner, since so many are ready to dismiss them as monsters and criminals out of hand..."

Zorian made a sound that could be possibly interpreted as agreement, though really, his opinion of Ibasans couldn't possibly be lower. Perhaps if he hadn't repeatedly witnessed all the killings and destruction in Cyoria he might have felt some pity for them, but as it was? They really were dangerous scum in his eyes.

Unaware of Zorian's inner musings, Vani launched into a protracted explanation of the causes behind the Necromancer's War. He spoke of succession disputes in several prominent Houses and royal families that developed when their leaders turned themselves into liches and vampires and their heirs realized they would never inherit their birthright because their parents would never die of age alone. He spoke of the common people, who hated necromancers with a passion, and resented being ruled by the undead. And finally, he spoke of Eldemar's desire for supremacy, and how they were all too happy to prove their authority over all of Altazia by getting involved in every dispute they could find in order to place people more sympathetic to them in leadership positions.

Finally, it all came to a head when the kingdom of Sulamnon, back then in a personal union with Eldemar, rose in rebellion against their king, supported by Reya and Namassar. When they lost said rebellion, they were forced to issue a blanket ban on

necromancy by the king of Eldemar, or else forfeit their lands to the crown. The ban, if enacted, would gut the entire military of Sulamnon, which made great use of undead in their army at the time, as well as force a number of prominent aristocrats to hand over their titles to their children and go into exile.

The necromancers in Sulamnon refused to accept the treaty and raised an army of their own, bolstered by the part of the Sulamnonian military that still felt they had a chance to win if they continued fighting. Soon, they were joined by other forces that resented Eldemar's growing power – the remaining Khusky tribes that still retained some military might, the remains of witch covens, the undead aristocracy of other countries that saw the way wind was blowing and wanted to overrule the precedent that would see them similarly disposed of, as well as a number of opportunistic actors that felt they had more to gain by siding with the necromancers than with the king of Eldemar. The Necromancer's War had begun.

The necromancers soon showed themselves to be cruel and merciless opponents, and the atrocities they committed against captured villages and defeated soldiers shocked the continent. Any sympathies or support they had from neutral parties that wanted to see Eldemar humbled quickly evaporated. Instead of serving as a rallying force against Eldemar domination, they handed the growing kingdom exactly the sort of war they needed to cement their authority and legitimacy. When Eldemar's general Fert Oroklo defeated the necromancer's army led by Quatach-Ichl, thereby destroying them as a coherent force, the continent sighed in relief. The kingdom of Eldemar rewrote the map in their favor, and were seen as heroes for it instead of tyrannical aggressors, and the surviving parts of the necromancer's army fled to the frozen island in the north that would be henceforth known as the isle of the exiles - Ulquaan Ibas.

The king of Eldemar graciously agreed not to pursue them to their new home. No doubt that was because of his great mercy, rather than unwillingness to send soldiers to some worthless ice-swept land in order to pursue a broken enemy.

Then again, considering it took more than a hundred years before the exiles started making trouble again, Zorian supposed he couldn't blame him for his reasoning. Hell, he still wasn't certain what the Ibasans hoped to gain with their destruction of Cyoria. He supposed if their leadership was composed out of immortal undead they might have personally participated in the Necromancer's War and were still bitter about it.

"Well, I hate to interrupt such a fascinating story, but I was really hoping to ask you about some historical artifacts," Zorian said when he finally spotted a lull in Vani's 'discussion'.

"Oh?" Vani said, perking up.

"Yes, I'd like to know if you have some sources about the Bakora gates and the Sovereign Gate."

"The Sovereign Gate is nothing," Vani said dismissively. "The royals won't even let anyone see it, much less examine it. I have doubts whether it exists at all. The Bakora gates, though..."

Vani promptly started digging through his stacks of books, and continued to do so for another fifteen minutes or so. Finally, he found what he was looking for in some forgotten corner. He leafed through the book until he found the correct page and then shoved it into Zorian's hands while pointing at the illustration stamped on it.

The Bakora gates did not look anything like Zorian had imagined. When Alanic had described them to Zorian, he figured they were something like stone arches or rings or something like that. Instead, they looked like hollow icosahedrons assembled out of some kind of black bars. Not very gate-like in Zorian's opinion.

"It's hard to study the gates, since no one has witnessed one in

actual operation for quite some time, but from the writings found inscribed into their pedestals and preserved written records, we know they function similarly to a teleport platform,” Vani said, waving his finger over the illustration for... some reason. “Only they open a dimensional hole that connects one gate to another instead of teleporting people standing inside. It is probably not a good idea to stand inside the gate while it activates.”

Zorian gave the man an incredulous look.

“Well, I mean, it could have some kind of safety feature to abort the activation procedure if someone is standing inside,” Vani defended himself. “Anyway, the bars are likely stabilizers, making sure the rift stays open long enough for people to step through.”

“Hmm. They sound really powerful and exotic. I’m surprised there’s so little interest in them,” said Zorian.

“Most people think they were not nearly as efficient as modern teleport platforms are, and they are bound to be exorbitantly expensive and difficult to make. The gate spell is almost certainly reverse-engineered from Bakora gates, back when people still knew how to activate them, and it is pretty much the pinnacle of dimensional magic that very few mages can cast safely. Teleportation magic, on the other hand, is relatively accessible and cheap. In the end, it all comes down to the fact they are currently inert and nobody knows how to use them. If, indeed, they can be used at all in modern times. They are the oldest magical artifacts that we are aware of – it is possible they broke down a long time ago.”

“How many of them are there?” Zorian asked.

“Hundreds are known,” Vani said. “Only gods know how many more remain undiscovered in some distant jungle or mountain peak. The Bakora really loved placing those gates all over the place, it seems. Hmm... I actually think I have a map of all the recorded gates in Altazia.”

It took more than half an hour for Vani to find the map in the

mess that was his house, but he did produce it in the end. Zorian studied it curiously, immediately noting one particular location.

"Cyoria has a Bakora gate?" he asked incredulously. "How? Where? I've never heard anything about that."

"Oh, that." Vani snorted. "I almost forgot about that. That gate is deep within the lower levels of the Dungeon beneath Cyoria, very far into the dangerous levels. It would be suicide to go there for most mages, so nobody studies that one to my knowledge. Researchers interested in the gates have safer locations to set up camp at."

After studying the map for a while and failing to find anything really notable, Zorian thanked Vani for his time and left. The Bakora gates were kind of interesting, but he didn't see how they could be connected with the time loop.

Another dead end as far as he was concerned, but at least he didn't waste too much time on this one.



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

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

Zorian gave Kirielle an incredulous look. What? Why was he here? The summer festival was still days away, and the last thing he remembered was peacefully falling to sleep. Did Zach die prematurely again or was he killed in his sleep without even realizing it?

He was broken out of his thoughts when Kirielle kicked him, apparently unhappy that he was ignoring her. He expertly stabbed

his finger into her flank, causing her to lose her grip on him with a squeal of indignation, and then took advantage of her moment of weakness to throw her off and rise to his feet.

"I need to cast a spell," he said, looking at her. "Please give me some time alone."

"Can I watch?" she asked.

Zorian raised his eyebrow at her. "Do you think you can keep quiet for ten minutes?"

She placed her palm over her mouth, mimicking the sign of silence.

"Right. Go lock the door then so mother won't be disturbing us," he ordered. "I need utmost concentration for this."

Also, mother would go berserk if she found him pouring salt and quartz dust on the floor, so it was best if she were kept out until he was done. Thankfully, he had both materials available in sufficient quantities, so he would be able to perform the marker tracking spell without delay.

Ten minutes later, Zorian was once again given a sense of where all the marked individuals were in relation to himself. Two of them again – one representing him, and the other one in the direction of Cyoria. Less than a minute later, the other marker abruptly shifted positions to the southeast of where it had originally been, and then shifted south again not long afterwards. Teleportation. The owner of the marker seemed to be in quite a hurry to get away from Cyoria.

There was no third marker.

The other marker was almost certainly Zach, Zorian felt – his classmate definitely began restarts in Cyoria, and it made sense for him to have the marker since Zorian had to have got it from *some-where*. That left Red Robe, then – either he did not start the time loop in the vicinity of Cirin, managed to teleport outside Zorian's

detection radius in the 15 minutes or so it took him to set up the tracking ritual... or he flat out didn't *have* a marker.

He would repeat the detection ritual every couple of days and see if the third marker ever popped up.

"That spell is lame," Kirielle complained, poking him in the flank and disrupting his concentration. Apparently this was as far as her patience went. "There is nothing to see at all!"

"Here, have a swarm of butterflies," sighed Zorian, conjuring a tiny swarm of glittery, colorful butterflies. It was actually a pretty hard spell to pull off, despite the totally useless effect – it took a lot of skill and practice to make that many animated, solid illusions and make them half-way convincing. Still, the spell's ability to distract and fascinate Kirielle was every bit as great as he had hoped it would be – it took her a full minute to realize he had slipped out of the room.

Worth every minute he had spent on learning it.



"All right," mumbled Zorian to himself, taking a deep breath to steady himself. "I have temporarily shut down the house's warding scheme, neutralized both the explosion trap and the sleep one, blocked the acid mechanism and destroyed the alarm beacon disguised as the document seal. This is it. Third time's the charm."

And with that, Zorian commanded the small wooden golem in front of him to go fetch the papers for him. No way was he going near that safe personally.

The wood golem, version two, slowly stepped forward. Its movements were awkward and jerky, but it did not stumble or sway drunkenly, which was a vast improvement over the wood golem version one. It would be useless in battle, but this task was something he felt his creation might actually pull off. If not, he had a collapsible 10-foot pole in reserve.

Amazingly, the whole thing went off without a hitch – the golem reached into the safe and pulled out a stack of documents without some horrid trap mangling it in the process and then walked up to him and presented him with his prize.

It was only when he tried to take the documents from the golem's hands that disaster struck – he foolishly assumed that the golem would automatically let go of the paper stack when Zorian tried to yank them out of his hands, but of course the wooden doll had no such instincts. It was too slow to release its grip, and ended unbalanced when Zorian unwittingly yanked it forward. Before Zorian knew it, the entire stack of papers was sent tumbling through the air and ended up strewn all across the floor of Vazen's living room.

Zorian half-expected the papers to suddenly burst into flames out of sheer spite, but they thankfully remained intact. Just... completely scrambled out of order, probably requiring him to spend hours sorting them out.

"Ah, screw it." Zorian said, quickly scooping up papers into an unruly pile and stuffing it into his bag. "I'll just take the whole thing with me and sort it later."

His picked up his klutz of a golem and teleported out of the house. Minor annoyances aside, the mission was a success and he could finally find out what was so important about these documents.

UNREASONABLE THINGS

He didn't bring the papers to his room, of course. He was confident that there was no tracking spell on anything in the stack, but he was also confident that Vazen would try to divine the location of the papers the hard way once he noticed the theft. He might even succeed, in which case Zorian didn't want them to be near anything that would automatically implicate him in the theft. No sense in taking that risk when he could simply store the papers elsewhere.

Elsewhere, in this case, meant outside Knyazov Dveri – that way the papers would be out of range of virtually every divination spell cast from inside the city. Thus, after teleporting around randomly a couple of times to confuse any theoretical trackers, Zorian's last jump took him deep into the forested wilderness to the north of the city, to a location that had a small, convenient cave nearby. He had found the place in an earlier restart, while he had been tracking down ingredients for Silverlake, and he had felt even then that it would be a nice place to set up camp at. It just needed some touch-ups here and there to make it suitable for his purposes.

He conjured a glowing lantern to light his way in the gloom of the cave and got to work. After a quick casting of an area-wide 'spook animals' spell to drive away all the bats and vermin

that had taken residence in the cave, he set about using alteration magic to clean the place up and make some shelves and reading surfaces out of the rock. A while later, after he tested things for comfort and stability, he decided that stone chairs perhaps weren't the best idea and instead constructed some basic furniture out of the fallen branches he found in the surrounding forest. There – good enough for his purposes.

"Now comes the hard part," he spoke to himself.

It was time to start constructing the warding scheme for the place.

Three hours later, Zorian had layered every single divination ward that he felt could be useful and a few that he didn't, and had rechecked the whole thing twice to make sure everything was stable and worked correctly. Truthfully... he wasn't satisfied. He had an insufficient collection of different anti-divination spells to set up a proper, iron-tight warding scheme, and too little experience to properly judge what was crucial and what was not. In addition, if it took him this long to set up even this mediocre thing, how long would something more complex take? He really needed to get better at warding...

He shook his head to clear his thoughts. He needed to get better at a lot of things, but he had to prioritize. Defense against soul magic, then combat skills, then aranean mind arts. Those three things were urgent and couldn't be put off. Everything else was secondary for now, even the mystery surrounding Vazen and the documents. If stealing the documents resulted in his early death, despite the many precautions he took... well, he would just have to set the whole thing aside until he was done with his current main goal, wouldn't he?

No, his current defenses would have to be enough for now. He placed the papers he stole from Vazen on the nearby stone table he'd made from the cavern floor, sat down on a chair he'd fabri-

cated from wooden detritus he'd dragged into the cave and began to read...

Hours later, when he was finally done reading and organizing the whole thing, he seriously contemplated burning the whole stack down and scattering the ashes in the wind. Safer that way, and probably more than a little cathartic. He had expected to find something heavily incriminating, but this was something else entirely. Why did the man keep all of his incriminating correspondence in one convenient place, anyway? If it had been Zorian in his shoes, he would have destroyed all the letters once he read them so they couldn't be used against him. Was Vazen keeping them as possible blackmail material or something? If so, that was kind of ballsy of him, considering what kind of person the man was dealing with.

Said person being Sudomir Kandrei, the mayor of Knyazov Dveri. Because *of course* it was the goddamn mayor that was behind everything. No wonder that telling the police about the disappearances never went anywhere – even if somebody had seriously looked into it, they would have been told pretty quickly to drop the case by their superiors. Local governors in peripheral areas such as these were basically tiny tyrants that could do as they pleased, so long as they made sure not to piss off the wrong person or stir up trouble.

Not that knowing who was responsible for the disappearances shed any light on the man's motives. When all was said and done, Vazen was merely the guy supplying Sudomir with various illegal materials and occasionally hiring shady people in Sudomir's place so the mayor couldn't be implicated in the deal. The merchant didn't even know about most of the disappearances as far as Zorian could see. In fact, Vazen's shady dealings with the mayor seemed to have been much more benign until about three months ago, when the man suddenly upped the game and started demanding much

riskier merchandise, in far greater quantities, as well as started arranging full-blown assassinations like the ones directed against him and Alanic. One could tell from the letters that Vazen was getting progressively more disturbed and annoyed at his 'customer' for escalating things like that, especially since Sudomir refused to elaborate on what had caused this sudden change. The 'deal' that Vazen made with a company in Cyoria, the one that Gurey was so interested in, was basically a bribe that Sudomir had arranged for Vazen to calm him down and keep him cooperative.

The blueprints and recipes contained in the documents looked kind of interesting, but there was nothing there that Zorian found really notable or sinister. The names of the three businesses that provided the documentation were something he recognized, however – they were run by people that the aranea had identified as members of the Cult of the Dragon.

So. The mayor of Knyazov Dveri had some kind of connection to the Cult of the Dragon Below. Significant enough that he could arrange for them to hand over extremely valuable documentation to one of his agents for a mere pittance.

Well, the idea that this whole thing was connected to Ibasan invaders just got a lot more credible with this, though it was not Vazen that had links to them like he originally suspected. Still, the question of why he was after the soul mages around Knyazov Dveri remained. Why bother? What did the Ibasans *get* by doing that? Some of these people could only loosely be described as soul mages to begin with, and most of them weren't a serious threat to the Ibasan force... or anyone really.

He sighed. Like always, every answer he found seemed to bring up two more questions in its wake. He placed the papers on a nearby shelf carved into the walls of the cave, opting not to destroy them just yet, and then went back to his room to get some sleep.



After he had gotten some sleep and had a chance to think about things, he decided to put off the investigation of Sudomir's activities for some other time. No sense in stirring up the hornet's nest further when he could just wait for some future restart in which he never stole Vazen's documents and nobody knew they were even being threatened by someone.

However, as days passed without incident and nobody ever tracked down the documents to his little forest hideout, he began to relax. He didn't restart the investigation or change any of his plans, but he figured this would be a nice, relaxing restart where nothing of real note happened. He slowly absorbed Alanic's lessons in personal soul sight, fiddled with his wood golem (version three) in his free time, and made sure to cast the marker detection spell at least once per day (no change; the spell never showed anything except two markers).

And then, two weeks into the restart, he woke up in the middle of the night to see a black-clad figure with an obscured face and a knife in their hand standing over his bed.

Later on, he would wonder what had tipped him off that he was in danger, but in that moment he simply reacted. Without bothering to structure the magic into any real spell, he reached out to the blanket covering him and flung it at the assassin in a crude burst of telekinetic force. The man (probably; the build suggested a man) stumbled back as the blanket collided with him, not really hurt but surprised at the maneuver and disoriented by the sudden blindness.

Zorian scrambled to his feet, barely managing to get upright before the assassin succeeded in throwing the flimsy fabric off of him and lunged towards him. Three knife swipes later and Zorian was sporting a deep gash on his arm and a bleeding scratch on his

cheek and knew for a fact that he had no chance against the man in a physical confrontation. He frantically searched the room with his eyes, trying to spot something to help himself with, and admitted to himself that sound-proofing the room may have been a slight mistake. Only slight, though, because even if he could scream for help he doubted anyone would be able to reach him before the assassin was done with him. No, the bigger mistake was that he opted to sleep with his rod of magic missiles and shielding bracelets in his desk drawer instead of taking them with him to sleep.

It was official: after this battle, regardless of outcome, he was going to cast magic missile non-stop whenever he had free time and mana to make it fully reflexive. He couldn't afford to be this defenseless when deprived of his tools.

"If I die I will blow us both up!" Zorian yelled, and meant it. The suicide necklace, at least, was always with him. Maybe he should put something other than explosives there for situations like this.

The man hesitated for a second at the proclamation, but then moved to attack again. That second was enough, though – suddenly given a moment to concentrate, Zorian blasted the man's mind with telepathic noise. The assassin flinched, aborting his attack, but he didn't go down.

Not yet, anyway. When Zorian took advantage of his momentary dizziness to smash a nearby paperweight into his face, though, he went down in a spray of blood and didn't get up again.

A minute later, after he had calmed down a little (and confirmed that the assassin, while still alive, wasn't going to get up any time soon) he decided he couldn't go to the police with this. They were effectively the mayor's underlings, and Sudomir was likely the one who ordered the man bleeding on the floor of his room to kill him. Or had someone else arrange it for him, more likely, considering his behavior from Vazen's letters. The fact that

the assassin apparently had a key to his room, which was how he had bypassed Zorian's intruder alarm, didn't help his paranoia any. Regardless, he only really knew one person he could go to with this.

Already wincing at the lecture he was going to get, Zorian picked up the assassin's unconscious body and teleported to Alanic's temple.



Like Zorian hoped, Alanic readily accepted his explanation that the bleeding man he was carrying was an assassin sent to kill him and agreed to take him off his hands. He even gave Zorian a fast-acting healing potion to deal with the cuts and gashes the man inflicted upon him in their brief life-and-death struggle, and those weren't exactly cheap.

Unfortunately, he also decided that Zorian was now going to move permanently into the temple with him. According to Alanic, he had been expecting something like this to happen ever since Zorian stopped his and Lukav's killings earlier in the month and this was all the proof he needed that Zorian wasn't safe out there. Who's to say the attackers won't try again and succeed? No, as far as the warrior priest was concerned, Zorian had to be under constant guard until the situation was resolved.

Zorian really hated that idea, as it meant being effectively under house arrest for the remainder of the restart, but Alanic made it clear there was no way to blow him off without also losing his help in mastering personal soul perception. So that was that.

Despite his misgivings, however, it turned out to be something of a blessing in disguise. Since there was not much to do in a small, boring temple, Zorian found himself spending most of his time endlessly casting magic missile in an effort to make it faster and

more reflexive. He did make a promise to himself, after all. In any case, those efforts attracted Alanic's attention, and he agreed to give Zorian advice on how to improve his combat magic. Admittedly, Alanic couldn't help him much in his self-imposed goal of making magic missile reflexive – that was just a matter of sufficient repetition. Instead, most of his help centered around squeezing the most out of fire spells, which appeared to be his specialty.

Thus, whenever Zorian got sick of repeatedly casting magic missile, he worked on mastering the plethora of minor fire spells whose mastery Alanic claimed would increase his ability to wield fire in combat. One made a thin ring of fire around the caster, making the prospect of melee difficult for enemies unless they were willing to get burned; Alanic claimed a skilled caster could increase and decrease the radius of the ring from moment to moment, cause it to split into several weaker rings for better coverage, as well as move the center of the ring's alignment up and down along the caster's body. The second conjured a small flock of fully autonomous, sparrow-sized birds made out of fire to harass the enemy; that one was supposed to be practice for weaving animation magic into fire spells, as the usefulness of the spell depended entirely on how well animated the birds were. And so on, and on, and on. Alanic knew a lot of minor fire spells.

"Only twenty?" Alanic asked. "Come on, kid, I *know* you can do better..."

Zorian ignored him, patiently herding the twenty marble-sized fire orbs into gentle orbits around himself. Casting the spell itself was super-easy. Controlling the 20 conjured fire orbs simultaneously was not.

"I don't want to tire myself out too quickly," Zorian said, testing his control over the orbs by having a couple of them fly out of formation. He had already given himself a nasty burn the last time he used the spell by accidentally slamming one of the fire orbs

into the back of his hand and was not looking forward to a repeat performance. The ability to direct the orbs as you wish was an interesting advantage, but that also meant there was little in the way of safety features inherent in the spell. "I'll run out of mana too quickly if I start summoning 50 fire orbs all at once."

"You shouldn't be casting the spell a lot anyway," Alanic said. "Sustaining the orbs is by far cheaper than constantly recreating them. The point is to take control of them, and recasting the spell doesn't help you with that. You're just letting your fear of getting burnt control you."

"Well yeah, I don't want to accidentally burn my eyes off or something," protested Zorian.

Alanic sighed and shook his head. "You're too tense for this. Take a break and we'll continue this tomorrow."

Zorian immediately dropped the spell in relief. No matter what Alanic said, he did *not* like that spell. Still, Alanic was the fire magic expert here.

"Can I ask you something?" asked Zorian. Alanic casually waved his hand, telling him to get on with it. "Is it true you can selectively burn targets with your spells? That is, flat out exclude people from being damaged by your fireballs and the like?"

"Ah. I suppose Lukav told you about that," Alanic mused. Yeah, sure, let's go with that. "Yes, that is something I can do. More than that, actually. It is nothing you would care to learn, however – it is a difficult skill that requires a lot of specialized training. Years of it. Unless you intend to specialize in fire magic – and you strike me as a generalist mage, to be frank – I would not recommend worrying about it." He smiled. "Besides, by the time you mastered something like that, the 'pocket meteors' spell you are currently struggling with would be a joke to you, so it's hardly a shortcut to not getting hurt with that."

"Figures," Zorian said. "But you know, a simple fire ward

would make that spell a lot safer to practice. Why can't I use it on myself before casting the spell again?"

"Danger sharpens the spirit," Alanic said airily. "You'll learn faster and take things more seriously with the threat of horrific burns hanging over your head. But mostly I just wanted to see how long it would take you to remember you can do that."

"Ugh," Zorian grunted. "You're evil."

There were no further attacks for the rest of the restart, and this particular one ended right on schedule instead of being cut short like the previous one was.

The marker detection spell never displayed a third marker in its detection radius, despite Zorian casting it several times a day towards the end.



For the next three restarts, Zorian deliberately avoided making any ripples and focused on growing his skills. Not a very exciting time, but by the end of it he was finally able to cast magic missile quickly and easily without any external aid. He had also mastered personal soul sensing well enough that Alanic started teaching him his arsenal of protective soul magic. In addition to that, he learned a plethora of new fire spells, made some improvements to the wooden golem design he was exploring, and practiced the rest of his combat arsenal on the monstrous wildlife living in the wilderness.

Unfortunately, Alanic had been becoming ever more suspicious of Zorian as his skills rose with each restart – no doubt the fact that he recognized quite a few of those skills as his own had a big hand in it – and had almost refused to teach Zorian at all in the latest restart. Zorian had eventually managed to talk the man into helping him by promising to tell him everything after the summer

festival, but he suspected that pretty soon even that was not going to fly. By his estimation, he had at most two more restarts before Alanic refused to teach him anything without a damn good explanation, which he would be unable to provide.

But that was fine – by the time that happened, Zorian would no longer be defenseless in the face of hostile soul magic so the first of his goals would be achieved. He never really expected Alanic to teach him everything, anyway.

In the next restart, Zorian decided to lift his self-imposed ban of snooping around Sudomir and his activities. As cautiously as possible, he tried to find out more about the man. Sudomir being a well-known and public person, it wasn't hard to get people to talk about him... but most of the information he got was either useless or highly suspect. The most interesting piece of information he found was that the man was often absent from Knyazov Dveri on various 'official errands', and that those errands had become especially frequent in the last few months. This was in line with Vazen's letters, which also claimed the man had changed his patterns radically in the last few months.

When simple questioning failed to produce any new results, Zorian decided to be a little bolder and investigate the link between Vazen and the mayor. He didn't want to deal with Vazen himself, but fortunately there was no need to. Vazen wasn't a one-man operation like Gurey – he had other employees, and those other employees didn't have the same paranoia and level of security that Vazen did. They brought stuff home from work to look over later, left their keys cunningly hidden behind nearby flower-pots, and rarely had any sort of magical defenses. One of them even kept a detailed daily journal with all sorts of interesting tidbits and remarks. Probably the most interesting thing he found out from Vazen's employees was that he regularly sent mysterious packages to a place called 'Iasku Mansion' – a place that his employees were

pretty sure didn't actually exist. The place the packages were delivered to didn't exist on the maps, save as a random section of the uninhabited forest far to the north of the city. Further into the wilderness than Zorian ever got, in any case.

After consulting some maps, Zorian realized that he had no idea how long it would take him to reach the spot in question. Weeks? Months? Damn, those two really picked an out-of-the-way spot for their exchanges, didn't they? This was going to be such a chore...

He went to Lukav for help. The transformation specialist was noted to be an outdoorsman type, so he should have some advice on reaching out-of-the-way places like that one. Maybe there was some kind of enhancement potion that could help?

"No, I don't think enhancement potions would be of much help in this," Lukav told him while staring at the map Zorian provided. "They don't last long enough, and it would take you at least two weeks to reach the place on foot. Tricky. Maybe it's just my bias showing, but have you considered simply shapeshifting into a bird and flying there?"

"I haven't," said Zorian, surprised. "The idea never occurred to me. How complicated would that be?"

"Not complicated at all, but perhaps a bit pricy," Lukav admitted. "You would probably need to waste a potion or two to grow accustomed to flying and moving in your new form. Maybe more, depending on how fast of a learner you are. Birds are very different from humans."

He handed Zorian his price chart, and quickly pointed out the bird section.

"I recommend the eagle, personally," Lukav said. "Good flier, excellent eyesight, and big enough that few things will dare attack you. Plus, it's an eagle, what's not to like? Not like you need to be inconspicuous where you're going."

Zorian looked at the price tag attached to the 'eagle transformation' potion. It was... doable. He could buy three of those if he had to, though he hated using up most of his savings like that. Even though he knew they would be back at the beginning of his next restart, it just felt wrong to fritter them away. He spent *years* saving that money, dammit! Besides, what if he needed those savings later in the restart for some reason?

"I guess I could try that," Zorian said. "Incidentally, do you pay money for some rare animal that can be found deep in the forest?"

"Ha, no. If it can be found in forests around here, I'm more than capable of getting it myself," Lukav said. "Sorry. Though if you are willing to risk your life in the local dungeon, there are a few things I would be interested in paying good money for..."



Gliding upward on an updraft of warm air, Zorian surveyed the landscape around him with impossibly sharp eyes. The experience was impossible to describe – everything was full of color and detail, like a veil he didn't know he labored under had been lifted off his eyes. It reminded him of the time his parents had brought him to the doctor for an eye checkup and he was told he had to wear glasses. His father had been so disappointed about that, but the moment Zorian had donned the little pieces of glass on his face he knew he never wanted to take them off. This was just like that time, only even more extreme. If he tried, he could discern individual leaves on a tree from a mile away. The houses in the distance that would have been nothing but blurry blocks to his human self were instead rendered with perfect clarity, right down to that old tomcat hiding in the shadow of a chimney on that one house.

Being an eagle, Zorian decided, was awesome. Weird, but awesome.

He flapped his wings a couple of times to change directions, wobbling dangerously for a moment. He still wasn't much of a flier, truth be told, and the less told about his landings the better. Thankfully, big birds like eagles spent most of their time in the air gliding and catching air currents, so he could get by. He fixed his eyes forward, in the direction of where 'Iasku Mansion' was supposed to be, and set off into the wilderness.

Flying over trees got boring pretty fast, though, even with ridiculously enhanced eyesight – the leafy canopy of the forest obscured the surface from scrutiny pretty effectively, so there was nothing to see for the most part. He could see snow-capped mountains in the distance – the infamous Winter Mountains that dominated the landscape of central Altazia, which were said to be the source of all ice and snow by some – an icy, merciless heart of winter that woke up once a year to cover the land in frost until it was inevitably beaten back by the forces of summer, winter giving way to spring.

Zorian would like to call that superstition, but for all he knew there could actually be a kernel of truth in that, like an insanely-powerful ice elemental living there or something. There was very little known about the mountains, largely because of how dangerous they were – exploring them was about as safe as trying to map lower reaches of the Dungeon, and not nearly as rewarding.

Finally, Zorian approached his destination. He had been worried he would miss the spot, since he didn't have a map and everything sort of looked the same to him from his vantage point, but he needn't have worried. Iasku Mansion was very obvious and easy to spot. It wasn't, like he suspected, some inconspicuous clearing or standing stone that Vazen and Sudomir used as a drop-off point. It was, in fact, an actual mansion.

Zorian circled around the building a few times, trying to comprehend what he was seeing. The mansion gleamed white in a sea

of green, somewhat worn down by the ravages of age and nature but clearly livable and cared for. Aside from the mansion, there was also a small warehouse attached. The warehouse appeared to be of much more recent construction, however – it had no moss on the roof, there were no cracks on the walls that his enhanced eyes could see, and it was far blockier and utilitarian in construction.

Zorian had no idea why somebody would build this thing here. If it was a fort or an observation tower, he could understand.. but who would want to build a luxury dwelling this isolated and exposed to the dangers of the north? Sadly, his contemplation was interrupted when the crows that dotted the trees around the mansion took exception to his presence and a hundred angry caws filled the air.

Zorian focused on them momentarily. Though the birds were small and distant, the eyes he currently possessed had no problem in discerning their features. They weren't crows. They were larger, and their pitch black feathers had small red decorations and an almost metallic sheen to them.

Iron beaks. The hell-birds of the north. Zorian didn't fancy his chances against one of those in this form, much less against the huge flock stationed around the mansion. Though now that he thought about it, he could probably cast magic missile in this form now, couldn't he? He might be able to bring down a couple of them before the rest tore him apart, then. That wouldn't get him anything, though, so he stopped circling around the mansion and put some distance between himself and the iron beaks until they finally stopped making noise and threatening gestures.

He wondered what he had done to upset them so much. He supposed they just didn't like a large predator circling menacingly around them.

Well no matter. Landing right next to the mansion would have been a poor idea anyway. Very exposed, and probably warded

too.

He searched the surrounding area for an open space he could land at without breaking his neck (transfer of injuries between real and shapeshifted forms was weird and inconsistent, but Lukav assured him that being killed in one form means you're definitely dead in the other as well) and finally found a clearing some distance to the west of the mansion. A little bit farther than he had hoped for, but beggars can't be choosers.

After a frankly embarrassing landing that saw him face-plant into the grass, Zorian transformed back into human form and spent several minutes memorizing the place so he could use it as an arrival point for future teleports.

That done, he set off towards the mansion, hoping to get a closer look. He already missed the eagle's awesome eyesight, but some things were better done from the ground and this way he would actually be able to teleport away from danger and make himself invisible. As far as he knew, iron beaks had no magical senses, so an optical cloak should be enough to evade their attention.

He was right – the iron beaks took no notice of him while he inched closer to the mansion, cloaked in an optical cloak and an aura of silence. Before actually scouting the place, however, a pack of winter wolves burst into the scene, led by a particularly huge specimen. Unlike the rest of the pack, the alpha didn't have a white pelt. His was silver and shiny, and his mind felt different from the rest. Stronger, deeper, more complex. Sapient.

Zorian stood frozen, watching the group with dread. Twenty-two winter wolves led by an unknown super-special sapient variant. Fuck, he just had to push his luck, didn't he? No way would they be fooled by his spells, considering how sensitive canine noses were...

Except... they kind of *were* fooled. At one point the Silver One suddenly stopped and started scanning the tree line, and Zorian's

heart skipped when its eyes briefly passed over Zorian's location, but then the moment was gone and the pack moved on and disappeared somewhere on the other side of the mansion.

A minute later, when he was sure they were gone, Zorian slowly retreated into the surrounding forest and teleported away.



Zorian decided to leave the Iasku Mansion alone for the moment. He was virtually certain they were connected to the Ibasan invaders now, and definitely intended to get to the bottom of that place at some point. However, he had a feeling that investigating the mansion as he was now would probably involve a lot of dying. Plus, he had a hunch that the mayor was a necromancer, and definitely had one under employ even if he wasn't, so losing a battle there might have more serious consequences than a premature restart. No, if he wanted to go there he had to finish Alanic's lessons first and greatly increase his combat skills, *at minimum*.

Instead, now that his time with Alanic was coming to an end, he had to step up his effort to improve his combat magic so he could go talk to the other aranea tribes and learn the secrets of their mind arts. There were a lot of reasons why that was important, but the one that drove him the most was the possibility of unlocking the matriarch's memory packet that still remained in his mind.

The memory packet wouldn't last forever, Zorian knew. It was stable for now, the matriarch having pulled out all the stops to make it as resilient and durable as possible, but it would unravel and fail in time, and all the memories locked within would be gone. If Zorian wanted to fill in the blanks left in the matriarch's last message and understand what made her reach the decisions she did, he had to gain access to that knowledge.

He had no delusions it was going to be easy. For one thing the other aranean tribes were in no way guaranteed to be friendly, and

even if they were, there was no reason for them to actually teach a random human their secrets. And even if he could secure their cooperation, the memories of something as alien as the aranea were bound to be a chore to interpret. And even if he could master that, he still only had one shot at unravelling the memory packet without ruining the content or triggering whatever defenses the matriarch installed to prevent him from doing just that.

But that was a matter for the future – right now he didn't feel very confident walking into a possibly unfriendly aranean hive. Since he didn't feel like testing his mind magic against the masters of the craft, his current plan for dealing with hostile or treacherous aranea basically boiled down to quick-casting 'mind shield' and burning everything in sight via more conventional magic. Better combat skills were a must for that plan to work, though.

As it happened, he had something that should advance his combat skills, as well as make up for the money he lost to Lukav when he bought those two 'eagle transformation' potions – dungeon delving! He had basically ignored the dungeon entrance at Knyazov Dveri due to being sidetracked by the disappearance of local soul mages and Alanic's lessons, but there was no reason to continue to do so anymore. Most of the wildlife around Knyazov Dveri had ceased to be a challenge at this point, anyway.

Thus, two days after his hasty retreat from the Iasku Mansion, Zorian walked over to the official entrance to the dungeons beneath Knyazov Dveri and requested a permit to descend into its depths. It didn't cost any money, thankfully, and it was really nothing more than a formality to make sure you understood what you were getting into.

"Just remember, this part of the dungeon has never been pacified properly," the man behind the counter told him, handing him a permit card that he had to show to the guards to be let through. "It means there are greater riches to be found down there, but also

that things are much more dangerous. People disappear down there all the time. Nobody is going to look for you unless you join one of the local delver guilds. Which I personally recommend to young mages such as you.”

Zorian gave the man a non-committal hum and left, descending below on a long spiral staircase until he reached a small natural cavern that housed a small town. The inhabitants of the city above called it Delver Village, though officially it was just an extension of Knyazov Dveri. Not many people actually lived here – the buildings consisted mostly of guildhouses and businesses catering to dungeon delvers.

He had no intention of joining any of the guilds. Last time he checked they didn’t let new members like him out in the field for at least several months after they joined, which made them pretty much useless to someone in his situation. He did understand the logic of it – you didn’t want your new, inexperienced members to get horribly murdered out in the tunnels, and very few mages were particularly capable at his age – but that didn’t make them any less useless to him. He also didn’t have any money to buy anything from the shops, so he didn’t remain in the settlement for long. The people there were jerks anyway, asking for money just to answer basic questions or demanding that he join their guild before they would divulge any ‘secrets’. Thank the gods he could just read the answers out of their mind anyway.



Zorian stared at the patch of glowing mushrooms at the corner of a largish cave he encountered in his wanderings through the cave system under Knyazov Dveri. It appeared to be a normal patch of giant glowing mushrooms, little different from the ones he encountered elsewhere around here, but he knew better. He wasn’t fooled. His mind sense clearly told him there was an animal

mind behind that mushroom... no wait, the mushroom *itself* had a mind? An illusion? Or some weird intelligent mushroom?

Deciding that it didn't matter, Zorian leveled the combat staff he'd made for himself and fired an incineration ray at the 'mushroom'. If he had learned anything in the two weeks he had spent down here, it was that absolutely everything wanted to kill and eat him – and not necessarily in that order. The rock mites, for instance, wanted to paralyze you and lay their eggs into your still-living body so their larvae could eat you alive from the inside out. Anyway, the point was that striking first was common sense with these things, and he had no intention of getting closer to the mushroom impersonator.

Sure enough, the moment it was hit by the ray of fire, the 'mushroom' immediately unraveled into a large tentacled form of the tunnel octopus. Figures. The ability of those things to mimic both the color and texture of their surroundings was as impressive as it was annoying to deal with. This one was out of luck, though. Caught off guard by the devastating fire attack, it flailed its tentacles about briefly in panic before collapsing dead on the floor of the cave.

Zorian threw a rock at it to make sure it was not faking it, and then relaxed. He would have probably died to one of those by now if he didn't have his mind sense – it was, without a doubt, his main advantage compared to the other dungeon delvers. Thanks to it, he was able to evade the javelin worm ambush sites, tunnel octopuses and other hidden dangers to reach the richer, less exploited lower areas like this one. No wonder Taiven had been so excited about having someone with that ability in her team, back when she had first found out about it.

He instructed the floating spheres of light around him to scatter around the cavern and slowly inspected the walls for any sign of crystal and strange minerals. In general, crystalized mana seemed

to be a much better money-maker than hunting creatures for parts, at least if you could access virgin areas like this one. Crystallized mana also had the benefit of being, well, *static*. If he found some in a particular place on this restart, it stood to reason that it should also be there for every subsequent one as well. That meant that, if he could map out where they were over several restarts, he should be able to blitz through a bunch of known sites in just a few hours and get an enormous cash infusion at the beginning of every new restart. Especially if he learned how to filter through Dungeon interference and became able to teleport while inside it.

Sadly, his inspection found nothing in this cavern. Looking at the charred tunnel octopus corpse, Zorian considered the possibility of just harvesting its brain and beak (the most valuable parts of it by far) and returning to the surface. He had already found two large lumps of crystalized mana and several small ones, so this trip was already a smashing success, and continuing further would mean going deeper into the dungeon, with all the danger that implied.

He continued on – not like he was ever really in danger thus far so even if the danger jumped up a notch he should... be...

Zorian rounded a corner and came face-to-face, so to speak, with some kind of floating pink ooze covered with eyes. It glowed, threads of light dancing throughout its smoky, translucent bulk, and its form writhed and shifted chaotically, ripples and pseudopods growing and retracting from moment to moment. For a moment it appeared to have not noticed him, its countless eyes – each its own color and shade – blinking and swiveling in their sockets with no rhyme or reason. But that moment passed quickly and its many eyes turned towards him, some of them extending on pseudopods so the creature could focus them on Zorian properly...

Zorian's eyes abruptly shot open as a sharp pain erupted from

his stomach. His whole body convulsed, buckling against the object that fell on him, and suddenly he was wide awake, not a trace of drowsiness in his mind.

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

Zorian looked at his grinning little sister incredulously. What? But he was just-

"Oh come on!" Zorian groaned, burying his face in his hands. "That's it!? It just *looked* at me and I *died*? What kind of absurd ability is that!?"

"Umm..." Kirielle said.

"Forget I said anything," Zorian said, giving Kirielle a brief hug before rising to his feet. Kirielle refused to let go, clinging to him like a barnacle, so he just carried her around as he walked to his bookshelf and retrieved his Compendium of Dungeon Denizens, volume four, and began leafing through it. "I was just having a dream, that's all."

"What kind of dream?" Kirielle asked curiously.

"I was going to be rich, and then I got killed by an... eyebeast?" Zorian said, as he looked at the description in the book. Even the name was stupid. Ugh.

"Oh," Kirielle said. "A nice dream that ends in a nightmare. I hate those."

"Me too, Kirielle. Me too," Zorian said, snapping the book shut and placing it back on the shelf. The description in the book told him nothing useful about the damn thing. 'Beware its deadly eyes' indeed.

He thought about casting the marker detection spell again, but what would be the point? It never detected more than two markers in existence. Or less for that matter. At this point it was obvious that this was all it was ever going to show. Whatever way Red

Robe used to get into the time loop obviously wasn't identical to the one used by Zach and Zorian.

As for Zach, his movements indicated that he always opened the time loop by hightailing out of Cyoria. The direction was not consistent, though, and he seemed to wander around randomly around Eldemar during each time loop. He wondered what that was about. Clearly the boy was avoiding Cyoria, just like Zorian was, but beyond that he could not figure out what Zach's goal was – Zorian had tried placing the locations Zach visited on a map and found no pattern he could see in it.

Whatever. Zach will be Zach. He had his own, more pressing problems to worry about at the moment.

"Right. Kiri, could you perhaps let go of me now?"

MISTAKES HAVE BEEN MADE

'The beginning of the restart is always the most annoying part of the time loop,' Zorian mused quietly, standing on one of the arrival platforms in Cirin's train station. He pulled a watch out of his pocket and inspected it for a minute before putting it back with a sigh. The train was late. The train was *always* late, because this was less than a day into the restart and there hadn't really been time for anything important to diverge yet.

It was in times like these that he wondered why he even bothered going through this charade in every restart when he could just teleport out of his room at the start of every new loop and be done with it. It would save him hours of frustration and he knew from a couple of previous restarts that nobody threw a manhunt after him if he did that. He'd basically get an extra half a day each restart – that would add up to something significant pretty quickly, wouldn't it?

But, just as they always did when he considered that option, his thoughts turned to what the reaction of his mother and Kirielle would be at such a move. He never eavesdropped on them during those restarts where he hightailed out of the house at the earliest opportunity, but he couldn't imagine either of them taking it well.

He didn't get along with mother all that well, but he knew she cared for him in her own infuriating way and Kirielle...

He looked at Kirielle, standing sullenly some distance from him. The downside of his increasing empathy skills was that he knew just how devastated Kirielle was at not getting to come with him to Cyoria. If *that* was so upsetting, he couldn't even imagine how she would react if he did his disappearing trick immediately after he chased her out of his room. There was no way he could do that to her, no matter how much sense it made. He was feeling guilty enough about her as it was.

He walked up to her and ruffled her hair, which caused her to snap out of her funk temporarily in order to slap his hand away and give him a fierce glare. Or at least what she thought was a fierce glare, anyway.

"Don't be so gloomy, Kiri," he said. She said nothing, but the spike of anger and resentment he detected in his empathy was answer enough.

Damn it...

"Look," he told her. "I'll bring you with me the next time I go to Cyoria, okay?"

She gave him a startled look as her mind processed what he just said and then looked away with a pout. For a moment he thought she wouldn't say anything, but then her mind stopped cycling between different emotions and settled on faint, suppressed hope.

"You promise?" she finally mumbled after a few seconds.

"Yes," he said seriously. "I promise."

In the back of his mind, Zorian realized he really meant it, too. When he finally decided to go back to Cyoria, he was bringing Kirielle with him. It wasn't sensible in the least – it would cost him considerable time and attention to keep an eye on her and she would be in far greater danger than if he left her behind – but he was going to do it anyway. Not just for Kirielle's sake, either.

He kind of missed living at Imaya's place with Kirielle, Kael and Kana...

He had to take a step back to regain his balance when Kirielle rammed into him, wrapping him in a hug and burying her face in his stomach.

"You better not lie," she said, looking up at him with suspicious, narrowed eyes. "I'll never forgive you!"

"Yeah, yeah," Zorian scoffed, pulling at her nose until she let go of him. A loud whistle pierced the air, signifying that the train had finally arrived at the station. "I have to go now. We'll talk about this when I come back."

Fifteen minutes later Zorian watched a much happier Kirielle waving enthusiastically at him as the train departed from the station. Zorian responded with a much more restrained wave of his own and smiled. Maybe it hadn't been the smartest decision to make, but it was the right one nonetheless.



Zorian spent the entirety of the short train ride to Teshin-grad trying to perform a headcount of his fellow passengers using his mind sense – a surprisingly difficult endeavor due to the anti-shaping ward placed on the train. While not remotely able to actually stop him from sensing minds, the minor magical static produced by the ward compounded quickly with distance, effectively cutting his range in half. It was uncannily reminiscent of the similar magical static that suffused the dungeon, which had much the same effect.

Hmm... now that he thought about it, that was probably what had inspired the ward in the first place. Did that mean that practicing magic inside a ward like this one would help him learn how to filter out the Dungeon static? Something to think about, in any

case. Making a series of progressively stronger disruption wards to practice on sounded like a lot better idea than his original plan (which mostly consisted of trying to brute force things by practicing teleportation in the Dungeon until he got it right).

Once he disembarked from the train, Zorian teleported to Knyazov Dveri and immediately descended into the local Dungeon, where he proceeded to pick up every single piece of crystallized mana he had discovered in the previous restart before his unfortunate encounter with the eyebeast. When he tried to cash them in at the Delver Village shop he used for the purpose, however, he ran into... problems.

Apparently, there was a huge difference between going into the dungeon a couple of times and returning with a handful of crystals each time (what he did in the previous restart) and going in there once and returning with an entire bag of crystalized mana after a few hours. Not only did the shop not have enough money on hand to buy the whole batch off of him, the fact he had brought back such wealth after a single foray into the Dungeon caused far more of a stir than Zorian would have ever guessed. After all, you just don't do that kind of stuff unless you have some kind of secret method that is better than everyone else's or you were lucky enough to hit some kind of motherlode. Either possibility automatically made him a person of interest to every dungeon delver in Knyazov Dveri, as well as quite a few other people as well.

Any sort of plan he had for the restart immediately crashed and burned. There was just too much attention focused on him, which made it impossible to pursue tasks discreetly or talk to people as a relative unknown. His divination wards got an extensive field test due to the incessant magical spying he had been subjected to ever since, and while Zorian thought they held up admirably in the face of foreign assault, he couldn't actually be sure they were never bypassed. One enterprising spy actually painted spell for-

mula onto living moths and turned them into semi-autonomous voice recorders – if Zorian hadn't tried to chase them off with telepathy and found it curious they kept getting back towards him regardless he probably would have never noticed. How many others had done similar things without him figuring out what they'd done?

Of course, not everyone went with the cloak and dagger stuff. A lot of people simply wanted to talk to him about their amazing offer and what not, and few of them took his 'no thanks' quietly. At least one group outright attacked him when he told them to get lost, though thankfully they weren't all that good at actual fighting and were sent running easily enough. There was also at least one attempt to break into his room, which ended with a would-be thief electrocuted for his trouble and earned Zorian a stern talking-to by the law enforcement regarding excessively lethal security measures.

Finally, after a week of dodging aggressive recruitment efforts and repelling the myriad magical probes directed at him, Zorian decided to admit defeat and leave Knyazov Dveri. He failed to save Lukav and Alanic anyway, due to all the scrutiny he was under, so there was little reason to stay in the town and every reason to leave. He simply picked up all of his belongings, including a handful of bigger mana crystals he'd never managed to sell, and teleported as far south as he could manage.

Live and learn, he supposed. The next time he tried to pull off that trick, he should sell it outside of Knyazov Dveri and probably not all at once in the same shop. It was probably smartest to go to Korsa and Eldemar, since they were big cities that probably saw far more traffic in mana crystals and had plenty of shops to sell to. Though Cyoria would probably be even better in that regard, once he was ready to go back there – it was not only big, but also the magical center of the whole continent.

But no matter, the restart was still salvageable – there were plenty of things to do outside of Knyazov Dveri. For instance, finding the aranean webs to trade with. He knew they existed all over the continent, but other than the destroyed one under Cyoria, he didn't really know the exact location of any of them. Even if he wasn't ready to actually deal with them properly yet, it wouldn't hurt to spend a restart or two just locating every single web he could find and see just how friendly and receptive to trade each of them was. If Spear of Resolve was to be believed, they were unlikely to attack him outright just for contacting them. Modern aranea were descendants of aranea who grew in power after trading with humans, after all, so most of them should be at least mildly receptive to the idea of doing it again.

New goal set, Zorian teleported to Eldemar, the kingdom's capital, to visit the Cartographer's Society library. As far as map collections went, theirs was without equal, and it was largely free for perusal as well – so long as you never destroyed anything, you only had to pay for maps you wanted the library to copy for you. Zorian had spent a few days there the last time he had visited the capital, just browsing the shelves for any map that caught his fancy, and swore he would visit again when he had the time. This seemed as good an excuse as any.

"I dearly hope that's not one of our maps you are writing on, young sir," the voice behind Zorian's shoulder said. "As far as the library is concerned, that would undisputedly be destruction of our property."

Zorian jumped in surprise at the voice, too absorbed in his research to notice the librarian sneaking up at him. He looked at the map in front of him, heavily annotated and fighting for desk space with several stacks of map cases, travel journals and atlases and then shifted his attention to the old, bearded librarian behind him.

"It's not," he told the man. "It's the cheapest map of Eldemar I could find in a store I found on the way."

"Hmm. Would you object if I ask you what you are working on? It is rare to see such a young man here, especially one who is so absorbed in his research."

"I'm trying to find an aranean colony," said Zorian, not seeing the need to lie.

"And those are?"

"Magical talking spiders."

"Ah. Sounds like an intriguing project," said the old librarian. "I'll leave you to it. As friendly advice, I will note that it would have probably been cheaper to just have the library make a few copies of the maps you were interested in. The Cartographer's Society is not a profit-seeking organization and we try to keep the prices down as much as possible."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Zorian. "Say, since we're on the subject of copies... do you think I could learn how to copy documents like that from someone? Or is it some big secret of yours?"

"It is no secret," the librarian said. "The official policy of the Society is that maps should be as widely disseminated as possible, and we do not have a monopoly on that type of magic."

"Oh good," said Zorian. He knew a few ways to magically copy documents, but they relied on animating writing instruments to transcribe the contents. That didn't work all that well on non-textual content, and was slow even for written works. The spell used by the Cartographer's Society made perfect duplicates of any given map, down to every detail and shade, with only a single spell. "So does that mean you're open to teaching me how to cast the spell?"

"I'm afraid that isn't one of the services offered by this library. However, if you visit the main offices of the Cartographer's Society, you can sign up for some basic classes in map-related magic,

map making, map handling, and map-related research like you're doing right now," the librarian said. "The prices are very affordable and it would probably help you in your quest to find these 'aranea' as well."

Zorian hummed speculatively.

"I guess I'll check it out," he said. He certainly had no shortage of money, thanks to his ill-considered stunt at the start of the restart, and he was going to have to spend a few days in Eldemar one way or the other.

The librarian soon left Zorian to his own devices again, and he considered the map in front of him. He didn't have anything concrete yet, but he had several likely places to look for an aranean web. Korsa, Jatnik, Gozd and Padina were all large cities that had dungeon access and would be easy to reach from Cyoria, the source of the aranean expansion wave. One of them was bound to have the aranea living close by, and they might be willing to give him the location of nearby webs if he asked nicely (or bribed them sufficiently). Korsa was especially suspicious, since the city had an extensive textile industry, including one dealing in special clothes made out of spider silk. They got most of their raw material from Cyoria – unsurprising, as it produced the lion's share of the stuff – but at least some of it was gathered locally... 'from a mostly harmless breed of giant spiders native to the region'.

Yeah. Totally not an aranean colony.

Zorian made a small note in his notebook to track down every settlement that produced spider silk in any significant amount and decided to end the search for the day.



Zorian spent five days in Eldemar, though in all honesty he got everything he could about possible aranean sites on day three.

The other two days were mostly so he could relax a bit and mentally prepare himself for what was to come. The idea of an impending meeting with another group of aranea left him in a depressed mood, since it reminded him of what happened to the previous group of aranea that had gotten involved with him, and that wasn't exactly the best mindset with which to go and meet a bunch of telepaths. He did his best to distract himself by sight-seeing around the capital and browsing various magical stores he encountered.

He only browsed, though, never actually bought anything - Eldemar was a terribly expensive place to live in, he'd found. Everything, from room and board to already expensive magical reagents had higher prices in the capital than anywhere else Zorian had stayed at. 'Higher quality demands higher payments,' the merchants assured him. What a load of crap. He suspected the average citizen in Eldemar was simply richer than those in the rest of the country and could thus pay more. The large number of theaters, art houses and music halls present in the city certainly indicated that the inhabitants had plenty of money to burn.

That aside, the city was nice. Orderly. The royal quarter was walled in and off-limits to uninvited commoners like him, but that didn't mean that the government left the rest of the city outside their little bubble to rot. There were no obvious slums that Zorian could find - all of the buildings were well cared for and the streets free of trash and decay. Police patrolled everywhere, and were even joined by a group of well-armed soldiers at one point.

Asking around, he found that security was always tight. Eldemar had been a favorite target for saboteurs during the Splinter Wars, at least one of which managed to set the entire city ablaze. The fire consumed many important buildings, including both of Eldemar's magical academies and its central library. By the time the city had recovered and rebuilt, most of the mages and their attendant facilities had already moved to Cyoria, cementing its rise as a

magical nexus of the continent. Eldemar's citizens still seemed bitter about that, harboring a fair amount of resentment over the fact. In any case, security was upgraded immensely in the aftermath of the fire, and never really went away. Even their underworld was thoroughly purged and resculpted into something more manageable. Dungeon delving was forbidden within city limits – instead, the royal family sent the army into the depths several times a year to get rid of anything remotely dangerous they could find.

Basically, he could cross Eldemar from the list of possible candidates to have an aranean colony. If it ever existed, it was almost certainly wiped out or chased away at this point. It also helped explain why the invaders targeted Cyoria instead of Eldemar, even though Eldemar contained the royal palace, treasury and most of the government buildings - much juicier targets if one intended to collapse a country and destabilize the continent. The city was too well guarded for such a large-scale attack to take them by surprise.

He ended up taking the classes offered by the Cartographer's Society. More accurately, he paid extra to have an instructor assigned to him for individual lessons, so he could save some time. Zorian was pleasantly surprised by the mage they sent him in response – the young man assigned to him was polite and straightforward in his teaching methods. A welcome reprieve from Zorian's usual luck with teachers. He only attended three sessions with the man, but that was enough to give him a plethora of mapping spells, not all of which dealt with classical paper maps. Zorian's personal favorite in that bunch was a spell that created a miniature illusionary replica of the caster's surroundings above their palm – that had been fun to play with.

It was tempting to just spend the rest of the restart goofing around with maps and visiting various curiosities in the capital, but he didn't. He had a task to do, and an invisible time limit counting in the background. At the end of the fifth day, he gathered up

his things and set off for Korsa to find the aranea.



Korsa was a big city – the third biggest city in the kingdom, to be precise, right after Cyoria and Eldemar. Even though Zorian was certain the aranea were in there somewhere, he knew it would take him ages to find them if he searched for them by exploring the local Dungeon. So he didn't even try. Instead he approached the textile manufacturer that produced spider silk products and flat out asked him to introduce him to the aranea.

The man refused, claiming he had no idea what Zorian was talking about before throwing him out of his store with a warning to never come back again. Harsh. Still, Zorian never actually expected his request to be granted. He just wanted the man to inform his aranea trading partners that there was this strange kid going around town asking people about them. If the local aranea were anything like those in Cyoria, that would get their attention in a flash. He wouldn't have to look for them because they would be looking for him.

It took less than two days for the aranea to track him down.

It was late in the evening of his second day in Korsa when Zorian felt an aranean signature enter his radius. Considering he was currently sitting on a small hill on the outskirts of Korsa, surrounded with a lot of grass and fields and nothing of any importance whatsoever, he felt confident that it was here for him.

[Greetings,] Zorian sent telepathically. [I am Zorian Kazinski. I have come to trade.]

Aranean minds were still too strange for him to recognize their emotions easily, but he felt sure the aranea was thoroughly shocked when he spoke to her.

[You are Open?] the aranea asked after a few seconds.

[Yes,] Zorian confirmed. He decided not to mention the Cyorian aranea and his connection to them for now – for all he knew they might have been mortal enemies or something. [May I know who I am talking to?]

[I am Seeker of the Eight Universal Paths, of the Sword Divers Web,] the aranea sent. [You can simply call me Seeker.]

[Seeker then. I would like to start by apologizing for the way I attracted your attention, but I didn't know how else to contact you. I hope I haven't caused too much of a stir,] Zorian said. [I hope we can work with each other despite this somewhat rough start.]

[I'm afraid I am not qualified to negotiate on behalf of my web, so I cannot make any firm promises. My task was only to find you and report my findings to the web,] Seeker responded. Translation: she was supposed to trawl through Zorian's memories to see what his deal was, but him being psychic kind of made that impractical. [That said, I'm sure a small incident like this one can be easily smoothed over if you refrain from scaring us like this in the future. Just so I know what to report to the matriarch, what kind of trade are you proposing?]

[I want to trade for knowledge and training,] said Zorian. [Specifically, I want your help in learning how to wield my psychic abilities.]

[You already seem fairly proficient in them, though,] Seeker pointed out. She sent a weak psychic probe to worm its way through Zorian's defenses but promptly retracted it when Zorian harshly slapped it down. [Not many humans can use telepathy so smoothly, and even fewer would have noticed that probe.]

[You flatter me, but we both know I am but a rank beginner when it comes to mind arts,] Zorian said. [I wish to move beyond bare basics in the field. At the very least I want to get a better grasp on telepathic combat and develop memory manipulation abilities.]

Seeker produced a burst of uncertainty and surprise over the

link that Zorian didn't quite know how to interpret. Some kind of aranean curse, maybe?

[You are certainly ambitious, young human,] Seeker said. [I hope you realize that this is not really a small thing you are asking for. I don't believe the leadership will be happy with that idea. What exactly do you offer in return?]

[I have a number of magical items that I believe would be very useful to aranea, including one that allows telepathic communication over vast distances. Since I am the inventor and maker of such devices, I am open to requests in regard to their modification to suit your needs better. Since I am also a capable mage in general, I can help you out in any task that would benefit from human-style magic. And finally, I have access to important news that I would rather not discuss at this time, and which I suspect would greatly interest you.]

There was a short pause as the aranea absorbed this, after which it responded with a note of tentative acceptance.

[I see,] said Seeker. [As I said, I am not in a position to agree to any deals, but I shall present your case to the matriarch and we'll see the result. Is there anything else you wish for me to note?]

[Not really, no. I would like to know how I can contact you properly in the future, if you don't mind.]

Seeker was silent for a few moments before sending him a mental map of Korsas lower sewers with three distinct locations marked with a tiny blue sun.

[You can contact us by going to any one of these three places, but please don't be impatient. It will probably take a couple of days before we're prepared to talk to you again and impatience isn't going to endear you to us.]

[Fair enough,] Zorian said. He had no intention of staying inside Korsas for days while they deliberated on whether to give him the time of the day or not, but fortunately he didn't have to. He

could kill two birds with one stone by giving them means of contacting him wherever he may be, while also providing a tangible example of what he was offering to them.

He removed a large wooden disc out of his jacket and placed it on the ground before him.

[This is a telepathic relay,] Zorian told Seeker. [Anyone touching it will be able to get ahold of the person holding the matching pair, regardless of distance. In this particular case, that someone is me. I'm not going to be in Korsa for long so use this to contact me when you've reached your decision.]

[I'm not bringing a possible bomb into the settlement,] Seeker said. [But I guess there is no harm in dragging it off to some forgotten corner where no one will stumble upon it until we come back for it again. Farewell, Zorian Kazinski. Events permitting, we shall meet again in a few days.]



Zorian wasn't idle while the Sword Divers deliberated whether to accept his offer or not – he left Korsa to continue searching for more aranean colonies. Sadly, none of the other colonies were as easy to find as theirs, despite living beneath much smaller settlements. By the time the Sword Divers contacted him again eight days later, he only found one more colony. Illustrious Gem Collectors lived under a small village near Ticlin and, although perfectly friendly and polite, immediately informed him that they had an exclusive contract with the leaders of the village to only engage in trade with them and none else. Unfortunate. That said, they were perfectly willing to tell Zorian the locations of five other webs in their vicinity that might be more open to the idea, so that was still a win in his book.

Before Zorian had the chance to check out any of them, however, he *finally* received a call from the Sword Divers that they

were ready to make a deal. At this point the restart only had a week and a half left in it, so Zorian doubted he would get much out of the agreement, but he went to meet with them regardless.

When he reached the designated meeting place, however, he found only two aranea waiting for him, which was very suspicious. His experience with the aranea, limited as it may be, told him there should have been a minimum of three – one negotiator and two guards. More realistically, it should have been even more of them. The Cyorian matriarch had been fond of carting at least four honor guards along with her, and that was when meeting with little old him that she knew for a fact was no threat to her. Illustrious Gem Collectors sent a total of eight aranea in their greeting party.

His suspicions were confirmed when the two aranea revealed they were just guides, meant to take him where the *real* meeting was to take place. Zorian was instantly alarmed, and his paranoia was not assuaged in the least when the two aranea proceeded to lead him deep, deep into the Dungeon beneath Korsa. Too deep for his liking.

"Okay, we're stopping here. This is as far as I'm willing to go," said Zorian out loud, purposely not bothering to communicate with his guides telepathically. His voice resonated unnervingly in the large cavern they were in, and the two aranea flinched at the harsh sound of his voice.

[Please, be patient,] one of them said nervously. [We're not far from the meeting place. It will only take a little while to reach it.]

"Well, then it shouldn't be too big of a problem for you to go fetch them and tell them to come here," Zorian said. "The exact place shouldn't matter much unless you are trying to lead me into an ambush."

The sudden stiffening of their bodies told Zorian everything he needed to know. He had just enough time to channel mana

into the 'mind shield' spell inscribed on the medallion he wore under his shirt for the occasion before two mental attacks slammed into his newly-erected barrier like a pair of sledgehammers. He immediately fired an overpowered magic missile at one of the aranea in front of them, crushing her like a grape. Her mind instantly winked out and disappeared from his mind sense.

The other aranea, realizing it would never batter down his mental shield fast enough, jumped straight at him, fangs bared. It bounced back harmlessly off the shield he erected in front of himself. Zorian drew his spell rod out of his belt and pointed it at her.

"Why do this?" Zorian asked her. "Tell me and maybe I won't just incinerate you on the spot?" Zorian asked her.

She didn't answer. After a second, Zorian realized with some embarrassment she couldn't, seeing how his mind was totally shielded from her at the moment. He dismissed the shield for the moment, but kept the spell rod trained at her.

[Please, I don't know anything!] she mentally whined. Zorian kept alert for any surprises she might send at him over the telepathic link, but she didn't even try. She seemed completely overcome with terror. [I was just supposed to lead you there, nobody told me the reasons! Please don't kill me, I don't want to die!]

Zorian growled before shoving the suddenly glowing spell rod at her. Her fear spiked for a moment and she let a terrified screech, curling upon itself in preparation for her demise... and then suddenly stopped when all that happened was a bubble of force springing into existence around her.

Just then Zorian felt two additional aranean signatures speeding towards him from the direction his two 'guides' had been leading him to. Then another, and another...

Shit. The two must have sent a warning to the main ambush force. He gave the surviving 'guide' a brief glare, causing her to curl up inside her force cage, and then started running towards

the surface. He knew for a fact that humans were way faster than aranea so it should be possible to simply outrun the pursuers and-

There were eight more aranean minds in front of him, blocking off his path of retreat.

Zorian cursed his rotten luck and he skidded to a halt, trying to think of a way out of this. His mind shield wasn't going to last long against... 16 araneas!? No, 18, two were just slow runners apparently.

Six telepathic attacks slammed into his mind shield, failing to break it but causing him to stagger drunkenly as his vision swam and his balance went haywire. He wondered for a moment why only six of them had attacked his mind when so many more of them were in range before he remembered his talks with Novelty about telepathic combat. Battering down mental shields like this one too vigorously could easily destroy the mind underneath.

Seven attacks this time. His mind shield still held, but only just barely, and he collapsed on his knees in response regardless.

They weren't trying to kill him. Of course not – what would have been the point of that? No, they were aiming to capture...

Zorian almost lost consciousness as nine attacks slammed into his mental shield, crushed it like an egg and then ripped straight into his unprotected mind. The pain was excruciating, blanking out all thought and making it impossible to concentrate on anything. There was something he needed to do, he was sure, but for the life of him he couldn't remember what exactly it was...

He felt his muscles lock up as an alien mind seized his motor control away from him and started rooting in his head for facts and memories. He had to do... something... had to...

Suddenly an image flashed before him, of two necklaces hanging from his neck, one of them inscribed with the defensive spell that ultimately failed him and the other that contained...

His mind suddenly snapped back into place, his course of ac-

tion clear. Activate the suicide rings, that's what he had to do. He felt the alien mind panic as it realized what he was going to do, and felt three more attacks rip through his thoughts. They were far weaker than the ones that broke through his shield, but his mind was unprotected now and they felt like hot knives driven into his brain. He held onto the thought, though, the idea that he had to activate those rings no matter what. He forgot what the rings really did when the mental knives hit, forgot why they mattered or where he was and what he was doing, but he still knew what he had to do. Had to... had to...

A weak, gentle pulse of mana poured into the rings around his neck and the world suddenly became awash in light and heat.

Then there was only darkness.



Like many times before, Zorian woke up in his room back in Cirin. However, there was no Kirielle jumping on him to wake him up this time, and it was late in the evening instead of early in the morning.

Also, he had a blinding headache. Can't forget about that part.

Suddenly the door cracked open and a familiar head peaked inside tentatively, as if afraid what it would find inside. Zorian squinted, his vision blurry without his glasses, and gave Kirielle a searching look.

Her eyes immediately widened in surprise for some reason. He reached out to her mind in order to understand what was going on and-

"Ow," he croaked painfully. Okay, apparently he wasn't supposed to do that.

"Mother! He's awake! He woke up! He woke up!" Kirielle shouted, thundering down the stairs. Zorian winced at the sound

and tried to remember what happened. How the hell did he mess himself up this badly so early in the restart? The last thing he remembered was...

Suddenly his memories came rushing back in, along with a fresh wave of pain, and he remembered everything. Well, not literally *everything* – his memories of everything after he confronted the 'guides' were fuzzy and jumbled out of order – but enough of it to understand what happened to him.

Those treacherous, motherfucking *slimes*!

"Zorian?"

Zorian jerked in surprise at his mother's voice, broken out of his recollection.

"Uh... I'm... sort of fine?" Zorian mumbled. "My head is killing me, but I don't think it's anything serious. Can you hand me my glasses?"

His vision cleared immensely with his glasses on, allowing him to see just how worried mother looked as she stared at him. He winced internally. He was pretty sure he knew what the problem was, but better feign ignorance...

"What happened to me?" he asked.

"You wouldn't wake up," Mother said. "You scared Kirielle like you wouldn't believe – she came running down this morning, bawling her eyes out, saying she killed you. Well, you obviously weren't *dead* but nothing we did could shock you awake either. We summoned a doctor, but he couldn't find anything wrong with you. As far as he could tell, you just suddenly fell into a coma for no reason."

He nodded slowly. That sounded about right. The Sword Divers really did a number on h- wait, what was that first part?

"Killed me?" he asked incredulously.

"I didn't say that!" Kirielle protested, suddenly entering the room and carrying a bowl of soup in her hands. "Mother is just

making things up! It's just that I... um..."

"Relax, Kiri," Zorian sighed. "There is no way you jumping on top of me could have caused this."

The silence that followed clued him in that he'd made some sort of mistake. What did he...?

Oh. Oh damn.

"How'd you know I did that?" asked Kirielle.

"Because... that's what you always do?" Zorian tried, his mind still a little fuzzy and unresponsive. Probably why he made that kind of stupid mistake in the first place. "Hey, how about that soup, huh? Is that for me?"

"Not always," Kirielle huffed sullenly, thrusting the bowl at him. Whew, one bullet dodged. Mother was still giving him suspicious looks, though...

Zorian considered things as he practically inhaled the bowl of soup in front of him (the aranea may have scoured his mind, but there was nothing wrong with his stomach and he had not eaten for an entire day). This whole restart was probably a bust. The headache was bound to stay with him for weeks, only gradually going away, and he would be pretty useless while it lasted. On top of that, he wasn't sure if mother would even let him go to the Academy after an episode like that, so it might be impossible to leave the house without flat out running away. It might be best to just spend the entire month recovering and making sure his attackers didn't saddle him with any nasty surprises or permanent consequences.

He glanced at mother and Kirielle, who were both still giving him concerned looks, as if expecting him to fall apart at any particular moment, and then the empty soup bowl in his hand.

"So," he said. "You wouldn't happen to have more of this stuff, would you?"



Like he expected, mother didn't want to even hear about him going back to the academy so soon after his inexplicable coma and insisted he remain at home to recover. However, she and father had arranged for their trip to Koth in three days' time, and she was clearly loath to delay it. Since the last thing Zorian wanted was to spend any more time around his parents than necessary (even though mother had been surprisingly nice to him at the moment, he knew the effect would wear off after a few days), he was fully on board with her going through with their original plans and leaving him alone at home to recover.

In the end, mother and father did not need too much convincing to leave for their extended visit to Daimen. Zorian just had to promise to stay home for at least a month before heading back to the academy, with neighbors occasionally checking up on him to make sure he was keeping to his end of the bargain. Oh, and take Kirielle off their hands, but he no longer considered that such a chore as he once did.

Interestingly, this was the first time since he got stuck in the time loop that he had spoken to his father again. It only took a single snide comment about his 'weak, fainting son' for him to remember why. If he was lucky, this would be the last restart he had to interact with the man.

The month passed in quiet recovery. Kirielle was initially enthusiastic about 'nursing him back to health', but it took her all of two days before she got bored of playing nurse and dumped all of the cooking and household chores in his lap. He was fine with it, really – she meant well, but he wasn't a big fan of burned steak and half-cooked eggs, which was just about the only thing she knew how to make. That seemed to signify to her that he was okay, though, because she began pestering him for magic lessons soon

after. Not having anything better to do with his time, he agreed. She showed much more patience for that than she did for cooking, at least.

As the restart gradually dragged to its close, Zorian breathed a sigh of relief. The attack had no lasting consequences he could detect. The headaches were annoying, but thankfully subsided quickly. By the end of the third week, they were completely gone. He had no problems using his powers after the second week or so, and he noticed no holes in his memory – even the memories of the final attack had gradually un-jumbled themselves into a proper timeline by the end of the first week, although the very end was hard to interpret due to his less than coherent state at the time. The matriarch's memory package was thankfully still whole and intact, waiting for the day he was good enough to open it properly.

He had been lucky. That could have gone far worse for him than it had in the end. Far, far worse. If he hadn't managed to activate his suicide rings in time...

But no matter – live and learn. He would just have to make sure he came better prepared when he visited the other aranea communities in the next restart. He had five other candidates from the Illustrious Gem Collectors, and they can't *all* be treacherous jackasses like the Sword Divers, right? Still, he had every intention of taking better precautions in the future to make sure something like the previous restart could never happen again.

If another group of aranea tried to betray him in the future, he would be ready to show them just how big of a mistake they made in attacking him.

A BATTLE OF MINDS

Eventually, the month-long recuperation period came to an end. Zorian spent the last few hours of that restart with Kirielle, attending Cirin's own celebration of the summer festival. Kirielle was very happy with him, because apparently she was never allowed to wander around or stay up so late during the previous festivals. He didn't really reciprocate her excitement, to be honest – Cirin's summer festival was the same as it was every year: incredibly dull. He found himself almost wishing for Ibasan invaders to make an appearance, just to liven the place up a bit.

Okay, no. No, he didn't. The whole thing was still very boring – that's what he meant.

Regardless, with the beginning of the new restart (initiated by the familiar feeling of Kirielle jumping on top of him to wake him up), he was ready to once again tackle the problem of contacting the aranea and getting them to teach him mind magic. It didn't work all too well last time, but he had a whole month to consider what went wrong and how to fix it and he was willing to give it another go. Though not immediately, of course – teleporting to the nearest aranean web right from the start would be stupid. He had no intention of getting anywhere near one until he had already tested some tactics and equipped himself accordingly.

Consequently, he started the restart in the same way he had started most of the previous ones: by going to Knyazov Dveri.

He did two things before anything else after entering the town. First, he descended into the local dungeon to pick up all the mana crystals he knew the location of... though he didn't sell a single one in the Delver Village, or even the town above, so hopefully there would be no uproar and spying attempts on him this time around. Secondly, he saved both Alanic and Lukav from the assassins - even though he had no intention of pursuing lessons from Alanic in this restart. One of his reasons was purely emotional - both men had helped him a lot, and it felt wrong to let them die when he was already there, capable of preventing their deaths, even if it was meaningless in the long term - but the other reason was that saving them gave him some relatively non-threatening combat practice. He knew he could defeat the undead boars trying to ambush Lukav and the attack party assaulting Alanic's temple without dying, but they were still life-and-death battles that he had to take seriously.

One of these days, when he finally got some mind magic expertise from the aranea, he was going to capture the two mages involved in the assault on Alanic's temple and trawl through their memories to see if they knew anything important. Maybe some of the gunmen too...

But he was getting ahead of himself. No counting his chickens before they hatch - better worry about actually learning said mind magic before thinking about what he would do once he had it.

The first and most obvious problem he had to tackle was what to do if things went wrong again. No matter what precautions he decided to take, there was always a possibility he would bite off more than he could chew or end up caught off-guard. Technically, he had his suicide rings for that, but there was one thing that struck him about his altercation with the Sword Divers - how slow he had been about activating them. He should have blown himself up the

moment it became obvious that the situation had become hopeless, instead of waiting for the last possible moment like he had. He could think up a lot of excuses for himself, but at the end it all came down to one simple fact: he didn't want to die. He had a powerful survival instinct, and it was not easy for him to consciously kill himself... even if he knew, on an intellectual level, that it wouldn't be permanent. Thus, he had waited until he was absolutely *sure* he wasn't getting out of that situation alive and intact, and it had almost cost him everything.

All things considered, Zorian didn't want to become jaded, accustomed to dying and suicide – that seemed a bad attitude to have, especially once he left the time loop. That left two main ways he could see to deal with the problem. One was to set up a bunch of contingencies into his suicide rings, allowing them to activate automatically in certain cases. Another was to have more options to choose from when faced with disaster – something other than 'fight to the death or kill yourself'. A retreat option.

Contingencies sounded like a good idea, and Zorian even had some experience making them thanks to his studying of warding – a discipline that made heavy use of contingencies to determine when it should activate particular defenses. Unfortunately, most warding schemes used relatively easy-to-define triggers such as 'a human touches the object' or 'a living being not keyed into the wards enters the area'... defining a trigger for a contingency that would kill him should his mind be tampered with but wouldn't activate the moment he engaged in telepathic communication of any sort or hit his head or became dizzy or a million other things which were beyond him at the moment. Even if he could make such a thing, he would still have to exhaustively test it to make sure it was reliable... by working with a friendly aranea. Which, uh, kind of made it useless for his current needs.

So he cheated. Instead of creating a nuanced, sophisticated

contingency, he made the metaphorical equivalent of a sledgehammer. Specifically, he made a contingency that would kill him the moment he lost consciousness or suffered a sufficiently strong headache... but only if he turned it on. It would normally stay dormant, to cut down on unwanted activations, but he could activate it on a moment's notice if he found himself in a dangerous situation. He wasn't terribly happy with that solution, but it would do for now. He just had to remember to turn it off once the danger had passed, lest he explode the next time he went to sleep. That would be so very embarrassing...

That being done, he turned his attention to the retreat option. He had considered everything from talking to Lukav about transforming into a rock worm or some other tunneling creature, alteration spells that would allow him to create his own paths and sanctuaries underground, phasing magic, haste spells, and more. But ultimately, his mind kept going back to teleportation. It was the ultimate form of mobility magic, and everything else was just a poor substitute. If he could somehow bypass Dungeon interference to teleport away, he could simply avoid ambushes like the ones the Sword Divers had used against him instead of resorting to suicide in order to evade capture.

Fortunately, during the month-long recuperation, Zorian had come up with an idea of how he could side-step his current limitation as far as teleportation was concerned. Which was why, before descending into the dungeon, he turned one of the large stones he found on the outskirts of Knyazov Dveri into a recall anchor.

The recall spell was outright made specifically for quick retreats, and the link forged between the caster and the anchor ensured they could teleport out even from areas warded against teleportation. Well, so long as the wards were basic ones, since those protections simply disrupted the targeting part of the teleport rather than inhibiting dimensional warping as such.

Consequently, Zorian had a feeling the spell would work to yank him back to the anchor, even through the Dungeon interference.

He was right... sort of. He had found that past a certain depth, the strain on the link became too much and it snapped. Before that happened, however, the spell worked flawlessly, allowing Zorian to quickly teleport away to the surface. The depth past which it ceased to work was too shallow for his liking, but he was confident he could strengthen the link. Over the next couple of days, he worked to combine several marking spells and his knowledge of spell formula in order to create a stronger anchor for the recall spell – one that would allow it to power through *any* amount of rock and Dungeon interference. He was largely successful in this, though the anchor object had to be pretty large to contain the final spell formula he designed. No matter, there was no need to make the anchor particularly portable for what he had in mind.

Satisfied that both of his projects bore fruit, Zorian spent the rest of the week creating various portable traps and magic items... including a more combat-worthy version of his wooden golem. Golems, having no minds, were almost entirely immune to aranean mind magic, and Zorian intended to bring one with him under the explanation that it was his helper and luggage carrier. Partially true, since the golem he'd made wasn't exactly the mobile wardstone and murder statue that professional war golems were... but in the end it was still a painfully obvious bodyguard construct and Zorian fully expected the aranea to recognize it as such. Having such a guardian trailing behind him was bound to make even the most opportunistic aranea think twice about going after him.

Or at least he hoped so. He also hoped they wouldn't feel *too* threatened by the construct, since they might simply refuse to talk to him at all if it made them too nervous around him...

Well, no matter. He would risk it. Gathering all of his equip-

ment, he teleported himself and his golem to the one aranean colony that had been friendly to him the last time around. It was time to pay the Illustrious Gem Collectors a visit.



The last time Zorian had visited the aranean web that called itself Illustrious Gem Collectors, he found a colony that specialized in harvesting various precious stones that were abundant in their local underworld and traded them to the nearby human village in exchange for various human-produced goods. They were miners, essentially. They informed him straight away that they had agreed not to trade with any humans except the ones at the village, but gave him the locations of five other webs that might be more willing to help him. Since his main goal had been to locate as many aranean webs as possible and sound them out, Zorian had accepted this explanation at face value and moved on. However, after thinking about it for a while, he realized he had been kind of stupid. Just because they couldn't trade with him didn't mean they couldn't receive gifts. He should have given them one – aside from the fact they may have been even more helpful if he had done so, there was also a chance they immediately alerted the webs they sent him to about his coming. In which case he definitely wanted them to put in a good word for him, which would be far more likely if he were handing out gifts to every group he visited.

Hell, he even had a perfect gift for them. Although he cashed in on a lot of the crystallized mana he found in Knyazov Dveri's local underworld, he left a fair amount for his own tinkering and for situations like this. He was pretty sure the Illustrious Gem Collectors would have no problems accepting a gift of crystallized mana, since they traded similar items to the village all the time and it would not be in the least bit suspicious of them to have a couple of mana crystals in their possession.

Zorian entered the tunnels that held the Gem Collectors' colony and contacted the nearest sentry in the manner shown to him by the web's matriarch during his last visit. If the web found it in any way unusual that a human knew how to properly greet them and ask for audience, they never mentioned it. Instead he was soon presented with the web's matriarch, She Who Eats Fire and Sees Gold, and her escort of 10 other aranea. Huh, two more guards than the last time... apparently having his golem trail after him *did* have an effect. Still, while the matriarch was noticeably more nervous around him this time, she did not act outraged at his addition and she gave him essentially the same speech she had the last time around. They were honored by the visit, but they had prior commitments and agreements and couldn't deal with him so here's a bunch of other webs he could pester for help instead. Only this time they gave him eight names instead of five. Aside from the Rose Labyrinth Dwellers, Yellow Cavern Guardians, Filigree Sages, River Navigators and Luminous Advocates that he'd already known about, she also gave him the location of the Talisman Bearers, Ghost Serpent Acolytes and Silent Doorway Adepts. Strange. Why the extra information this time around?

[Is there something special about those last three webs?] he asked.

[Ah, so you have heard of them then?] the matriarch said, making her own conclusions about his question. [Yes, they are a bit... *shady* in their dealings with others, human and aranea alike. I wouldn't normally send a young mage like you to webs like theirs, but you seem like someone who can take care of himself.]

She gave his golem a significant look.

[He's just my luggage carrier,] Zorian said.

[Of course he is,] the matriarch said, a touch of amusement embedded in her telepathic message. [I'm sure those glyphs on its surface are purely aesthetic too. Leaving that aside, is there any-

thing else we could do for you?]

[You have done more than I could have possibly hoped for, honored matriarch,] Zorian answered honestly.

He beckoned the golem to come closer and pulled out a box from the backpack it was carrying, pointedly ignoring the wave of tension that rippled throughout the assembled aranea at the action. He then opened the box, revealing several pieces of crystalized mana and placed it in front of the matriarch.

[Please,] he said. [Take this as a small token of my appreciation for your help.]

The matriarch stared at the box without a word for several seconds before becoming agitated. No, wait, she was just trying to mimic shaking her head with her entire body.

[I cannot accept this,] she protested.

Zorian frowned. [Surely the village leadership isn't so insistent about your trade agreement as to keep you from accepting gifts?]

[It is not that! Your gift – it is simply too generous,] the matriarch said. [It's too much.]

[I respectfully disagree,] said Zorian firmly. [You were amicable and honest with me, and you told me where to go even if you could not help me yourself. You've most likely saved me months of searching by telling me where I can find more webs. I feel this is the least I can do for wasting your time with this meeting.]

The matriarch remained silent after that. After a while, Zorian figured she was not going to say anything and that this was effectively the end of their meeting.

[In any case, I suppose it's time for me to leave,] Zorian said. [Until we meet a-]

[Wait,] the matriarch said, interrupting his farewell. [One of the webs I told you about. The Luminous Advocates.]

[Yes?] asked Zorian curiously.

[They are a web dedicated to honing our psychic abilities as much as possible, even by aranean standards. Among other things, that means they are intensely interested in studying rare cases, such as aranea with unique talents... or human psychics. They will want to work with you every bit as much as you want to work with them. Always keep that in mind, because they're liable to pretend otherwise when you deal with them.]

[I... see,] Zorian responded. [That is a very useful thing to know about. I thank you for your advice, wise matriarch.]

[Oh, there is no need to flatter me,] She said. [I'm just helping a good, generous soul get forward in life. Besides, the Luminous Advocates are snotty and arrogant, always looking down on us as 'mere miners' and thinking their mastery of the mind arts makes them *so* much better than everyone else... in my opinion, they deserve to be taken down a bit. But never mind that, I've just realized I've been a terrible host. If you would be willing to follow me deeper into the tunnels, I would love to give you a brief tour of our humble home. We can talk some more while we walk.]

Zorian agreed, but quietly turned on the suicide contingencies before following after her.

Just in case.



Despite Zorian's concerns, the brief tour of the place offered by the matriarch turned out to be just that. There was no sudden ambush or sinister reveals, just a stroll through the tunnels with some running commentary. Zorian could tell he was only being shown the less interesting, outer parts of the settlement... but the tour was really more of an excuse to have a conversation and exchange some information, so he didn't mention it.

The matriarch gave him a little more information about the other webs. The Rose Labyrinth Dwellers were somewhat unique

in the sense that they never visited the surface. Most aranea webs lived underground but were heavily dependent on the surface for their survival. Not so for the Rose Labyrinth Dwellers – they were only active underground, and were rather mysterious even to other aranea. The matriarch didn't know how they would feel about teaching him, but she seemed sure they wouldn't attack. The Yellow Cavern Guardians had apparently found one of the rare underground fungal forests and made it their home – they were fiercely protective of their home, knowing just how tempting a target it was for just about anyone, but the matriarch felt they were worth the visit. The Filigree Sages specialized in 'webcraft', which was basically the aranea equivalent of spell formulas – instead of carving glyphs onto items, they anchored their spells into web constructs for some reason. Zorian didn't understand why they would do that, since web constructs were bound to be far more fragile than glyphs carved into stone and metals, but it seemed to be a thing among the aranea. It was probably a convenience thing – aranean limbs weren't exactly made for carving and chiseling things, so they probably had to use alteration magic any time they wanted to do such things. Easier to just spin some webs. The River Navigators made their homes on the banks of an underground river, and had mastered the skill of making boats and using them to travel down its length and back. This allowed them to range a lot further than most aranea could manage, and thus gather more resources. They were very active in trading with humans, but mostly for material possessions rather than psychic instruction. Finally, there were the Luminous Advocates. Their territory had little in the way of natural resources, so they mostly traded their mind magic expertise to other aranean webs instead of dealing with humans much, but that was due to lack of means rather than wants. The matriarch insisted that the Luminous Advocates were clearly

jealous of the Illustrious Gem Collectors' wealth, and otherwise made some snide comments about their character and even sexual potency. She did admit, albeit grudgingly, that they were his best bet if approached correctly.

Zorian was somewhat surprised how relatively advanced the aranea in the local region were with regards to their crafting abilities. The Cyorian web mostly traded with the surface for all their crafting needs and didn't produce anything except silk and processed monster parts. It reminded him of Novelty and her desire to learn 'human construction magic'... and thinking of Novelty promptly made him feel guilty and angry, so he dropped that trail of thought soon enough.

Of the last three webs, the matriarch knew little beyond generalities. The Talisman Bearers were apparently heavily magic-focused, most of them carrying large metal discs full of spell formulas strapped to their bodies. The Ghost Serpent Acolytes had abandoned the aranean Great Web belief in order to worship some kind of native spirit they found. The Silent Doorway Adepts had either some kind of stealth magic or great teleportation skills, or maybe both, because they had a reputation for getting into inaccessible places and disappearing from them just as easily. All three had a bit of a shady reputation. The Talisman Bearers were known to be very greedy for magic they could use, especially magic items, which could be either very good or very bad for Zorian. The Ghost Serpent Acolytes slavishly followed the guidance of their guardian spirit, and the Ghost Serpent was known to be a little... erratic at times. The Silent Doorway Adepts were thieves, or at least had a reputation for such.

Zorian decided to put all three of them firmly at the bottom of his list of aranean webs to visit.

For his part, Zorian told a little bit about himself to the matriarch - how he was studying magic in Cyoria, and how he had met

the aranea there. How they had helped him make sense of his abilities and learn how to control them. How they are all dead now, wiped out in totality.

[So Cyoria changes hands once again, does it?] the matriarch asked rhetorically. [I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. Do you happen to know which web took over?]

[None at the moment,] Zorian said. [It wasn't a rival web that destroyed them. It was... something else. Most likely some monster rising from the deeper section of the dungeon. Cyoria has had a bit of a problem with that recently.]

[I have heard something about that from the night runners,] the matriarch said. [But I didn't know it was that bad. Still, expect a new web to move in soon enough. Cyoria is a tempting prize. Not for us, mind you, the Illustrious Gem Collectors are happy enough with their lot, but plenty of ambitious webs would jump at the chance to claim the place for themselves.]

[Night runners?] asked Zorian.

[A name for aranea that go between different webs to bring news and conduct trade. Don't go looking for them. Night runners generally don't like humans. Their whole existence revolves around crossing over vast stretches of human-controlled land. Many die to mages and guns in the process. They wouldn't appreciate some random human tracking them down, regardless of the reason. The whole point of being a night runner is evading humans, after all, and especially mages.]

[Got it. Don't bother the night runners unless I want a fight,] said Zorian.

[Have you ever gotten in an actual fight with an aranea?] the matriarch asked curiously.

[Um. Sort of,] said Zorian. [It didn't end all that well for me. While we are on that topic, have you ever heard of the Sword Divers web?]

[Can't say that I have. Where are they from?]

[They live under Korsa,] Zorian answered.

[Oh, no wonder, then! Korsa is really far from us. I'm afraid that aranean webs have very little contact with webs outside of our immediate vicinity. Other than the news we get from the night runners and the occasional aranean explorer, we know little of what happens in distant webs. It may be strange to hear this, but we actually have a better picture of what humans are doing at any given point than our own kind. What did you want to know about the Sword Divers anyway?]

[They arranged for a meeting with me and then tried to ambush me when I got there,] Zorian said.

[Ah,] the matriarch said quietly. [I am sorry to hear that. Treacherous webs like that bring a bad name to our kind.]

[So you can't tell me why they did that?] Zorian asked.

[It could be any number of things,] the matriarch said, adding a mental equivalent of a shrug. [Aranea are not nearly as homogenous as humans in term of culture-] Zorian silently boggled at the notion of humans being culturally homogenous. [-since the relative isolation of each web quickly causes webs to develop their own... peculiarities. Perhaps you insulted them somehow. Perhaps it was how they test anyone wanting to meet with their leaders. Perhaps they were simply greedy and decided you would be an easy target. I'd personally assume the latter, but who could possibly tell?]

Soon after that, the conversation died down and he parted ways with the Illustrious Gem Collectors. The matriarch told him to drop by for another chat when he was done scouting out the other webs to tell her how it went, which Zorian interpreted as 'come back again soon with some more expensive gifts', but agreed to anyway. He meant it too – this visit had turned out to be far more productive than he had been hoping, and who knew what

else he might learn from the matriarch if he could get her talking again. Stopping by before the restart ended shouldn't be too much of a hassle.

The next day he set off towards the Rose Labyrinth Dwellers to begin his task in earnest.



Despite having detailed instructions about where they live, it took Zorian an entire day of searching before he encountered any of their sentries. And an entire day of wandering the lightless tunnels, constantly doubling back after taking wrong turns and fighting the denizens of the Dungeon. That black, fire-breathing beetle whose carapace shrugged off both kinetic force and fire really gave him a scare, but thankfully it was rather slow and freezing it solid finally allowed him to kill it.

The Rose Labyrinth Dwellers really lived up to the 'Labyrinth' part of their name.

[Zorian Kazinski of Cyoria,] the aranean spokesperson began. The local matriarch declined going out to meet him, sending a small greeting party of four aranea instead. They had taken their sweet time considering his offer, silently communicating between themselves for nearly two hours, but it seemed they have finally reached their decision. [We have discussed your request and reached a decision. We agree to teach you in the ways of our Gift, but only if you accept our terms.]

[Those being?] asked Zorian.

[You will live with us for the duration of your lessons. You will eat and sleep in our settlement, hunt with our hunters, patrol our territory with our scouts and otherwise act as a member of our web.]

Zorian balked at the terms. How the hell did they expect him to agree to that!? He knew for a fact that the aranean idea of food was

vastly different from the human one, for one thing. But frankly, even ignoring the sheer logistical problems of that idea, it required him to trust them far more than he did. He'd be at their complete mercy all day, every day...

...which, now that he thought about it, was probably what they were going for. That, or they were trying to get rid of him via unreasonable terms.

[There is no negotiating these terms?] asked Zorian.

[No,] the spokesperson responded. [If you are not willing to commit yourself, how can you expect the same of us?]

[...I will have to think about it,] Zorian said. It was a dirty lie, of course, since he had already thought about it and rejected the idea with extreme prejudice. But there was no sense in being impolite. For all he knew, they thought they were being extremely reasonable.

[Take your time,] the spokesperson said. [It is not something to decide on quickly. You know where to find us if you're interested.]



[I am sorry, but we are going to have to refuse your request,] the aranea said. [Perhaps if you are still interested in a couple of months from now we might be able to help you, but we are currently busy with... the renovation of our settlement and cannot help you. I hope you understand.]

Zorian stared the two aranea in front of him. That the matriarch of the Yellow Cavern Guardians came to greet him with only one guard was already pretty strange, but her nervous, twitchy behaviors did nothing to still his paranoia. Thankfully, it didn't seem she was planning on doing anything to him, she just seemed generally stressed and frightened. In fact, her guard was just as ner-

vous, and so was the sentry he initially contacted. The entire web seemed to be on edge for some reason.

The matriarch returned his stare with one of her own, her body shifting from time to time to switch focus between him and his golem, trying to divine something about them through intense scrutiny.

[I am sorry if I am making you nervous,] Zorian said. [I assure you that the golem is-]

[We are not threatened by your stupid *toy*!] She snapped. [We have far more pressing-]

She suddenly cut herself off and remained silent for a second before reestablishing telepathic communication.

[I am sorry. I let my temper get the better of me. Please, just leave. It is dangerous for you to remain here.]

[You are being threatened by someone,] Zorian guessed. A spike of emotion and images came from the link, hard to interpret but not totally incomprehensible. [Correction, *something*. A monster. A thing from the depths?]

[This talk is over,] the matriarch said icily. [If you don't go away, I will attack you.]

[Perhaps I could help?] Zorian tried.

[No, you cannot,] she said. [You are unwanted here. Leave. Now.]

What else could he do? He left.



[Yes.]

[Yes?] Zorian repeated in surprise. [Just like that?]

Bridge of Moonlight Connecting Ten Thousand Shores, the matriarch of the River Navigators, gave him a searching look. [Was I not supposed to agree? You gave a convincing offer. I

could really use those telepathic relays to connect all our outposts together. I've been trying to buy some of those from the Filigree Sages for ages now, but the greedy bastards keep increasing the price.]

Honestly, considering how his previous visits had gone, he'd half-expected the River Navigators to consult the river currents about whether or not they should teach him and then inform him that the river said no. That was just about how his luck worked, apparently. But no, they just patiently listened to his offer and promptly agreed. It was almost anticlimactic, but Zorian wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

[The Filigree Sages have telepathic relays? And here I thought I was being original when I made them...] he complained. Though it kind of did make sense that some of the aranea would try to make something like that. It was probably more unusual that *no one else* had them...

[If it makes you feel any better, they are the only web I know of that have them, and they refuse to share them with the rest of us,] Bridge of Moonlight said. [They won't even sell the finished product to us, lest we figure out how to make them from live examples.]

Ah, of course - the tendency of spellcasters everywhere to jealously hoard their knowledge and share bare scraps with others. A major part of why Ikosian magical tradition was so successful was that it had mechanisms for overcoming that - widely-accessible schools to teach everyone proper basics, state-sponsored libraries to preserve spellbooks and make them available to aspiring mages, legal frameworks for apprenticeships and magical monopolies, and so on. Even with that, there were a lot of cases of mages taking priceless magical knowledge with them to their graves because they had never entrusted anyone with their secrets.

Zorian decided that if he ever managed to escape from the time

loop alive, he was going to write a book about psychic powers to make sure people like him don't have to jump through the same hoops he had to in order to master their abilities. He wasn't sure how much of his knowledge would be transmissible through a simple written medium, but he would try.

Three days later, when Zorian provided the first shipment of telepathic relays and proved they worked as advertised (plus warded one of their storage caves against various vermin), they introduced him to Mind Like Fire, his new mind magic teacher.

[Your name is surprisingly short by aranean standards,] he told her.

[The names you hear are simply approximations of their original meaning in aranean mind-speak,] she said. [Our names are all of similar length, but since our languages are so different, it is often hard to translate certain concepts without ending up rather verbose. Though in my opinion, many aranea also enjoy making the translation as grandiose-sounding as possible. Are you ready for your lesson?]

[Yes.]

[Excellent. First, let me tell you what I mean to teach you. Feel free to stop me if you already know something I included in my lesson plan or have any objections.]

Zorian nodded, settling down on the small chair provided for him and glancing at his surroundings. The room they were in was pretty well done for something built and furnished deep in the dungeon by a bunch of giant telepathic spiders – it had a proper table and some chairs, a pair of decorative cabinets (they were completely empty; Zorian got curious and checked when he was left alone at one point), and even a couple of landscape paintings hanging on the walls. Only the lack of any windows and an expensive, clearly magical lamp perched on the table indicated that he was not in some medium-grade hotel on the surface.

He found it interesting that the River Navigators had a room in their settlements that was clearly intended for humans – it meant they received human visitors often enough they felt the need to make a guest room for them. He should probably ask them about that later.

[The first thing I intend to teach you is how to encase your mind in a defensive mental shell. It is one of the simplest and most expensive means of mental defense, but also one of the most effective ones. The name is indicative; much like your exoskeleton protects your soft, squishy insides-] Lady, I don't think you understand how human anatomy works... [-so too does this technique create a form of mental exoskeleton to protect your vulnerable thoughts.]

[So, basically, it is the psychic equivalent of a 'mind shield' spell?] asked Zorian.

[Show me,] she demanded.

Zorian complied. He channeled mana through the amulet hanging around his neck and his mind was instantly encased in a protective magical shell that repelled all mental intrusion.

For a full minute, his teacher remained silent and still, unable to establish telepathic communication with him but also not giving any indication that he should drop the spell. He decided to keep it up until she signaled him somehow, but that moment never arrived. Instead, after about two minutes of nothing happening, her telepathic voice rang in his head again.

Despite the fact the mind shield was still on.

[As I thought,] she said smugly. [The spell is neat in its simplicity, but it ultimately suffers from the same drawbacks common to nearly all human mind magic. Namely, it gives you no feedback whatsoever when attacks start interacting with your defenses. You didn't even feel it when I slipped past it, did you?]

[I do feel it when sufficiently powerful attacks interact with it,] Zorian protested.

[That's not feedback, that's damage leaking through without totally collapsing the whole thing,] she scoffed. [No, while this thing may have served you in the past, it is thoroughly inadequate for my purposes. A *real* mind shell, the sort I will teach you to produce, will be far better than this. It will be many times stronger than what your spell can manage, and infinitely more adaptive and responsive. You will be able to sense probing attacks, too subtle to actually damage your defenses but indicative of what your opponent is planning. You will be able to repair and reinforce your defenses without tearing the whole thing down and starting from scratch. You will be able to strike back without dropping your whole mental shield to do so...]

[Sounds wonderful,] Zorian said. He collapsed the spell, since it clearly wasn't doing anything at the moment. [Though if I may be so rude, I do think there is one thing where human magics generally beat your psychic powers.]

[Oh?]

[They generally require no attention from the caster to keep affecting the target, and they expose the caster to far less risk of mental retaliation by their victims. From what I can tell, that is not true for psychic powers.]

[True,] she acknowledged. [But I think the inflexible nature of those spells is too much of a weakness to make up for those advantages. But we've digressed enough – after you learn how to defend your mind a bit we will move onto attack and retaliation...]

It did not take long for Zorian to realize that Mind Like Fire was *very* serious about her job. Far from teaching him only the bare minimum and meeting him once a week or so like he had assumed she would, she scheduled lessons with him every single day and demanded every shred of effort and patience he could spare. The lessons basically consisted of him lovingly constructing a mental shell around his mind before Mind Like Fire mercilessly took it

apart, only backing off when his defenses collapsed from the strain. It was a good thing he had decided not to turn on his suicide contingencies before going into her lessons, because they would have gone off at the end of the very first day due to all the headaches he had suffered in the process.

Still, Zorian couldn't complain. This was basically what he was searching for all this time, wasn't it? True, it was a lot more painful than he had imagined, leaving him bedridden for hours after the lessons ended, but it was also a lot more effective than he had thought it would be. His ability to shield his mind was improving fast, and after the first week Mind Like Fire started bringing 'guest teachers' to give him experience with attacks different from her own.

Not that everything was perfect. For one thing, Mind Like Fire had a Xvim-like obsession with getting the basics right and refused to teach him anything else until he mastered the 'mind shell' technique to her liking, and she had some pretty high standards. For another, the River Navigators spontaneously raised the price of their cooperation twice, first demanding of him another ten relays if he wanted to continue the lessons, and then urging him to help them kill some kind of giant mole monster that was threatening one of their outposts. The mole-thing didn't look particularly dangerous to Zorian, but apparently it was resistant to mind magic and too tough to bring down with their meager magical skills. Though annoyed at the sudden and completely unwarranted demands, Zorian decided to play things their way, easily producing another ten relays and luring the giant mole into a minefield he had set up for it. As tempted as he was to break the whole arrangement on principle, the fact was that Mind Like Fire was simply too good of a teacher to lose.

Before the restart ended, Zorian had once again visited the Illustrious Gem Collectors, gifted them some more crystalized mana

(to the matriarch's continued protests that he was being too generous) and told them a little about his experiences. They had nothing new to tell him, however, so his visit was largely pointless in the end.

Upon the start of the next restart he once again teleported to Knyazov Dveri to perform his preparations and then promptly contacted the River Navigators with the offer, deciding not to contact the Illustrious Gem Collectors this time. The River Navigators were just as quick to accept his offer as they had been in the previous restart, and they once again assigned Mind Like Fire as his teacher.

Not particularly surprising, as he soon found out. Now that he showed some pre-existing skill, she actually allowed him to have some breaks during the lessons where she would tell him a little about herself and her web. She was literally their mind magic teacher, and was thus the most logical person for the job. Although she usually taught aranean children, rather than adults...

Maybe Zorian was a little too prideful, but the fact that they had sent their elementary school teacher to conduct his lessons kind of burned.

[Prepare yourself,] Mind Like Fire suddenly stated, and Zorian knew the break was over.

He quickly erected the shell around his mind, a simple blast of telepathic noise washing over it harmlessly. Mind blasts like that one were the simplest form of telepathic attack, one that even Zorian could produce, and they had no chance in hell of punching through a solid defense like he was currently sporting. It was the fastest attack most telepaths could manage, though, and Mind Like Fire always started a battle with one of those to see if she could catch him unprepared with it. That used to actually happen, back when he was still starting and was struggling to call up the mental shell on a moment's notice, but even after it stopped working on

him she persisted in doing that at the start of every battle.

Immediately after the blast subsided, he felt pinpricks skittering across his shell, looking for flaws and weaknesses. He had tried to be clever in the past by deliberately creating weak spots and then quickly shoring them up when she committed to an attack, but he quickly learned that was a risky tactic to employ at his level of skill so these days he was more passive and reactive.

Soon enough, once she was convinced there were no obvious flaws in his defense, she tried to create some. Sudden, concentrated mental bursts slammed into his mental shell, seeking to crack it by concentrating all their energy against a specific portion of the shell. He recognized that attack as the one that the Sword Divers had used to smash his 'mind shield' spell and ravage his mind. Not surprising they had used that, he was informed, since that type of attack was specifically designed to punch through mental barriers. 'Mind spike', the aranea called it. Unlike the last time he was faced with this attack mode, however, he had a shiny new mental defense and was facing only one attacker. He felt the spikes hit his shield but it held, and he quickly repaired all the damage and reinforced that part of the shell to withstand future attacks.

Mind Like Fire promptly switched targets, bombarding another, different portion of his mental shell. And when that didn't work, she moved on to the next, and the next, steadily speeding up her attacks until Zorian was straining to hold his mental shell intact. She began mixing in low-powered probing attacks between mind spikes, masking the tiny pinpricks among the sheer intensity of her barrage and looking for any cracks created by her assault. Zorian frantically worked to patch up damage and reinforce the shell in places where he detected her probes, and somehow held on until her attack attenuated.

Success. His shell usually cracked during that last phase. Maybe now she would-

A massive vise of telepathic pressure closed around his mind from all sides, crushing and grinding without mercy or end. The attack, the unimaginatively but appropriately named 'mind crush', closed around his mental shell like an armored fist around a soap bubble. And, weakened as it was from the previous barrage, the shell promptly broke like one too. Zorian experienced a brief flash of blinding pain in his head before Mind Like Fire realized she'd won and let the attack dissipate.

"Motherfucker," Zorian swore loudly, massaging his temples and not even bothering with telepathy to express his displeasure. "Did you really have to finish things off with that attack?"

[Yes,] Mind Like Fire said simply.

"Ugh," Zorian groaned.

[I'll give you five minutes before we go for round two,] she said.

"I take back everything nice I've ever thought about you," Zorian told her. "You're pure evil."

[My other students agree with you. There is a reason why I was named Mind Like Fire, you see,] she said. [Four more minutes left.]

Damn it.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

SLOW BURN

As the weeks went by, Zorian became increasingly bored with Mind Like Fire's lessons. While they continued to pay results in terms of his increasing mental combat proficiency, they were also very repetitive and had increasingly marginal results. It didn't help that his mental defenses were by now too good to be casually collapsed by his teacher, which meant that he no longer ended the lessons with a raging headache and an urge to lay down for a few hours. The lessons mostly just taxed his patience now, leaving him a bit tired and frustrated but otherwise ready to do something else.

He decided to do just that. He had never really finished sounding out the rest of the aranea, wanting to get some basics of mental combat from the River Navigators first, but he was becoming increasingly certain that Mind Like Fire was stalling him with her demands at mastery in order to avoid teaching him anything more advanced. His mental defenses were already good enough, in his opinion, so there was no harm in giving the other webs a visit to see what their offer was.

The Luminous Advocates were his first destination. They were, after all, supposed to be very interested in teaching someone like him, as well as hungry for resources he could provide. Unfortunately, that didn't quite work out. Their initial offer was

utterly ridiculous, calling for Zorian to pay a simply staggering amount of money and magical artifacts. He didn't agree to that, of course – couldn't, actually, even if he wanted to, since the whole thing would cost twice as much as he had on his person. Even if he gathered all of his savings and sold every single mana crystal he'd found under Knyazov Dveri, it still wouldn't be enough. It took more than 3 weeks to talk them into a more reasonable price, since they seemed to finally realize he was in a hurry. By that time, the restart was already near its end. Undeterred, he tried to approach them again over the next four restarts, varying his approach, but in the end only managed to reduce the negotiation period by a couple of days.

Admittedly, the few lessons he actually managed to finagle out of them really were top-notch. Not only did they give him some crucial advice in regards to strengthening his mental shell that really sped up his progress in Mind Like Fire's lessons, they also helped him hone other aspects of his psychic abilities. For instance, he was now capable of forming two-way telepathic links that allowed non-psychics to talk back to him mentally, as well as form links with multiple people at once. They even taught him how to better handle the information from divination spells which dumped their results directly into the mind of the caster. Some useful information, that. Nonetheless, Zorian decided to give up on seeking their help after the fourth restart. While their help was useful, the sheer amount of time and nerves he lost arranging for said help to actually materialize made the whole thing a poor deal in his mind. It didn't help that they categorically refused to teach him memory manipulation unless he subjected himself to a total memory probe, courtesy of their elders, which made their web a bit of a dead end as far as he was concerned. Because that was basically never going to happen.

Since negotiation with the Luminous Advocates involved a

whole lot of waiting for the web to respond to his offers, Zorian had time to approach the Filigree Sages at the same time. They too took a lot of time to convince, although in their case it was because they were a suspicious bunch and also more than a little bit unhappy about him selling telepathic relays to the River Navigators. Thankfully, the first time he managed to convince them to teach him, he immediately found a shortcut that allowed him to drastically cut down on the negotiation time necessary to convince them. All he had to do was demonstrate his proficiency with spell formulas and promise to help them adapt human techniques to their own 'webcraft'. They cared about *that* a lot more than about any material trade goods, and so long as he did so it only took a week of negotiation before they agreed to teach him.

Zorian was more than a little shocked when he was first shown an example of the Filigree Sage's webcraft. He had expected something relatively simple and crude, like a piece of spider silk cloth with familiar Ikosian symbology embedded into it, or perhaps even individual threads woven into the glyphs. Instead, the Filigree Sage crafter he was to work with led him to a rectangular formation of stone pillars, in the middle of which was suspended a complex, multi-layered sphere made out of spider silk. The sphere glowed with pale white light in the darkness of the room, points of brighter lights constantly racing along this or that thread in a complicated dance that Zorian couldn't decipher. Every inch of its surface (as well as every inch of the inner layers too, he would later find out) was covered in glyphs. Unfamiliar, non-Ikosian glyphs. And his guide claimed this was just one of the lesser practice spheres, since they weren't going to bring a potentially-untrustworthy outsider anywhere near the real thing.

He had realized at that point that he had bitten off far more than he could chew. Helping the Filigree Sages refine their webcraft basically required becoming adept in a whole different tra-

dition of making spell formulas. A tradition that descended from the Ikosian one, thus making the job much easier, but still. This was a task that could take *years*. Not something that you could do on the side while focusing on something else.

He still gave it an honest try (mostly by completely giving up on rest and free time for several restarts) and the Filigree Sages seemed pleased by his work, but in the end he decided that he simply couldn't justify the spent effort to himself. While the topic itself was extremely interesting – indeed, many researchers would have quite literally killed to be in his place, studying an otherwise unknown magical tradition – it was ultimately a distraction he, at the moment, didn't need. And really, the actual mind magic instruction he was getting in exchange for his work was little different from what the River Navigators were offering. He did admittedly get to experience a slightly different style of mental combat from the one practiced by River Navigators and most other aranean webs, since the Filigree Sages used methods that revolved around group combat. Not very useful to him, since he didn't have a fellow telepath to use it with, but he did learn some tricks to deal with multiple attackers.

Originally, the Filigree Sages were completely unwilling to teach Zorian any form of memory manipulation. However, after two restarts of studying their webcraft, it became impossible to pretend he was starting from scratch. The next time around, he used an excuse that he'd learned the bare basics from the Cyorian web. He was promptly taken to their matriarch (who had mostly ignored him up until then, preferring to have her underlings interact with him), who seemed very keen on sending an expedition to Cyoria with Zorian's help in order to establish some kind of contact with the Cyorian web. Not even finding out they had all been killed dampened her enthusiasm for the idea of an expedition to Cyoria – it just meant the focus of the expedition shifted from

establishing contact to looting the place down to bedrock. Lovely. Regardless, in exchange for transporting the expedition to Cyoria, protecting them from any threats and transporting them back, Zorian was promised... just about anything, really. Even memory manipulation was on the table.

Aside from the fact that agreeing to such a thing would require Zorian to go back to Cyoria, and the fact that he would be helping a group of aranea loot the remains of his friends, there was the little matter of him not being actually sure that the Cyorian web actually used any webcraft. He suspected they did, and many of the things the matriarch had mentioned in her stories and off-hand comments seemed to indicate so in retrospect, but he wasn't actually certain. It was just an excuse he made up to explain his otherwise inexplicable knowledge.

He should definitely go down into the ruins of Cyoria's web and check to see what's in there before agreeing to any such expeditions.

With the Luminous Advocates and the Filigree Sages essentially eliminated from the list of options, at least for the time being, Zorian was left with only three options to serve as an alternative to the River Navigators. The three 'shady' webs that the Illustrious Gem Collectors had warned him about. Zorian was about to start approaching them when Mind Like Fire finally decided to move on from basic telepathic combat drills.



When Mind Like Fire declared that Zorian's mental defenses were 'passable' and that they would be switching over to honing his offensive arsenal, he was cautiously optimistic but didn't expect much. Practice would probably become less painful, since Mind Like Fire would be on the receiving end of attacks this time, but he

didn't really think his attacks would be very effective. Her mental defenses were bound to be excellent.

But then Mind Like Fire told him to hit her with his best shot and simply stood there, content to passively weather the attack and Zorian decided to oblige her. He dumped a positively huge amount of mana into his next attack, the most he could manage without the entire thing losing cohesion, and slammed it straight into her mental shell.

The results were beyond all of his expectations. Rather than simply bouncing off her mental shell like he had expected, the attack effortlessly blew her defenses away and slammed into her unprotected mind like a battering ram. She screeched in pain, spasming and flailing with her whole body, and, for a brief while, there was pandemonium as other nearby aranea burst into the room to see what the fuss was about. Zorian tried to explain what had happened without the whole thing devolving into a fight. For a moment he was sure he would have to flee and was already clutching the recall rod in his hand to teleport away, but Mind Like Fire recovered in time to defuse the situation.

She also insisted on continuing the lessons as if nothing notable had happened, and proceeded to shoo away all the other aranea that had come to her defense.

[Damnation,] Mind Like Fire grumbled once they were alone again. [Not only did I get taken down by a human rookie, but everyone saw it too. I won't live this one down for a long while.]

[Uh, sorry?] tried Zorian. He wasn't sure what to even tell her, in all honesty.

[Don't be,] she said. [It's my fault, really – your inexperience has automatically put me in the mind of one of our young and I foolishly assumed your attack would be like one of theirs. But while your skills at mental combat leave much to be desired, you are still a qualified mage with plenty of mana to burn and consid-

erable experience in managing it. I should have let you face my best defenses and then lowered the strength afterwards. I should have waited to see what your strongest attack was like instead of making assumptions about how strong my shield needed to be. Let that be a lesson to you as well, should you ever teach someone – it is always unwise to be arrogant and carelessly presumptuous, lest you get taken down by some precocious hatchling.]

He was not a freaking hatchling! He was only a year away from being legally recognized as an adult, and was already one if the time spent in the time loop was factored in!

[I didn't do anything permanent, did I?] Zorian asked instead.

[No, of course not. Why do you think- Ah. I see that in my haste to bring your practical skills to a workable level, I have neglected some crucial bits of theory. Like what happens when an attacker manages to break through the defender's defenses.]

[Bad things?] tried Zorian.

[Yes, but perhaps not quite as bad as you'd think,] she countered. [To grossly simplify things, there are four main things one can do to an unshielded target. The first is to simply assault their mind telepathically, seeking to damage it. This is, in almost every case, simply a way to incapacitate the target for a while. It is very difficult to actually kill people through purely mental attacks – usually such attacks simply cause a lot of pain and make the target lose consciousness for a while. Maybe quite a while, and they may suffer from headaches, confusion and amnesia for a time, but even then they are almost guaranteed to eventually recover.]

[Oh. I didn't know that,] Zorian admitted. He honestly thought that getting hit by a sufficiently powerful telepathic barrage could cripple you permanently. Then again, 'for a while' could perhaps mean months or years, so still not something to take lightly. And he was pretty sure a pain-inducing attack could be easily adapted to an instrument of torture. [So you were never

in any permanent danger, then, but you'll probably be hurting for a while.]

[Yes, that is the short of it.]

[And the other three things the attacker could do to the target?] Zorian asked.

[Well, the second possibility is that the attacker extracts information out of the target, either by reading their thoughts or probing their memories. Reading thoughts is the easiest option, of course, but often ineffective. Aranea, mages, and quite a few human civilians as well, have learned to maintain certain discipline over their surface thoughts, making it hard to pluck information out of their minds that way. That leaves deep memory reading, and this is not nearly as easy as it sounds, as most people have quite a lot of memories to sift through and can sense when someone is rooting through their heads and resist. Even non-psychics can resist deep memory scans, if they're strong-willed and the psychic isn't very practiced in the skill...]

Zorian remained silent. He had raised the possibility of being taught memory manipulation plenty of times in the past, and she had always told him he wasn't ready yet. He couldn't imagine her answer would be any different now. At least it wasn't a flat out no, he supposed.

[The third and fourth options are what we aranea call deep and surface manipulations. Surface manipulations consist of temporary manipulations, such as fooling the senses or amplifying a particular emotion in the victim to produce a desired reaction. Deep manipulations, on the other hand, are more... permanent. They consist of things such as modifying someone's memories, blanking out entire sections of their life, instilling lasting compulsions or turning them into unaware sleeper agents. Deep techniques are what a lot of humans associate mind magic with, but they are actually rarely used. Such lasting mental alterations require the at-

tacker to dive deep into the victim's mind and spend a lot of time tweaking things, making them hard and time-consuming to use. This is not something you use in a fight – this is something you do to a foe that has been decisively defeated and cannot strike back at you at all. Even among us aranea it is considered something of a dark art. Few of us are proficient in its use.]

Zorian sighed. "This is all leading up to an explanation about why you don't want to teach me any memory manipulation, isn't it?" he said out loud.

[Yes and no,] Mind Like Fire said carefully.

"So a no couched in flowery language," said Zorian derisively. "Man, that's the third refusal in a row. I'm going to have to find more webs to investigate..."

[Oh, have you gone to other webs with this?] she asked, not in the least bothered by his little outburst. [Sounds like quite a story, you'll have to tell me about it later. But don't write us off yet. While it's true that we are not ready to let you root through our minds, even as practice, that doesn't mean we can't help prepare you for when you do eventually find an aranea brave enough to let you read her memories.]

"And you're going to do that by...?"

[The main problem you are facing when trying to read aranean minds is that our ways of perceiving the world are very different from yours. Our many eyes allow us to see the world in three different ways, only one of which – the one provided by our pair of big, forward-facing eyes – is in any way analogous to human vision. We can also sense vibrations through our legs, and our sense of touch is much more sophisticated than yours. It's how we can navigate through the tunnels so easily with no light to see by.]

"You can't see in the dark?" asked Zorian. Most Dungeon-dwellers could.

[No, we need at least a little light to see,] she said. [We do

have excellent low-light vision though. But we're getting off track. What I'm trying to say is that even if you received access to an aranean memory, you probably would not be able to parse it. If you want to be able to read aranean memories, you first need to learn how to process the way we perceive the world. And that is where I *can* help you. I can let you tap into my senses and let you adjust to them. I can even package some of my more inconsequential memories into little packets and send them to you over the telepathic link to help you understand how to deal with memory packages.]

"Oh," Zorian said lamely. Yeah, that did sound useful. Somewhat mollified by her response, he switched back to telepathic communication. [So can we perhaps switch to that right now? I must admit I am getting thoroughly sick of combat drills. I know it's important to practice my mental shields, believe me, but I'm going to go crazy if this continues for much longer.]

[As a matter of fact, yes. I had wanted to wait with such instruction until you could actually break through my mental shields before starting you on that path, but you did succeed with that. Not in a way I had expected or planned for, but fair is fair. We shall start with surface manipulations, since you will need some proficiency with them before you can tap into someone's senses. How much did your other aranean teachers tell you about them?]

[Very little, other than the fact that they exist,] Zorian said. [But surface manipulations are basically mind control, yes? We covered those back in my mage academy. Only theoretically, with an emphasis on identifying the type of mind control and how to fight it, but still.]

[Summarize those lessons for me, please,] Mind Like Fire ordered. [I'd like to see what I'm working with.]

With a wave of his hands, Zorian created a glowing geometric diagram that was informally known as the 'mind control rectan-

gle' among the students and whose official name escaped Zorian at the moment. It was something far too loquacious and complicated for what were basically four words arranged into a simple two-by-two grid – a rectangle divided into four smaller ones, each of the four major methods of manipulating people through mind magic assigned its own corner.

Domination, Suggestion

Puppeteering Illusion

[Pretty,] Mind Like Fire deadpanned. [But I must confess I have never learned how to read human script, so you'll have to explain to me what that means.]

Ah. Right. He sometimes forgot that for all that aranea interacted with humans, they were still alien beings with a completely different culture. Ikosians had possessed an almost religious reverence for the written word, and had spread literacy to every place that had fallen under their domination, so literacy was near universal in places they'd once ruled over. Universal literacy most likely made it much easier to train as many people as possible into mages as well, thus providing tangible benefits for the policy. The aranea, on the other hand, had no such tradition, and probably couldn't use human-style writing effectively anyway. He knew that the Cyorian web had a number of aranea that could read and write, but most aranea probably had no need to master such skills.

[Domination and suggestion represent spells that enforce the caster's will upon the target,] said Zorian, pointing at the upper row of the rectangle. [Domination spells involve the caster outright ordering the target to do something and compelling them to do so against their will. Suggestion attempts to present the order as something the target wants on their own. They are will and situation based; depending on the sort of person you cast such spells at and the circumstances they are in, it might be completely impossible to affect them with this sort of mind magic. Most people will

resist orders to kill themselves or their loved ones, for instance, and it is next to impossible to convince a patrolling soldier that you are not the person they are looking for if they had been given your picture or someone singled you out to them.] He pointed at the lower row of the rectangle. [Puppeteering and illusions, on the other hand, are not directly affected by the target's personality and circumstances. Puppeteering flat out usurps the target's control over their body and pilots it like a... well, puppet. Illusions manipulate the target's senses in some fashion. Neither can be resisted as such, although puppeteering has to overcome the target's magic resistance first and illusions can be detected and dispelled.]

Zorian waved his hands again and the illusion split in half, separating the rectangle into left and right halves – domination and puppeteering on the left side, suggestion and illusion on the right side.

[Domination and puppeteering are forceful methods,] he said. [The target knows they are being targeted by a spell, and will usually be furious at the caster when it ends. As such, they are usually used in combat situations, against people who are clear enemies to you. Suggestion and illusion are subtle methods. The target doesn't automatically become aware they have been affected, and in fact the goal is for them to remain unaware as long as possible. They are generally used for criminal and espionage purposes.]

Compulsion spells on the top, hijacking spells on the bottom, forceful spells on the left and subtle spells on the right. Yup, he'd covered everything. He let the illusion evaporate into smoke and settled down to wait for Mind Like Fire's response.

[An interesting breakdown,] she said. [It has a sort of simplistic beauty to it. I'll have to remember that one. The reality is far more complex and less sharply defined... but we'll get to that later, when it's actually relevant. I was never very big on spending time on theory, truth be told. We've wasted enough time on it today

and I'd like to get started on something productive.]

The resulting lesson was exceptionally painful, reminding Zorian of his initial lessons with her, several restarts in the past ago... and despite her insistence she was being no harder on him than she was on any of her other students, Zorian knew the sudden ferocity of her lessons was her revenge for catching her off guard.

On the bright side, she calmed down after a week of that. On the less bright side, he would have to piss her off like that on every subsequent restart as well, so he was looking at a week of painful headaches at the start of every restart.

Sometimes you just couldn't win.



As it turned out, Mind Like Fire's statement about him being unable to understand aranean senses turned out to be not just correct, but a vast understatement. Even after a full month of practice, he couldn't make heads or tails of aranean senses. Even trying to limit his sensory tap into their vision alone left him dizzy and confused, and the less said of their sense of touch, the better. They had a rudimentary sense of taste on their leg hairs! *They tasted the ground they walked on!* Why for the love of all that was holy would a species need to have an ability like that!?

It also put Novelty's habit of touching everything, him included, in an entirely new and unsettling light...

Not that he'd learned nothing during the entire month. Mind Like Fire did manage to teach him how to affect the minds of others in minor ways. Some of these, like the ability to induce spasms and limb failure, he already knew how to produce - but not very consistently before he'd been lectured on the proper way of hijacking other people's nervous systems. Others, like inducing full body paralysis, lightly dampening or amplifying their emotions,

subtly redirecting their attention away from things or inducing failure of one or more of their senses were wholly new to him. But while these things were all unquestionably useful, the total lack of progress on the one thing that he really had to master hit him hard.

In the end, he reluctantly decided to consult the Luminous Advocates for help. As much as they annoyed him, they probably had an answer to his problem. He managed to short-circuit the negotiations with them only two weeks into the restart by simply paying their ridiculous price. It required spending day after day on exploration of the lower levels of Knyazov Dveri's dungeon and selling everything of worth he had found there, but he did manage to talk them down to something halfway reasonable and then just pay them off.

According to the Luminous Advocates, his main problem was that he was basically trying to take on too big of a challenge at once. For one thing, he was trying to tap into the senses of another while still retaining his own, forcing his mind to process different perspectives at once. And no, sitting still with his eyes closed was not nearly enough to get around that. In order to deal with that issue, the Luminous Advocates taught him how to turn his mental abilities inwards and shut off one or more of his senses, leaving only the foreign sensory stream for his mind to process.

Their second suggestion was that he had to practice sensory tap on something easier first. Preferably his fellow humans, as their senses were closest to his own, but some of the more similar animals might also suffice. Only once he'd mastered the art of tapping into the senses of his fellow humans should he bother trying to tap into something as alien as an aranea.

When Zorian tried to do just that by tapping into the senses of a random passerby in a nearby town, he realized they were completely correct. He nearly collapsed from disorientation, even though he was only tapping into familiar human senses this time.

It would be a long time before he could move on to something more exotic than a human, it seemed.

Which presented him with something of a problem. While Zorian's mental abilities were currently good enough that he didn't fear discovery every time he used them on some random civilian, he could hardly guarantee that he would never mess up and reveal to his target that he was messing with their heads. And frankly, you could never really be sure that your target really was 'a random civilian' – it was all too possible to step into the mind of some high-ranking mage good at blending in with the crowd, or to encounter a civilian trained to detect such intrusions. And the response of the mage guild to rogue mind mages was *harsh*. He didn't want a guild hunter team after him, even if the time loop would probably shield him from the worst of the consequences.

And that was without even considering the moral dimension of the whole thing. Picking on innocent people for the sake of personal training was not the road he wanted to go on, and dismissing their plight as irrelevant due to the time loop struck him as an unhealthy attitude to have. He might have justified the whole thing to himself if it was just a matter of tapping into their senses, since that was mostly harmless, but the Luminous Advocates made it clear this wasn't the only skill he would have to practice on his fellow humans to get right. He would encounter the exact same issues when he tried to master memory manipulation – even after accounting for their different senses, aranean minds were sufficiently different that he would need to practice on something more similar to himself before he tried to interpret their memories. And practicing memory probes was neither safe, harmless nor inconspicuous.

He needed an acceptable target.



Zorian walked carefully through the streets of Cyoria, scanning the crowds for any signs of hostility with every sense he had available. He had a feeling his tension and nervousness was very obvious to people around him, but then again he was hardly the only person who was nervous. The random monsters welling up from the dungeon had spooked many a native, and there was a sense of tension in the city that hadn't been there the last time he'd been in the city.

This was his second recent visit to Cyoria, and it was just as uneventful as his first. He had even deliberately walked into some back alleys and more isolated parts of the city to see if Red Robe or one of his agents would confront him once he was out of the public eye, but no such things happened. He wasn't even confronted by a band of rough-looking men trying to steal his belongings, like it usually happened in the trashy adventure novels he read from time to time. Sighing, he twisted the top of the recall rod hanging off his belt and was promptly teleported to the outskirts of the city. The location was totally unremarkable – it wasn't lived in, and had been trapped to hell and back over the course of several weeks – Zorian could come and go as he pleased, but if the ward surrounding the area detected anyone other than him appearing inside, it would unleash a plethora of traps on the interloper – the nastiest and most lethal of traps that he had the capacity to make and install.

He repeated the action three times in quick succession, recalling himself to three additional, similar spots, walked off in a random direction for an hour or so and then finally teleported himself to his real destination.

Two days later, when no one tried to track him down to a small, remote village he'd chosen for his current base (mostly because it was in the middle of nowhere with nothing but fields of wheat for miles in any direction), he finally breathed a sigh of relief... and promptly started planning his next foray into the city.

Next time he was checking out the aranea ruins to see if Red Robe had put any tripwires there to alert him of intruders coming there.

When Zorian first got the idea of going back to Cyoria, he had immediately dismissed it as madness. He wasn't ready, and acting prematurely could potentially ruin everything. However, the more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea. Red Robe clearly wasn't trying to locate him anymore – if he had been doing so, Zorian wouldn't have lasted nearly as long as he had, he was quite sure of that. *Why* Red Robe felt no need to locate him, when he clearly wanted to get rid of any rival time travelers, Zorian did not know. He'd feared that the other time traveler had maybe placed tripwires in Cyoria to alert him when he came back, but even that seemed increasingly unlikely at this point – Zorian had been all over Cyoria during his two brief forays into the city, even in parts of the Academy, and nothing of note happened.

That was important, partly because Zorian felt like he was going a little crazy and desperately wanted to see some familiar faces, at least for a short while, but also because Cyoria held some perfect targets for him to practice his growing mind magic skills on. The matriarch solved at least a part of the time loop's mystery by ferreting out information out of the heads of Ibasan invaders and their supporters. *Why* couldn't Zorian do the same? He would not only be advancing his abilities in preparations of opening the matriarch's memory package, he would also be tackling the mystery of the time loop from another direction. Two birds with one stone.

He wasn't going to move back into the city yet. He would continue testing the place for a while still. Try to spend a whole week in there, show up for a class or two. But if Red Robe's response turned out to be as non-existent as this?

His long exile from the city was about to end.



Zorian spent the next three restarts alternating between Mind Like Fire's lessons and making forays into Cyoria. He was never attacked while in Cyoria, not even when he combed through the aranean corpse-filled settlement in one of the restarts. A part of him felt that was highly suspicious, but ultimately it didn't keep him away from the place.

Especially since he was starting to reach the limits of what Mind Like Fire was willing to teach him. His mental defenses were top-notch, and his ability to strike back at hostile minds was nothing to scoff at either – even Mind Like Fire admitted she actually had to take him seriously these days. She had taught him all of the simple tricks and basic techniques she dared give him access to, and he was even getting the hang of tapping into aranean senses – the Luminous Advocates were right, it went a whole lot easier after he had mastered the art of tapping into purely human senses first. If he wanted to get any benefit from her teachings, he would have to spend a few restarts practicing deep memory scans on humans first.

Of course, that would require finding an aranea that was willing to teach him even the basics of such memory scans. Mind Like Fire's reaction to that was a firm refusal, since that would involve lowering all of her defenses and letting Zorian dive deep into her private memories. Even among themselves, the aranea considered such an act to be one of great trust and significance. It didn't help that when Mind Like Fire challenged Zorian to provide similar access to his own memories to *her*, he had little choice but to say no.

He did know that the Filigree Sages were willing to play along if he let them loot the Cyoria settlement, but Zorian had been unable to find much in the way of webcraft when he searched the

settlement in one of his brief forays, so he wasn't sure whether that would actually work out at all.

Then, near the end of the last restart, something interesting happened. Zorian had gotten permission from Bridge of Moonlight to stay in the River Navigators' main settlement for a while after he helped them dig up a brand new cavern with alteration spells, and was present in the matriarch's chamber when a messenger from the Yellow Cavern Guardians arrived to plead with the River Navigators' matriarch for help.

The Yellow Cavern Guardians, he had found, were on the verge of extinction. A few days before the start of the time loop, the caverns from which they got their name – and which their survival and prosperity depended on – had been taken over by some huge monster from the deeper levels of the dungeon. The creature was too magic-resistant to be affected with mind magic, extremely tough, and also regenerated. Roughly a week and a half into the restart, the Yellow Cavern Guardians were starting to get desperate. In an attempt to retake their cavern, they had decided to launch an all-out attack, seeking to drive the monster off. It was an utter disaster, and the Yellow Cavern Guardians lost both their matriarch and her two successors/assistants/somethings. Now leaderless as well as desperate, the Yellow Cavern Guardians went into a panic (well, they claimed they 'deliberated things', but Zorian knew how to read between the lines) before begging for help from anyone they thought would listen.

Sadly for them, the River Navigators had no intention of messing around with a creature capable of taking on an entire aranean web and winning. Fortunately for them, Zorian was not nearly so intimidated.

The last time he'd offered aid, he'd been rudely refused. But last time, he'd asked at the start of the restart, when their leadership had still been alive and believed they could handle things. They

had probably been more worried about him taking advantage of their momentary weakness and had not felt they needed all the help they could get. Now that their leadership was dead, however, they were not in a position to be nearly as picky.

He didn't even have to ask – the messenger approached him with a plea for help on her own, after Bridge of Moonlight blew the messenger off and she'd realized that Zorian was there.

After hammering out some basic agreement (which could be summarized as 'we'll agree to anything, just give us back our cavern!') Zorian recalled himself and the messenger to the recall stone he had left on the surface and then immediately teleported them to where he knew the Yellow Cavern Guardians were. The messenger seemed shocked he knew where to find them without her guidance, and a bit disoriented from the rapid succession of teleporting, but she recovered quickly and led him to what passed as leadership of their web for the moment.

Several hours later, he found himself at the entrance to a vast cave overgrown with a fungal forest, a pair of Yellow Cavern Guardians 'guards' watching him from deeper into the access tunnel. Supposedly they were ready to intervene if he ran into trouble at any point, but he was pretty sure they were just going to stay on their asses if he got attacked and then, if he lost, mournfully report he had tragically ended up as monster chow before they could do anything. They seemed terrified even to be there.

Zorian created a floating eye out of ectoplasm and sent it deeper into the cave to get some basic sense of its contents and layout. His recent practice with tapping into other people's senses made processing what the eye was sending him child's play, and he no longer had to close his eyes to use it.

He had to admit one thing - the cavern was simply breathtaking. It was huge, and almost entirely covered with a dizzying vari-

ety of giant mushrooms. The more familiar umbrella-mushrooms existed between ones that resembled leafless trees and long, fleshy spikes and berries. Looking over them, Zorian even spotted several that appeared to be whitish plants rather than mushrooms, complete with small flowers and atrophied leaves. The largest of them glowed with a faint blue light that suffused the entire cavern with weak, shadowy light.

Underground forests like this one were treasure troves of information and interesting alchemical ingredients, and were highly sought after by both humans and dungeon denizens. And this one was both huge and largely unspoiled. No wonder the Yellow Cavern Guardians were so protective of it.

His appreciation of the view was quickly interrupted, however – the monster wasn't hard to find.

It was right in the center of the cave, sitting like a king in a small, shallow lake situated there. Well, shallow in a relative sense. Zorian could have submerged himself easily in its center, but it was barely a puddle for the monster who towered over the waters. It looked like a giant frog, albeit one whose mother had mated with a troll and which was then raised solely on muscle-growth potions from the day it was born. Knobby, dark green skin covered a creature that was at least five meters tall, even while crouching, and its limbs were thick and practically bursting at the seams from the sheer muscles it was sporting. Oh, and they ended in huge, sharp claws rather than suction cups.

One of the frog-thing's eyes swiveled in its socket to focus on Zorian's ectoplasmic eye, noticing the intruder, but the creature remained motionless and eventually returned to its silent vigil, ignoring the sensor. The monster had knocked down all the fungus surrounding the lake, probably to give itself a better view of its new domain, and was now just standing in the lake in the center, periodically shifting in place so it could stare at the different parts

of the cavern.

Zorian dismissed the sensor and turned to the two guards behind him.

"I'm going to need a few days to prepare," he said.



Three days before the end of the restart, Zorian was ready to try and kill the giant frog monster that had driven the Yellow Cavern Guardians out of their home. His plan was simple: fire.

Lots and lots of fire.

When he finally arrived at the cavern entrance, he first made sure the frog-thing was still where he had last left it (it was) and then carefully lowered an ignition stone into the crate full of highly flammable alchemical bricks he had been levitating behind him. Once that was done, he created an illusion around the crate to make it look like an aranea and sent it floating along the ground towards the monster. He trailed after the crate under the guise of invisibility, a huge, solid steel golem trailing beside him. The golem was fully visible, and mostly served as a big, visible target for the creature's ire if this whole thing went south.

Zorian had considered a number of methods to trick the monster into eating the decoy, but none of them turned out to be necessary. It seemed that the claims of the Yellow Cavern Guardians about how the creature loved eating aranea were spot on, because the creature barely even looked at the disguised crate before attacking. A long, ropy, blood red tongue lashed out at the crate with dizzying speed, reeling it into its wide open maw in the blink of an eye.

The moment the frog thing's mouth snapped shut, Zorian sent a mana burst at the ignition stone in the crate, causing the whole thing to blow up in its mouth.

The resulting scream was quite possibly the most disturbing sound he'd ever heard in his entire life. It wasn't a croak or anything even remotely froglike. It sounded like a whole herd of pigs being slaughtered messily, over and over and over again. The frog thing vomited a stream of fire, blood and bile, trying to expel the offending substance to no avail – Zorian had specifically chosen an alchemical product whose fire clung to the surface like glue, and no matter how hard it tried, it could not remove the burning gunk that covered its insides. Truthfully, its attempt to vomit out the compound was only making things worse. It would have had more luck by keeping its mouth shut and trying to starve the fire of oxygen.

Sadly, after a few more futile attempts, the monster suddenly stopped struggling, noticed Zorian and his golem, and immediately charged towards them.

Zorian silently motioned for his golem to meet the creature's charge with one of its own, not even questioning how the creature knew he was there. Dungeon denizens had all kinds of ridiculous abilities and senses, especially powerful ones like these. He sent a wave of force at the creature's feet, managing to trip it up a bit and allowing his golem to slam its metal fist straight into its face. Though much bigger than his creation, the creature seemed momentarily stunned at the hit and didn't have enough time to dodge when Zorian hit it with a massive fireball.

Annoyingly, it still wasn't dead. It screamed again, scorched from both inside and outside, its eyes reduced to ruined husks by the fireball. But it still found enough strength to tear apart his golem (which he had spent ages crafting and reinforcing) in a flurry of violence. It ripped both of its arms out of their sockets, snapped the main body in half, and flung the pieces into the distance. The armless remains of the upper torso impacted the ground not far from Zorian, but he remained silent and still,

hoping to avoid notice.

It would have been nice to say that what followed next was some epic battle where he bravely strode forth to finish the monster once and for all, but in truth, he simply evaded the creature's notice and waited as it rampaged throughout the forest for a while, looking for more targets. The loss of its vision seemed to really hurt it, and it never even came close to detecting his location. At some point it simply stopped and keeled over, finally dead after having succumbed to its many wounds.

Still - a victory was a victory, wasn't it?

His "guards" had fled from their posts at some point in the battle, so Zorian slowly made his way towards the Yellow Cavern Guardians' temporary camp to give them the good news.



The two Yellow Cavern Guardians that came to check up if he was telling the truth stared silently at the charred corpse of the frog-thing that had nearly ruined them. Zorian tried to be respectful and wait for them come to terms with the fact that he had actually succeeded in killing it, but after five minutes he was really starting to get impatient. And annoyed – it wasn't *that* unbelievable that he'd succeeded at this, surely?

He cleared his throat, finally getting their attention.

"About my payment..." he began.



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

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

Zorian sighed. He really wished that not all of his restarts began this way.

"Good morning to you too, Kiri," he said politely. "Mind getting off me?"

"Hmm..." she pretended to think about it. "Nope! I think I'll stay like this for a while."

"That's unfortunate," he said blandly.

"You know you're going back to academy today, right?" she asked him.

"How could I forget?" he responded. "The real question is, do you want to come with me?"

Kirielle's eyes expanded comically, like those of a particularly startled cat. "Really!?"

"I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't certain," Zorian said.

Five minutes later, Zorian managed to distract an ecstatic Kirielle with an illusionary bird and get her to stop babbling and start packing her luggage.

He, on the other hand, was ready. He had learned the basics of deep mental scanning from the Yellow Cavern Guardians last restart, he was certain that simply being in Cyoria wasn't dangerous in itself, and he had a rough plan of where to go from now on.

It was time to visit his old Academy again.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

RETURN TO CYORIA

Zorian's previous experiences with riding the train to Cyoria alongside Kirielle hadn't been very encouraging. She always started excited and curious, staring intently at the passing landscape and commenting on anything that caught her interest, but that didn't last very long. There just wasn't all that much to see on the route to Cyoria, so she quickly got bored of looking through the compartment window and turned to the only other source of entertainment left to her – him. And he was hard-pressed to entertain her throughout the entire ride.

That was back when he had been unwilling to use his rising shaping skills to do magic on the train, though. This time he decided he simply didn't care about the risk of discovery. He could find no detection ward on the compartment they were in, and even if they did catch him in the act somehow, they would probably just slap him with a small fine and a lecture. It would be annoying, but better than listening to Kirielle whine about being bored for several hours. Plus, this way he got to practice his spellcasting while inhibited by a shaping disruption ward – something he had already been planning to try.

That was how Zorian found himself levitating a sphere of water in front of him, a ring of pens and erasers orbiting around it

in a diffuse, slowly revolving ring. It was hard, despite the seeming triviality of it all. This wasn't just him stacking a bunch of easy beginner spells to get a neat effect – he was performing an act of unstructured magic, treating the whole thing like a very complicated shaping exercise. Between the complexity of the floating construct and the disruption ward throwing off his shaping skills, he was really struggling to maintain control over the sphere and its satellites. He was pretty sure this was his absolute limit in terms of mana shaping skills so he should probably-

"Make a frog!" Kirielle challenged.

Zorian gave Kirielle an annoyed look. She grinned at him, confident that she had won their little game. That she had finally found his limit. He did not deliberately set out to make the complex thing floating in front of him, after all – it had started out as a much smaller sphere with a mere two pens circling around it, and Zorian had fully intended for it to stay that way until Kirielle started challenging him to make it more difficult. After he emptied the entire contents of his water bottle and used up all of the pens and erasers they both had in their possessions, he was certain she would have had to concede his victory...

He broke eye contact with her and focused on the floating construct in front of him. Trying to shape the floating water into anything other than the sphere it was now would be insanely hard. Telekinetically controlling water was far, far harder than doing the same with solid objects, and he would be hard pressed to sculpt it into complex shapes even if he was outside of a disruption ward and had no ring of small objects to serve as an additional distraction.

But he'd be damned if he was just going to roll over and admit defeat to his little sister just because of that. Over the next fifteen minutes, he slowly shaped the blob of water into a sculpture of a frog, as detailed and convincing as he could manage it...

in other words, not very. He did have a burst of inspiration half-way through, though, and decided to depict the frog monster he saved the Yellow Cavern Guardians from in the previous restart instead of a normal one. Unfortunately, Kirielle didn't think much of his efforts.

"That's a pretty weird frog," she declared.

"It's a yellow cavern devil frog," said Zorian, shamelessly making things up. He had no idea how that monster was called, or if it even had an official name to begin with. "Huge, vicious things with a penchant for eating little girls."

"That's stupid. You're just making things up," she accused. "Just admit you lost."

"Bah, you asked for a frog and I made one. It's not my fault you are not knowledgeable enough in the diverse and fascinating world of magical amphibians. Let me put this away and then I'll tell you about Sumrak the mage and the story of how he saved a secret society of mages from one of the aforementioned devil frogs..."

Before Kirielle could complain too much, Zorian hurriedly set about dismantling the construct in front of him before his rapidly degrading control unraveled completely, letting the pens and erasers float down on the empty seat beside him and pouring the water back into its bottle. That done, he launched into a somewhat modified account of his battle against the frog monster.

Well okay, *heavily* modified. In Zorian's story, the Yellow Cavern Guardians were a group of reclusive human mages that lived in the far north, practicing 'spider magic', and the adventurer Sumrak confronted the frog monster head on with his awesome magical might instead of resorting to traps and subterfuge. It made for a more impressive story that way. Kirielle seemed skeptical of the story at first, but when Zorian started using detailed illusions to demonstrate the events he was talking about, her suspiciousness melted away and she paid rapt attention to the story.

Zorian didn't know whether to be amused or outraged that she was so entranced by the illusions. They were... well, not quite easy, but nothing special either. The floating ball of water and school supplies he had made earlier on her prompting had taken much more skill and effort to create. He was tempted to chalk it up to her ignorance of what a true display of magical expertise looked like, but he suspected that even if she knew how to judge the difficulty properly, she still likely wouldn't have cared. He had noticed during previous restarts that she loved illusionism the most out of the magical disciplines he had shown her. Maybe it appealed to her inner artist?

The train announcer declared that they were arriving to Korsa, forcing Zorian to cut the story short just before Sumrak succeeded in fighting his way through the devil frog's innumerable spawn and confronted the monster in the cavernous home to which it had cravenly fled when it lost its last bout with the adventuring mage...

...and of course Kirielle was having none of that. She was fine with waiting while people were streaming into the train and looking into compartments to find a seat, but with everyone now settled down and the train moving again, she demanded he continue with the story. The problem was that Ibery had decided to join them in the compartment in the meantime, and Zorian felt just a tiny bit apprehensive about showcasing his abilities in front of her. An apprehension that Kirielle didn't empathize with in the slightest.

"You can't stop now, not when the story is so near the ending," she complained.

"Well, so long as I refrain from using my, err, *visual aids*..." tried Zorian.

"Nooo!" Kirielle pleaded. "That was the best part of the story!"

Zorian threw a significant glance towards Ibery, hoping that

Kirielle would take the message. She did, sort of, though she didn't react to the information the way he hoped she would.

"Oh come on, the nice lady won't snitch on you for doing magic in the train," Kirielle declared out loud. She then turned towards the startled Ibery and gave her the most soulful puppy-eyes look she could muster. "You wouldn't do that, would you?"

"Umm..." Ibery mumbled, fidgeting uncomfortably in her seat. "What? I thought the train had countermeasures to stop spellcasting?"

"It does?" asked Kirielle, surprised.

"It does," Zorian confirmed. No point in playing dumb now. "They just disrupt spellcasting though, not make it impossible. You can work around it if you're good enough."

"And... you're that good?" Ibery asked uncertainly.

Zorian shrugged, offering no other response. To Kirielle's delight, he then proceeded to finish the story he had been telling, pretty illusions included. He noticed that Ibery had set aside her book to listen as well.

She also tried to discreetly cast a few simple spells when she thought he wasn't looking, and then frowned when she failed to overcome the disruption ward. She was probably just curious about the level of skill needed to overcome the ward. He thought about scanning her surface thoughts to find out what she was thinking, but decided not to after giving it some thought. The risk of getting caught in the act was minimal, since Mind Like Fire had taught him how to stealthily test for presence of mental defenses, but getting into the habit of casually invading the minds of everyone around him struck him as a bad idea. He left Ibery to her experiment and focused back to Kirielle and the story he was telling.

Once he was done with the story, Ibery promptly struck up a conversation with the two of them. She admitted that she didn't

care much about the story itself, especially since she only caught the tail end of it, but she was very impressed by his ability to overcome the train's wards. Especially once she learned he was only starting his third year at the academy.

Eventually they arrived to Cyoria, however, and went their separate ways. Before they said their goodbyes, however, Ibery nervously told him to drop by the library sometime in the next week in order to discuss... something. Well, whatever – he had intended to raid the library for more spells in this restart anyway, he might as well see what she wanted from him while he was at it.

"I think she likes you," Kirielle said when they were alone.

"Nah, she's head over heels for Fortov," said Zorian.

"What?" Kirielle asked, baffled. "Her and Fortov? No way!"

"Well I didn't say they're *together*," Zorian clarified. "Just that she has a crush on him."

"How do you know that?" Kirielle asked suspiciously.

"Ancient magical secrets?" tried Zorian. Kirielle gave him a deadpan look. "Fine, fine... I'll tell you later, when we arrive at our new lodgings. It's not something we should discuss out in the open."

Even as he conversed with his little sister, Zorian paid attention to what his mind sense was telling him while they moved through the crowds. Even if he was being targeted by someone shielded from mental detection, the absence of a mind in someone would be a huge red flag on its own. He detected no hostile intentions directed at either of them, though, and none of the suspicious people he encountered were invisible to his mind sense. After ten minutes, he breathed a sigh of relief – his fears of walking into a trap with his little sister in tow appeared to have been unfounded.

Hmm, he knew it would rain later on, but he could ward against the rain easily enough... perhaps a little sightseeing around the city to quench Kirielle's curiosity a little?

"Hey," Zorian said, attracting Kirielle's attention. "Do you want to visit the main plaza of the city? They have a pretty nice fountain there that I like to watch sometimes..."

She said yes, of course. He needn't have even asked.



It had been more than four years since Zorian had started looping, and a lot of things had happened in that period. Keeping track of it all was a major challenge, despite his mage training and his own excellent memory. Being absent from Cyoria for nearly a year and a half in order to escape Red Robe's scrutiny certainly didn't help in this regard, and many of the minor details and specifics of how a 'normal' restart was supposed to go had faded from his mind during his long absence.

It should not be very surprising, then, that he'd totally forgotten what happened the last time he tried to reach the fountain at the beginning of a restart – after all, he hadn't tried it since that very first, fateful restart that got him included into the time loop.

Thus, when the two of them finally stumbled upon the swarm of cranium rats blocking their path, Zorian was caught just as off-guard by it as he was the previous time. He wasn't as defenseless as he was back then, though, and he nearly burned them all to a crisp before he stopped himself. He was pretty sure that him killing the swarm would put him on the invaders' radar, and therefore on Red Robe's radar as well, so the smartest move would be to simply retreat like he did back in his first restart.

He felt the swarm testing his mental defenses and responded by strengthening his defenses and striking back. The attacks stopped, but his counterattack did very little to the collective mind of the swarm – the group mind was thoroughly unshielded, probably because any mental shell would interfere with its internal

telepathic network, but his counterattack merely knocked out a couple of individual rats instead of doing any significant damage. He wondered-

He felt a spike of terror from Kirielle as she finally realized what she was looking at, and realized he really shouldn't be playing around with these things – he was probably immune to anything they may dish out but she wasn't. He fired off a weak flamethrower at the closest part of the swarm to make them back off a little and then immediately turned around, grabbed Kirielle and fled. The rats didn't follow, much like how they didn't follow him the first time he encountered them. They probably didn't want to attract attention any more than he did, though that did raise the question of what the hell they were doing blocking off one of Cyoria's major roads in broad daylight. Something to look into eventually...

While they ran, he idly marveled about how fortunate it was that he'd never replicated that first meeting with the cranium rats before he had met the aranea – they would have undoubtedly read his mind, and there was a good chance they would have found out about the time loop from his thoughts. Even if they dismissed the time travel stuff as delusion, they would have definitely been interested in him knowing about the invasion...

"Um, can we still go see the fountain?" Kirielle asked once they had retreated sufficiently and she'd had a chance to catch her breath and calm down.

"Yeah, I know an alternative route," said Zorian, pointing towards a nearby park.

Wait, hadn't he tried that in the first restart and encountered some kind of problem? He was pretty sure he had. What kind of oh! The bicycle girl. He had totally forgotten about her. Oh well, that wasn't really a problem – he would just get her bicycle out of the water really quickly and they would be on their way.

Kirielle got unusually quiet when they encountered the little

crying girl and hung back while he talked to her. He got the girl's bike out of the creek with trivial ease, simply placing his hand over the bridge and wiling the bike to rise into his grasp – it took more time to calm the girl down a little and get her to tell him what she was upset about than it did to actually retrieve it. He used a couple of spells to dry the bike off and clean all the grime that had accumulated on it, simply because he could and saw no reason not to. He suspected the bike was cleaner now than it was before it had fallen into the creek.

"There," said Zorian proudly. "Your bike is clean, intact and out of the creek. You can stop crying now, okay?"

"Okay," she sniffed, rubbing her eyes. "Um. Thank you."

"Don't mention it," Zorian said. "Well, we should get going now, so take care. I think it's going to rain soon, so you should probably head home as well."

"Come on brother, don't be mean. We can't just leave her here," protested Kirielle suddenly. "We should get her home ourselves, just to be sure."

"He's not mean," the other little girl protested, suddenly snapping out of her daze. "And I can find my way home just fine. I'm not stupid."

Oh, he liked this kid. It wasn't often that someone defended him in preference to Kirielle.

"Well. I'm glad that *someone* is not automatically assuming the worst of me," said Zorian, giving a sideways glance towards Kirielle. She rolled her eyes at him. "I am sure that Kirielle didn't mean anything like that, though – she was just worried for you, since you still looked pretty upset."

"I was just... I only got the bike yesterday and mother told me to be careful with it because they couldn't afford a new one and I..."

"Hey, hey, it's alright," said Zorian quickly, interrupting her story. She looked like she was going to cry again. "You got it back.

All's well that ends well. But maybe we really should accompany you home, at least until you calm down a little."

"Yeah!" Kirielle piped in. "We can talk on the way and get to know each other. I just moved in here and it would be nice to have a friend my age. What's your name anyway? I'm Kirielle and this guy here that got your bike out of the river is my brother Zorian."

"Nochka," she said. "But, um, I don't want to make you late."

"We were just going to see the fountain, nothing really important," Kirielle waved her off. "We can do that any time. Come on, show us where you live."

The walk to Nochka's house was a short one – she lived pretty close to the park, which was the reason her parents had let her go there all alone. Still pretty strange for parents to be so hands off about their child's whereabouts, but Zorian's parents were the same with him so he didn't pry. He didn't say much of anything really, but that was okay because Kirielle talked plenty enough for both of them. Nochka herself was shy and nervous, constantly watching her surroundings and jumping at every unusual sound, but she did warm up to Kirielle by the time they had reached her house. She was eight, a year younger than Kirielle, and was also fairly new to Cyoria. Her family had arrived into the city a couple of months ago, and she didn't have any friends her age either. Great. He was pretty sure he knew where this was going...

Zorian once again tried to disengage from the whole situation once they got Nochka to her destination, but failed – Nochka's mother saw them arriving and insisted they come inside, and he didn't want to be impolite. He figured the woman had every right to be curious about a couple of strangers walking around with her daughter in tow, so they should at least allay her fears a little before leaving. Nochka hurriedly gave her an account of the situation the moment they were inside; though in her story the bike didn't end up in the creek, but was instead stuck in a rope trap that happened

to be in the park for... some reason. Nochka kind of glossed over that part and moved onto Zorian helping her get it down from the tree.

Yeah, Nochka was a terrible liar. Based on the way her mother was looking at her when she finished her story, Zorian was betting that she would be getting the real story out of Nochka the moment Zorian and Kirielle left the house.

Nochka's mother, who Zorian learned was named Rea, was honestly a little scary to Zorian. She didn't *look* frightening – she had the same jet black hair and dark brown eyes that Nochka did, and the stature and dress of an average housewife – but it took only five minutes for Zorian to decide there was more to her. Her movements were all fluid and precise, she never stuttered or wavered when she spoke, her gaze was frighteningly intense, and she gave off an air of absolute confidence and composure. Frankly, if he had been alone he would have left the place in a hurry, but Kirielle didn't seem nearly as intimidated by the woman and insisted on telling her new friend stories. Such as the one of how they stumbled upon her in the first place.

"Ah yes, the strange brain rats," Rea said when Kirielle told them about their encounter with the cranium rats. "I've seen a few hanging around the house, but never in such numbers. Disgusting things."

Zorian frowned. Why were the cranium rats hanging around their house?

"You should be careful," he told her. "They're called cranium rats and they can read your mind, possibly even memories if left unmolested long enough."

"Hmm... good thing I kill them when I find them, then," Rea said.

"Yes, but don't think that makes you totally safe," Zorian said. "They're a telepathic hive mind, so killing one rat will not erase

the information it has gathered on you. What one cranium rat knows, they all know. I really think you should report this to the city authorities and have them hunt the swarm down, but it's your choice in the end."

"I see," Rea said after staring at him for a few seconds. "I'll talk to my husband about your advice and we'll see what we can do. I must say, you are surprisingly well informed for a fifteen-year-old, mister Kazinski."

"Brother is really smart," said Kirielle.

Oh hush, you flatterer.

"Right - thank you for your hospitality, Mrs. Sashal, but our landlord is expecting us and we really should get going," Zorian said, rising from his seat and motioning for Kirielle to do the same. From what Rea had said earlier, her husband was going to come home from work soon, and he'd rather not get stuck in another round of explanations.

"The rain is rather heavy, though," Rea said, glancing through the window next to her. "You should at least wait for the weather to get better before you go."

"Unfortunately, that doesn't seem like it'll happen for quite some time," said Zorian. "But that's okay, because I can just teleport myself and Kirielle close to our destination and shield us from the rain for the short while we'll be caught in it."

"Can Kirielle come over to play with me some time?" asked Nochka.

"Uh, yeah. Sure," said Zorian. Yes, he was pretty sure Kirielle would be angry if he said no. Though he really didn't want Kirielle in an area infested with cranium rats...

Zorian and Kirielle said their goodbyes and left in the direction of Imaya's house.

The next day, Zorian woke up early and told Imaya he was going to the library, though in truth he did no such thing. Instead, he teleported himself to Knyazov Dveri, where he proceeded to gather crystalized mana. By now he had mapped large portions of the local underworld, and as such couldn't actually pick up every piece of crystalized mana within a single day. He would need another two or three days to clean the place up properly. Oh, and he was also hitting the limits of his memory, it seemed – he had outright forgotten about some of the minor resource locations, and it took him a while to track down others. Annoying.

He wondered what his previous self would say if he knew that in the future he would have so much wealth within reach that he would literally forget about some of it. Probably something rude.

He had only been back at Imaya's place for half an hour or so before Taiven came to speak with him.

"Let me guess, you want me to go into the sewers with you to recover a watch from a bunch of giant spiders," Zorian 'guessed'.

"What? No, I decided not to bother with that job since more lucrative ones have popped up lately," said Taiven. She gave him a strange look. "How the hell do you know about that, anyway? I told maybe two people I was even interested in that job."

Uh, right. The circumstances in Cyoria had changed greatly since the last time he'd been in the city – the mercenaries he hired to confront Red Robe had been soul-killed along with the aranea, and monsters were starting to well up from the Dungeon with no aranea to keep them in check. Nothing could nor should be taken for granted – he had to keep that in mind.

Rather than try to trick her with some poor excuse, he decided to simply ignore her question and ask his own.

"If you're not here for that, why *are* you here, Taiven? You don't exactly have a habit of visiting me for the hell of it..."

Taiven protested that she totally did visit him for the hell of it,

and vehemently denied that she had come to ask him for a favor. It was an opportunity, she insisted – an opportunity to earn big money and fame, if only he would cooperate with her.

Well. If nothing else, her new scheme was a lot more tempting than her old one.

Long story short, the monster incursions he read about in the newspapers had started way earlier than Zorian had expected they would. There were a couple of bad ones on the very first day of the restart – a young couple had been heavily injured when a huge abyssal centipede crawled out of the sewers in the middle of a crowded street and a restaurant had to be evacuated when a huge yellow ooze broke into the wine cellar and started consuming everything in sight. Things got worse overnight, and there were a number of fatalities while Zorian had been busy picking up crystalized mana in Knyazov Dveri, causing the city to enact some emergency measures. One of these was issuing large bounties on confirmed monster kills and encouraging various dungeon delvers and mercenary groups to go as deep into Cyoria's dungeon as they dared, and cull the monster population before they could reach the surface.

As far as Taiven was concerned, this was exactly what she had been waiting for. Already frustrated with the lack of chances to prove her worth, she was eager to take advantage of this new development to make a name for herself by aggressively pursuing bounties and putting down as many dungeon denizens as she could find.

The problem was that her group was too small for her ambitions. Three people do not make a proper hunting party.

"I'm surprised you came to me with this," said Zorian. "This sounds like it requires decent combat skills, and I am only a third year. Surely some of your peers would have been better for this?"

"Well, the thing is, I'm not the only one recruiting... and many

of the other recruiters are a lot more prestigious and well-known than little old me. It should get easier once I start getting results, but that could be too late and I can't afford to be too picky right now."

"Can't afford to be picky, huh?" said Zorian flatly. Before the time loop, that phrase right there would have caused him to refuse her offer out of spite. He hated being thought of as second best, never mind a last resort. But years in the time loop had tempered his ego, and he could admit to himself that Taiven's judgement was spot on – considering the information she had on him.

"Okay, bad choice of words," admitted Taiven. "But as you said yourself, you're only a third year. How good are you at combat magic? Do you think you could pull your own weight in a team as you are now?"

Hmm, how much should he reveal here? Taiven could be shockingly oblivious about some things, but she would definitely not ignore him being way stronger than he had any right being. And she was one of the few people who knew his pre-time loop self well enough to make such a judgement call with a fair amount of certainty.

And for that matter, did he even *want* to join Taiven's group? It sounded like a huge time sink, and he had so many other things vying for his attention... maybe it would be better if he were to pretend he was too weak and inexperienced to help her?

Oh to hell with it – he'd give it a chance this time. If nothing else, it would give him a ready-made excuse for a lot of things he intended to do in this restart.

"Absolutely. I have been in the Dungeon before," he admitted. "I have a decent repertoire of combat spells and I'm confident that I won't freeze on the first sign of danger. The biggest problem is my mana reserves – at maximum, I can only cast about 20 magic missiles in a row. And that's after I increased my reserves through

constant use – I’m pretty average in terms of mana reserves magnitude.”

Taiven stared at him for a few seconds, incredulous. “You’ve been in the Dungeon before?” she finally asked. “I’m surprised you got permission for that. The Academy sure didn’t want to give *me* one before I was well into my fourth year.”

“I didn’t say anything about asking permission,” said Zorian.

“Zorian...”

“What, like you’ve never done anything like that?” challenged Zorian.

“Well, maybe once or twice,” Taiven admitted. “But it doesn’t sound like this was an occasional occurrence for you. Getting your mana reserves that high must have involved some pretty intense practice, considering where you started from. That sounds pretty dangerous.”

“Sometimes a man has to take chances,” Zorian quoted in Taiven’s voice. “I do believe you’re the one who told me that, Taiven.”

“I was talking about romance and you know it,” she protested. “Why couldn’t you take my advice about *that* instead?”

‘I did take your advice,’ thought Zorian sourly to himself. ‘I got laughed in my face for my trouble.’

“Why are you lecturing me about this? You should be overjoyed your desperate ploy had worked,” he said instead. “Do you want me in your damn team or not?”

“I do, I do!” Taiven quickly assured him. She pulled out a sheet of paper from her bag and set it down on the table in front of him. “I guess you’re right, this isn’t really important right now. Why don’t you just fill out this membership form and I’ll give you a run-down of what I had planned for tomorrow...”



Over the next couple of days Zorian went on regular forays into Cyoria's underworld with Taiven, Urik and Oran. He quickly realized that his combat skills weren't really the most valuable thing he brought to the whole operation – the combined might of Taiven and her two old teammates was usually enough to destroy any threat they encountered, with Zorian only called to fight when one of those three ended up low on mana and needed to rest for a while. No, the biggest benefits he brought to the table were a detailed map of a huge chunk of Cyoria's underworld (courtesy of the matriarch's last message) and a decent proficiency in divination that allowed him to scout the areas in front of them and track down any specific target they were pursuing. Without him there to direct the rest of the group, they would have probably spent most of their time wandering aimlessly in search of something to fight. Those three were dangerously overspecialized for direct combat in Zorian's opinion.

While down in the Dungeon, he took the opportunity to scout the invaders' underground bases that he was aware of, trying to see how they were dealing with this kind of increased activity and scrutiny of Cyoria's underworld. Taiven's group was far from the only one that had tried to cash in on the bounties the city was offering, and more groups were expected to get involved soon. What he found was that the invaders had retreated somewhat, abandoning several of their more exposed bases completely and leaving only token forces in many others. That was bound to have a very negative impact on the execution of the invasion...

When he wasn't hunting down dungeon denizens with Taiven, he was tending to the multitude of his other plans and obligations. He finished harvesting crystalized mana under Knyazov Dveri and had started to slowly sell his huge stockpile off to various stores, both in Cyoria and outside. He took Kirielle to see Nochka and stayed around to watch out for any cranium rats in

the area (but thankfully didn't detect any). He ended up meeting Nochka's father this time – a tall, jovial, bearded, muscular fellow named Sauh who loved to laugh and talk and was completely unlike his wife, yet still terrifying in his own way. Zorian was half-convinced that the workshop Sauh insisted on showing him, the one full of hammers and other heavy, dangerous-looking tools, was the man's way of threatening him bodily harm should he hurt his daughter in any way. He also visited the library to see what Ibery wanted from him. To his surprise, he found out that Ibery was interested in getting magical instruction from him. She had been looking to hire someone for additional tutoring outside of the academy, but found most tutors out of her price range, and was hoping a third year like him might be amenable to a spell exchange or something else of that nature. Though the offer was kind of interesting, he had too many things on his plate as it was – so he told her he'd get back to her after the summer festival, if she was still interested. Perhaps in some future restart where he refused Taiven's recruitment pitch.

And, of course, he still had to attend classes. That was a chore, though not quite as big of a one as he had been expecting. His long absence from Cyoria had made him forget many of the details of how classes were supposed to go, and caused him to view others in a completely new perspective. The constant monster incursions into the city had also had an effect on the academy. Jade was gone from the class, pulled out of the academy by her family for safety concerns. Zach was gone too, of course, and since nobody (except Zorian) knew the real reason for his absence, most people assumed he had been similarly pulled out for safety reasons and sent out of Cyoria. Kyron announced during their first lessons that he was running additional combat practice lessons during evenings and Ilsa openly encouraged anyone with significant combat ability to join one of the groups culling the monsters, offering special bene-

fits and exceptions to anyone who did so and achieved results. She pointed out Zorian, Briam, Tinami, Naim and Estin as examples of people in the class who had already done that, thoroughly surprising Zorian – he never would have guessed so many people in his class had decided they're good enough to get themselves involved in that. Two days later, Kopriva would join that list, while Maya and Iroro were ordered home by their parents until the situation calmed down.

With such large changes in class composition and teacher behavior, Zorian's school experience was relatively novel compared to what he remembered of his pre-exile Cyoria days. He was sure it would all get boring and repetitive again after another restart or two, but for now it was bearable.



A few more days passed. The number and severity of monster excursions gradually dropped off, and the city stopped behaving like a kicked over anthill and settled into some semblance of normality. There was still a lot of tension in the air, forays into the Dungeon went on still, but things were finally calming down. As such, Zorian started investigating various invaders, cultists and other people related to the invasion that he still remembered from his time with the Cyorian aranea, tracking their movements and activities but launching no attacks for the moment. The furor over the dead mercenaries and monster incursions caused so many changes to the preparations of the invasion that his memories were of limited use, and he didn't want to move until he was reasonably sure he knew when and where to strike.

It was peculiar, though... even accounting for massive divergences due to Red Robe's removal of aranea, the invaders were still strangely ineffective. Less informed. Before, they seemed to know how to bypass certain wards or evade notice of Cyoria's law

enforcement – knowledge that they largely lacked in the current restart. He was starting to suspect that Red Robe had a habit of handing over a lot of crucial information to the invaders in previous restarts, even ones where he didn't appear to pay much attention to them afterwards... but that in this one restart he'd chosen not to bother with that at all.

Strange.

The arrival of Kael at Imaya's place reminded Zorian of their deal to help Kael develop his alchemy in exchange for help with soul magic and other stuff. Unfortunately, there was a problem: Zorian had largely forgotten what the contents of Kael's notebook were over the many, many restarts he had been absent from Cyoria. Somehow Kael managed to figure out a few things from the disjointed parts of his notes that Zorian still remembered, which helped convince him that Zorian was telling the truth, but he was essentially starting from scratch.

Zorian knew he had to find a solution to the forgetting problem if that deal was ever going to work. Without constant reinforcement in every restart, he *would* forget again, and the amount of information he had to memorize was only going to increase with each restart, making the task harder. And that wasn't just the issue with Kael's potion recipes, either – he had been having trouble remembering the layout of Knyazov Dveri resource deposits, some of the minor details of previous restarts (such as his meeting with Nochka) had completely slipped from his memory, and he had a feeling that remembering the vast amount of information about invaders in Cyoria he was currently gathering was going to be a major issue in the future.

He needed a better way to remember things, and he needed it soon. He would have to set aside the upcoming weekend to see if he could figure something out.

He knocked on Xvim's door and dutifully waited for the man

to invite him in.

"Come in," Xvim called out from inside, and Zorian quickly entered the man's office and sat down when instructed to do so.

"Show me your basic three," Xvim ordered.

Zorian did so – silently, efficiently and without complaint. He had decided before coming here that he would try and see how long it would take for Xvim to get unnerved by him meeting all of his demands without any issue or complaint. It was a long term project, of course – he didn't really think he could baffle the infuriating man in this particular restart – but he was determined to see it through. He would practice whatever stupid exercise Xvim threw at him every single day, restart after restart, until he got them right. Until he got them *all* right, if he was forced to. The man had to run out of shaping exercises at some point, right?

Xvim threw a marble at him. Zorian moved his head lightly to the left, moving out of the marble's flight path without ever meeting the man's eyes. Another two marbles flew at him, but the result was exactly the same.

"Close your eyes," Xvim ordered.

Zorian did. He still dodged every marble Xvim threw at him, a cloud of diffuse mana scattered around him as a detection field. Xvim did not react, unfazed by his improbable skill, but neither did Zorian.

"You can open your eyes again. Here's a box of marbles," said Xvim, reaching beneath his desk to pick up a large bowl full of hated spheres of glass. They came in a wide variety of sizes, and Zorian was silently thankful that Xvim only ever threw the small ones at him – some of the big ones looked like they could knock a man unconscious if they connected. "Levitate as many as you can. Hurry up, we haven't got all day!"

Zorian levitated every single marble in the bowl, but alas – he was too slow. Or at least Xvim thought so, anyway. He made Zo-

rian lift and lower the entire mass of marbles over and over again, wasting an entire hour. Zorian said nothing though, doing his best to meet Xvim's unreasonable demands.

"Levitating them like that in a giant disorganized lump is unsightly. Make it a proper sphere. A ring now. A pyramid. That doesn't look like a pyramid to me – do you need to have your glasses checked, mister Kazinski? Yes, better. But slow – you must be faster. Much faster. Start over from the sphere again. Again. Again."

Zorian made the mass of marbles flow from one shape to another as fast as he could, but eventually a disaster struck – he lost control of the exercise and the entire mass went crashing down onto the table. Zorian winced as the marbles bounced off the table, making a huge racket and scattering all over Xvim's office, his mask of cool detachment breaking for a moment.

Damn it.

Several seconds passed in the aftermath as Zorian and Xvim stared at each other impassively.

"Well?" asked Xvim curiously. "What are you waiting for, mister Kazinski? Hurry up and gather the marbles into the bowl so we can continue where we left off."

"Yes, sir," said Zorian, unable to keep a note of sourness out of his voice. "I'll be right on it."

It was official: he really hated marbles.

SUSPICIOUS COINCIDENCES

Zorian stared at his tormentor in silence, as relaxed and impassive as one could be when faced with such a pitiless, unreasonable man. Xvim stared back at him, his face a picture of unshakable, effortless composure that made Zorian's best efforts at stoicism appear laughable in comparison. Still, he wouldn't break. He *didn't* break. He had (eventually) met every ridiculous demand Xvim had given him and had never blown up at the man even once. Of course, that hadn't impressed the man any, even when he'd demonstrated insanely good shaping skills for a third year student, but he'd expected as much.

They continued staring at each other in silence for several seconds.

"That," Xvim finally decided, "was terrible. You are inflexible, slow, yet paradoxically impatient. I see in you a tendency to overreach, mister Kazinski, moving on to advanced fields of study without a healthy foundation to back it up. A common problem with many of your fellow mages, true, but 'everyone else is doing it' was never a valid excuse for anything. We will have to work on that before we tackle anything more substantial."

"Of course, sir," Zorian said calmly. "I'll be sure to practice everything you've shown me back at home."

"Good. I expect a better performance on our second session," said Xvim, leaning back in his chair before making a shooping motion with his hand. "You are dismissed."

Zorian made a solemn nod, slowly rose from his chair and then fled the office as fast as he could without making it obvious he was in a hurry to leave. Only when he shut the door and put some distance from the room did he let himself relax.

That could have ended up badly. Very, very badly. He knew he'd be taking a risk when he tried to read Xvim's mind, but the man had aggravated him so much that he couldn't help himself. Besides, what were the chances of Xvim deciding to shield his mind for a meeting with one of his students? Pretty good, apparently, because Zorian encountered a powerful mental shield when he tried to read his thoughts. He withdrew immediately, terrified that his telepathic probe had been noticed by the man, but whatever defenses Xvim had apparently gave the man too little feedback to notice Zorian's relatively delicate attack. Well, that or he *did* notice but decided not to say anything, but that seemed very unlikely – if that were the case, he would have at least made a snide comment or two about how sloppy Zorian's attempt was, even if he wasn't at all bothered by the attempt itself.

It was very interesting that Xvim had bothered shielding his mind for their meeting, though. Was Xvim one of those mages who kept their mind shielded at all times, or did he somehow know about Zorian's talents? There were a lot of possibilities. Zorian made a mental note to barge into the man's office unannounced at some point in the next week, just to see if Xvim had his mind shielded even when not expecting Zorian to arrive...

His thoughts were still preoccupied with Xvim when he arrived back home, at which point the realization that he could sense the minds of Nochka and her mother in the house pushed the topic of his so-called mentor out of his mind. That was unexpected –

there had been no plans for them to visit, as far as he knew. He entered the house and made a beeline towards the kitchen, where he could sense Imaya and Rea were currently situated, and found them seated around the kitchen table, gossiping over some cookies and... plum brandy?

Well, whatever. After exchanging greetings, he tried to ask Rea about her reasons for coming unannounced without sounding rude and accusing. He didn't quite succeed if the dirty look Imaya shot him was any indication, but Rea herself didn't seem to mind.

"Nochka was being impatient about your next visit so I decided to take her to Kirielle instead," she explained. "Besides, it is not fair to make you spend your time on bringing your sister over to my home. You are a student of magic, with many additional obligations aside, I'm told, and I am but a simple housewife with plenty of free time."

'Simple housewife', right. If she really was what she claimed to be, he would... well, he wouldn't do anything crazy, but he'd be shocked. It was possible, but she was too confident and emotionally composed to be some ordinary housewife.

"For myself, I have no complaint about Nochka coming here from time to time," Imaya piped in. "So you need not worry about any complaint from me."

"I see," Zorian said slowly. He looked at Rea, and found her unflinchingly meeting his gaze. Though his empathy detected no hostile intent and she didn't do anything overtly threatening, he found her vaguely unsettling. It was her body language, he realized – though her posture was relaxed, she did not fidget or move at all.

Making a snap decision, Zorian decided to take a risk for the second time in a day and dived into her surface thoughts. He didn't want to get too comfortable with violating the mental sanctity of people around him, but if a person looked like a threat, he felt it was justified. And Rea definitely looked suspicious to him right

now.

Rea's mind was not shielded, and she gave no indication that she detected his intrusion. That said, he didn't get anything worthwhile out of it. She was not feeling very introspective at the moment, nor thinking any incriminating thoughts. Mostly, she seemed to be studying *him*, even as he was doing the same to her. Much like Zorian could tell she was not a normal housewife, she too seemed aware that he was anything but a normal student.

He decided to get her talking about her background and current situation, hopefully guiding her thoughts down the path that would reveal what her deal was. Besides, Imaya seemed to be getting more and more uncomfortable with their silent stare-down so if nothing else he should break the silence to calm her down a little.

"You know, I just realized I never did ask you why you and your family moved into Cyoria," said Zorian. "I bet it's a fascinating story..."

Over the next half an hour, Zorian spoke with Rea about her life and recent history, with Imaya occasionally jumping in with her opinion. Despite his efforts, Zorian failed to uncover any deep secret from Rea's thoughts. Her mind was too focused on what she was saying, with little in the way of internal musings or stray thoughts. The only thing Zorian could tell with certainty was that she hadn't lied even once while talking to him. Her story about her family moving from a small rural town to Cyoria out of simple desire for a better life in the big city was something she honestly believed in, rather than some clichéd cover story. Her husband wanted a better paying job he could not get in their old home, Rea wanted to get away from their rather unpleasant neighbors who were spreading nasty rumors about her whenever they could get away with it, and they were both unhappy with the poor state of the local school and wanted better for Nochka. So they moved.

Simple as that. Currently they were still in the process of setting up in Cyoria, and were thus having some money problems, but Rea seemed unconcerned about that, claiming it to be a temporary issue.

His mind reading did pick up on two interesting things. First, Rea had ridiculously good hearing. Throughout the entire conversation, she was somehow picking up on the conversation Kirielle and Nochka were having in another part of the house, separated from the kitchen by a corridor and two closed doors. Zorian himself could not hear a thing from the two girls, no matter how hard he strained his ears. Secondly, while Rea did not know he was reading her mind, she was pretty good at figuring out people's moods and motives the old fashioned way – she realized pretty quickly he was suspicious of her and trying to interrogate her.

And she found it amusing. Very, very amusing.

Eventually, Zorian was forced to admit defeat, withdrawing from Rea's mind and excusing himself so he could leave. At the very least he was mollified that Rea did not seem to have any sinister plan for him and Kirielle, which was really all he cared about in regards to her. She could keep her secrets, so long as they didn't come back to haunt him later.

"Oh yes, I nearly forgot," Imaya said as he turned to leave. "Kael said he wanted to talk to you when you get back. He's in the basement right now, tinkering with his alchemical equipment again."

Thanking her for the information, Zorian descended into the basement to see what Kael wanted from him. It could be any number of things, really – he had dropped a multitude of bizarre problems on the morlock boy since they'd met in this restart, and he counted himself lucky that Kael was so reasonable and level-headed about what he had learned. He had to admit, with no small amount of embarrassment, that he himself probably wouldn't have taken it half as well in his place.

Then again, he had the feeling that Kael's willingness to accept his explanation about the time loop came from greed. He was sure that Kael saw the time loop less as a terrifying anomaly and more as a fantastic opportunity that could catapult his skills and knowledge immensely if he played his cards right, and that doubtlessly influenced how inclined he was to accept Zorian's story as truthful. Case in point...

"Ah, you're here," Kael greeted him. "Did you get the ingredients I asked of you?"

"Yup," said Zorian, reaching into his bag and withdrawing a wooden box full of alchemical ingredients.

"There were no problems?" Kael asked, accepting the box and promptly opening it to examine the contents. He pulled out one of the bottles from the box, the one full of inky black liquid, and brought it towards the light to check something.

"No. The shopkeeper looked at me strangely for buying so many expensive ingredients, but said nothing in the end. It would still probably be smart to buy the next batch from some other shop, though."

"Probably," agreed Kael, putting the bottle back and snapping the box shut.

There was no offer of reimbursing Zorian for his expenses. One of the first demands Kael had of Zorian once he decided the time loop thing had something to it was for Zorian to finance his experiments to the best of his ability. He understood Kael's demand for what it was – not just a way for the boy to secure more funding, but also a challenge for Zorian to prove he believed what he was saying. After all, if he really believed in his own time loop story, he wouldn't care at all about spending his money like that, would he?

Kael placed the box on the work table next to him, depositing it among the many other boxes, ceramic bowls, glass bottles and

other alchemical instruments that cluttered Kael's workspace. He seemed to be lost in thought for a moment, his bright blue eyes rapidly scanning the rest of the basement, before he focused back to his conversation with Zorian.

"How often do you think you'll be able to buy more?" he asked.

"Well... I hesitate to say 'as often as you need me to', since I'm sure you can burn through any amount of money I have if you go wild, but I'm pretty loaded right now. Thanks to the time loop I found a very time-efficient way to extract a great deal of crystalized mana from Knyazov Dveri's underworld, and selling that has given me a huge amount of money to spend," Zorian explained. "So... two or three boxes like that a day if I had to? Maybe more, but I really think that would be a bad idea, since I don't think I'd be able to avoid unwelcome attention if I started buying so much expensive stuff."

"I... see..." Kael said slowly, clearly more than a little surprised at the information. "That's a lot of money. Out of curiosity, why did you go to the trouble to get so much? Funds for your own experiments?"

"Partially," said Zorian. "It certainly makes things a lot easier when you can throw around money like it's nothing. Saves time. And yes, I know it's strange for that to be a concern when you're stuck in an ever-repeating time loop."

"And the other part?"

"Greed, I guess," Zorian admitted. "When I finally break out of the time loop I kind of want to have all my monetary concerns taken care of. Probably not the best use of my time but—"

"Don't worry, I understand you completely," said Kael, smiling slightly. "I probably wouldn't have been able to resist doing so myself. In fact, I probably would have done it much sooner, even with the threat of other time travelers and the presence of more pressing problems you're dealing with. So many problems in my

life would have disappeared if I had a million pieces or so..."

"Well, you *are* an alchemist," Zorian said. "Your profession has always been very expensive to practice, unless you were one of those alchemists who were willing to limit themselves to components they could grow and personally harvest in the wilderness. It makes perfect sense that you'd want to get rich if given a chance."

"Perhaps. I don't think I'd be anywhere near as efficient about it as you are, though. Well, not without resorting to theft. The thought of looking for crystalized mana would have never occurred to me. What's so valuable about it that people are willing to pay so much?"

Zorian gave Kael a curious look. "It's a bit strange to hear an alchemist ask that. I'm pretty sure that powdered crystalized mana is an important potion ingredient."

"Not in the kind of potions I'm making," Kael said, shaking his head.

"Ah. Well, crystalized mana is basically ambient mana in solid form. Harder to make use of than ambient mana, since it first has to be broken down into the more familiar, ethereal form before you can use it to power anything, but it is very convenient as a mana battery. Most mana batteries, such as the ones made with spell formulas, lose all stored mana in a couple of days to a week. Crystalized mana, on the other hand, is completely stable in normal circumstances. That's very useful if you want to, say, support a powerful magical item or warding scheme independently of ambient mana levels," explained Zorian.

"Ah, so these are the crystals the new trains use for fuel," said Kael.

"Yes," Zorian confirmed. "I heard that use of crystalized mana as train fuel is really driving the prices of it upwards lately, got a bunch of people worried. Very convenient for me, though."

"Shame it's only useful for powering items," Kael said. "Having

some kind of personal mana battery would have been a nice way of side stepping your limited mana reserves. Have you looked into making such a thing? Even if it only lasted a few weeks, that should be enough to be useful in your circumstances."

"Of course I've looked into it," Zorian scoffed. "It's impossible. Personal mana loses its affinity with its maker rapidly once expended, becoming indistinguishable from ambient mana in a matter of minutes."

"Ah."

"Indeed. What about alchemical solutions? Is there a potion that increases your mana regeneration, gives you a momentary mana boost or something like that?"

"I doubt it. I think we would have all heard about such a potion if it was at all available. But it's possible, I suppose, especially if it has some serious drawbacks that curtails its use. You should probably ask Lukav about that – if anyone knows how to answer that question definitively, it's him," Kael said. He squirmed uncomfortably. "And since we're on the topic of Lukav, I have a bit of a... personal request."

"I'm listening," Zorian said curiously.

"Okay..." Kael began. "When I gave you that list of people to consult with in regards to soul magic, I did not exactly give you a list of strangers. We weren't best friends, but I *knew* these people. We had history between us, we met sometimes to exchange news and the like... to find out that someone had been going around, kidnapping and killing them, was very upsetting to me."

Zorian winced. Now that it was pointed out to him, he had been really rather callous when he told Kael of the disappearances in Knyazov Dveri, hadn't he? This wasn't just another disquieting mystery to Kael, but an outright attack on him and his acquaintances.

"I'm not angry at you," Kael hurriedly added. "I realize you

already have a lot on your plate, and that staying alive and figuring out what is behind the time loop takes precedence over everything else. However, I would really appreciate it if you looked into these killers and figured out a way to stop them for good.”

”Of course,” Zorian immediately agreed. ”I had fully intended to do so anyway. I simply delayed that investigation until I had taken care of more pressing problems and gotten somewhat better at magical combat.”

Besides, he had figured that investigating the invasion forces here in Cyoria would automatically bring him closer to solving that particular mystery. The two were clearly connected somehow, perhaps even two different fronts of the exact same operation.

”I see. That takes a load off my chest,” Kael said, exhaling heavily. ”If there is anything I can do to help you with this, just let me know. I’m still in the process of asking around, but I think I can get my hands on a couple of truth potion recipes.”

”I already have my own interrogation magic, but I suppose having more options to choose from never hurts,” Zorian said. Truthfully, truth potions might actually be more effective than what he had in mind, at least at the current stage of the investigation, but he really needed to develop his ability to sift through people’s memories so he was reluctant to use them. ”Keep in mind that Lukav already knows how to make a truth potion, so if your talks fall through I can just teleport you to his village so you can have a friendly chat with him. Perhaps he is willing to share.”

”He knows how to do that? Sneaky bastard was holding out on me,” Kael grumbled. ”Still, that does remind me that Lukav is far from being a helpless victim and neither is his priest friend. It might be a good idea to involve them in the investigation – they might be perfectly capable of taking the killers down on their own if you provide him with sufficient information.”

Now there was an idea. It would be hard to secure Alanic’s co-

operation without coming clean about absolutely everything, but the benefits could be immense. He would have to seriously consider it when he started to seriously tackle the problem of Iasku Manor and disappearances around Knyazov Dveri.

"Well," said Kael after a few seconds of silence, unlocking one of the drawers attached to his work desk and withdrawing a cheap, featureless notebook out of it. "With that out of the way, I'd like to discuss another unpleasant topic with you: your soul marker."

Zorian straightened his back a little, suddenly alert. Truthfully, when he had told Kael about the soul marker and allowed the morlock boy to perform a scan of his soul, he had not expected much. Kael may have been a necromancer, but he was very much an amateur one. Still, he figured it wouldn't hurt to put some trust in the other boy – both Lukav and Alanic were rather narrowly specialized when it came to their soul magic expertise, and it was entirely possible that they had missed something that a full-blown necromancer, even a novice one, would find obvious. It seemed that was indeed the case.

"What is it?" he asked with barely hidden excitement.

Kael sighed and pressed the notebook into Zorian's hand. Leafing through it, however, Zorian realized he didn't understand anything in it. It was full of unfamiliar diagrams and alien jargon, interspersed with brief paragraphs that meant nothing to one who lacked sufficient context to understand them. He shot Kael an annoyed look.

"I'll be blunt," said Kael, ignoring his glare. "Your marker shouldn't work." Seeing Zorian's confused expression, he moved to explain. "I was immediately suspicious when you described how tightly the marker's entwined with your soul – why would someone make such a deeply embedded marker and then make it a simple unchanging identification stamp like you assumed it was? The desire to make the marker resilient to damage and harder to

remove could explain some of it, but it was still excessive – there are less invasive means that would have only failed if the soul was so mangled that the person was effectively dead. Those methods do have a noticeable flaw, though – they are a lot easier to copy than what you have rooted in your soul. That, I felt, was key. The marker was designed to foil attempts at copying it to other people. And in order to do that–

"It needed to check up on the host's soul to see whether it has been transplanted to another person," Zorian interrupted.

"Yes," Kael said. He took the notebook out of Zorian's hands, flipped it to one of the later pages and handed it back to him.

Looking at it again, Zorian could tell that the diagram was supposed to be a crude outline of a human's body, several circles, triangles and straight lines drawn over it. Below it was a short paragraph talking about 'essence channels', 'feedback nodes' and 'transition barriers'. It still didn't mean much to Zorian, but he could tell this time that it was supposed to represent Zorian's soul, the marker attached to it and their interaction to one another.

"I do not claim to completely understand the marker," Kael said. "Or even most of it – it's an awe-inspiring thing, clearly made by a master soul mage. I especially like how it makes itself inconspicuous to casual soul scans – I'm not surprised I never detected it before being informed it was there. Still, there are some things about its functions that are obvious to me, and one of them is that the marker is designed to consult the soul of its host – the core, unchanging part of it, anyway – and alter its identification tag according to what it detects. Transplanting the marker to another person should result in a totally different identification value."

"But that's clearly not how it works," Zorian protested. "Zach and I have the same damn marker! The tracking spell wouldn't have worked otherwise!"

"It's broken," Kael said calmly. "Your marker, that is. There

are parts of it that are totally inert, either because they do not acknowledge you as its rightful host or because they are missing some critical piece that got lost in the transfer. I'm guessing that at least one of those is supposed to send a signal to the looping mechanism when you die, terminating the loop prematurely – that would neatly explain why you get sent back when Zach dies but he doesn't experience the same when *you* end up dead. He has the intact version of the marker, whereas you don't."

"But the main part of the thing works?"

"In a sense. It does everything it is supposed to, consulting the core of your soul, but for some reason it is still stuck on the same value it had while it was still inside Zach. It's broken, but it's broken in your favor."

"Huh," said Zorian lamely. What was he supposed to say to that? "Honestly? This isn't such a huge surprise. I always suspected that the marker was in some way defective. After all, I highly doubt that its makers intended for someone like me to enter the time loop the way I did. Does this really change anything?"

"Depends how you look at it," Kael said. "You are in no danger of being suddenly dropped out of the loop, so I suppose from a personal perspective this doesn't change much. But look at it from a wider perspective. If I'm right, then whatever convergence of circumstances aligned to pull you into the time loop along with Zach was a fluke. A fortunate fluke, but a fluke all the same. It is not consistently reproducible."

Zorian frowned. What was he...

Then it hit him.

"Wait. How did Red Robe end up time looping, then?"

"Yes, that is the question, isn't it?" Kael said, his fingers drumming on his work table impatiently. "I'm afraid I don't know how to answer that question. But he clearly didn't use the same method you did."

"Yeah," Zorian agreed. "I had strongly suspected that, but I couldn't be sure. Him having some other method of joining the time loop would explain why he never used his own marker to track *me* down the way I did Zach. He doesn't have the same marker as me and Zach, if he indeed has one at all, so he would have to capture Zach and use him as a key to locate me that way."

"And if he's indeed a master soul mage like you seem to think, he probably 'knows' you could not possibly have an identical marker as Zach, so there is no reason for him to try that in the first place," Kael said.

They bounced theories and ideas off one another for the next half an hour, but it was all just hollow speculation at the moment. They had no way to confirm or discard any of the possibilities. Kael thought that Red Robe was in some way piggy backing on Zach, either by leaving portions of his mind in Zach the way the Cyorian matriarch did with Zorian, or by having some kind of soul link with Zach. Zorian discarded the possibility of a mind package immediately. The logistics of that kind of setup didn't add up – Red Robe was active within hours of the start of the loop, if his quick arrival to the ruins of the aranea colony in that one restart were any indication, and processing a large amount of memories took more than a day. Not to mention that Zach didn't start every restart by going to the same location, so it was questionable how Red Robe would have even gotten a memory package in every restart. No, Red Robe definitely wasn't using memory packages. And really, Zorian didn't think he was linked to Zach's soul either – if he was, he would have checked Zach's soul for additional connections when he'd read his mind and found out there were additional time travelers running around. Instead, he immediately ran off to confront the aranea. The thought of someone being connected to Zach's soul didn't seem to occur to him.

Personally, Zorian thought Red Robe did have a marker of

some sort. It was entirely possible, he felt, that there was a way for people who knew what they were doing to enter the time loop 'properly' – to get their own marker and all. Though that did raise a question about why he didn't just off Zach and go on with his life free of interference.

What was so special about Zach?

"Right. I don't think we're getting anywhere with this," Zorian said. "Anything else I should keep in mind?"

"Nothing that Lukav and his priest friend didn't already warn you about – avoid any magic that could alter your soul substantially. We don't know what caused the marker to get stuck on its current identification value, and there is no telling what will push it off the edge so take care," said Kael.

"I was afraid to do that even before now, and for that exact reason too," Zorian said, leaning back on making a deliberately dramatic sigh. "Pity, though. I guess my dream of turning that stupid grey hunter Silverlake sent me to deal with into my very own familiar or becoming a grey hunter shifter is doomed to remain just a dream..."

"Didn't you know? There is a reason why most shifters are made from normal animals," Kael warned him. "Being a shifter means you get instincts from the other part of the soul, and magical creatures always have very strong souls... the more magical the creature, the stronger. And they tend to be extremely violent and territorial. With regards to grey hunters, I'm fairly certain they don't tolerate even their own kind, much less anything else. Such an attitude would bleed over to you if you became a grey hunter shifter. And there is also the matter of inheritance to consider – even if you are able to master a grey hunter's soul and not let its urges rule you, there is no guarantee that your children will be similarly strong-willed, especially since they'll have those urges from the day they are born. I'd strongly recommend against that course

of action. As for making it your familiar, keep in mind that it takes a long time for the soul link to mature and that you need to be close to it the whole time. There is no guarantee that the creature won't kill you during the process. And if you do manage to slave it to your will, it could still be dangerous to everyone around you who is not protected by the soul bond."

"There was no need for a lecture. I was just joking," said Zorian flatly.

"Good."

"Even if its abilities would have been so very useful..." Zorian said wistfully. "Extreme toughness, speed and magical resistance? Yes, please!"

"Just kill it, chop it up for parts and make an enhancement potion out of them," suggested Kael. "You can ask Lukav to help you do it, I'm sure he'd jump at the chance. Not many people are crazy enough to go after one of those monsters, after all, so I'm pretty sure he never had a chance to work with grey hunter parts."

"You know, that actually sounds like an interesting idea..."

"Glad I could help," Kael said, peering into a slowly bubbling metal pot on the table in front of him and scowling. "Well, my current experiment is not going too well. And I thought I had it this time, too. Time to try batch number four." He gave Zorian a speculative look. "Say, do you think you can help me out here? Some of the steps are pretty simple, and observing my work will ensure you don't forget what I talked about as easily as you did last time."

"Yeah, I'll help, and holy gods will you stop reminding me of that!?" Zorian whined. "It was more than a year, and I had a lot on my mind, it was natural I would forget a lot of things. Besides, I'm already working on side-stepping my faulty memory somehow."

"Hmm, I wish you luck about that," Kael said. "Nonetheless, we both know you'll remember my work a lot better if you understand

what I'm doing instead of just blindly memorizing recipes and dry instructions. Think of this as free alchemical lessons."

Well. He *did* use a fair amount of alchemy in solving the problems he encountered, so getting some advice in the field might actually be useful.

"Alright. Where do you want me to start?"



The next day, Zorian decided to make good on his own internal promise to find some solution to the 'forgetting things' problem. Well, he had to organize another one of Kirielle's magic lessons first, but there were no issues with that. Her progress was much faster than it had been in the previous restarts he had tried teaching her, since he had already been through this several times and was therefore getting better at motivating her and explaining the subject matter in a way she intuitively understood. His obligations done for the day, he quickly excused himself and went out for a walk, lest Kael or Imaya find some other job to dump in his lap.

In the long run, Zorian knew he already had a perfectly good solution for remembering things with perfect clarity – he could just make memory packets like those of the Cyorian matriarch, storing them in his mind for future recall. The map of Cyoria's underworld that the matriarch had left him was still as crystal clear in his mind as it had been the day he had assembled it from the scattered remnants left in the minds of the male survivors of the colony. It served as a shining example of what was possible for one who could master the procedure of creating such things. And it wasn't like learning how to do that would be an additional time sink, either – learning how to handle memory packets was something he was already working on. It was his current priority, in fact.

The problem was, it would be a while before his effort there bore any fruit. Could be a couple of months, could be a couple of years... well, hopefully not *years*, since the matriarch's memory package could decay into uselessness by then, but the point remained: it was not a quick solution to his immediate problem. Fortunately, human mages were quite good at making quick solutions to immediate problems, and surely some of them had at one point needed to memorize a map down to the very last detail, or recite a book word for word? Zorian would be shocked if the spell to do such a thing didn't already exist somewhere out there, it was just a question of whether he could find it.

He decided to try at the academy library first. A bit unimaginative, but it was the best place to start his research and it had been a while since he'd spent some time browsing its shelves. He kind of missed that during his long absence from Cyoria.

Three hours later, he was torn between smiling in satisfaction and the urge to find something flammable to take his frustration out on. The bright side was: he found what he was looking for. There were no less than five different spells that could do what he wanted, mostly by allowing the caster to record what they see and hear for a brief period of time and storing that record in their minds. They differed in details, such as whether it was possible to pause the recording or not, but the core was the same. One even claimed it could form a clear memory retroactively, allowing the caster to remember what they had forgotten.

The bad news was that these spells were only available in the restricted section of the library.

Specifically, the mind magic section of it.

Zorian leaned back in his chair, precariously balancing it on its back two legs and taking his glasses off to massage his eyes. To say that the academy was reluctant to give permission to random students with regards to doing mind magic would be a severe under-

statement. He needed a better library pass if he wanted to get what he wanted, and there was no way he was going to get it through *legal* means.

He narrowed his eyes while staring at the library ceiling. There was no helping it. He would just have to steal one.

"What has gotten my best student so gloomy on this fine day?"

Zorian jumped in his seat, startled, the poorly balanced chair almost giving up on him and pulling him to the floor. After finally stabilizing himself enough, he turned around to give Ilsa an unamused look.

"Sorry," she said, but her smile and the emotions he felt off of her told Zorian she was not sorry at all. "I didn't think you would react so... explosively."

"You just surprised me a bit," Zorian said. He *had* detected a person passing by him with his mind sense, but that wasn't exactly something unusual in this place. It wasn't like the library was empty, after all. "What can I help you with, Miss Zileti?"

"Nothing, really – I am already done with what I came here for. You didn't notice it because you were so absorbed into your reading, but I had passed through this section twice before now. I just didn't want to interrupt you then, since you looked quite busy. I was just leaving now when I noticed you trying to burn a hole in the ceiling with your eyes, so I wondered if I can help you with whatever is troubling you."

"I appreciate the offer, Miss Zileti," Zorian said. "I really do. But I don't think you can help me with this."

Helpful though she may be, Zorian was pretty sure that asking her to help him with committing a crime was a terrible idea. Amusing, but terrible.

"What are you working on, anyway?" she asked, peering at the open book in front of him. "Memory preservation spells? Why would you need that?"

"I need a way to quickly and flawlessly memorize a notebook or two," Zorian said truthfully.

Ilsa gave him a searching look.

"If this is about class work..."

"No, I think I'm doing quite well in my classes," Zorian said, shaking his head. If anything, he thought he was doing too well – he was at the top of his class in terms of grades, despite his efforts to avoid standing out. "It's personal. All I can say is that I'll be going on a trip soon, and I won't be able to bring anything with me. Anything but my memories, that is. And while my memory is quite good, it is not good enough to memorize, say, a word-for-word transcription of a book of potion recipes."

"Sounds ominous and suspicious," Ilsa noted.

"I'm not planning anything illegal," Zorian assured.

"I'm sure," Ilsa deadpanned. "That's why you're looking up spells that I *know* you're not authorized to learn."

"Hence me being gloomy when you approached me," Zorian countered. "I'd thought I had found a solution to my problem, but it turns out it's beyond my reach at the moment."

"I see," she said. "Out of curiosity, how important is it that you be able to access the information in the book while it is stored inside your mind?"

"I'm not sure I understand," Zorian frowned. "What would be the point of holding a book in your head if you couldn't read it?"

"To create a copy of it, of course," Ilsa smiled. "It's a trick that some alteration experts use if they want to be able to create complex objects without carrying the originals with them. They use a spell to record the blueprint of an object, storing it inside their heads, then simply use that blueprint to create copies of the object whenever it strikes their fancy. Well, provided they have the correct raw materials. In your case, that would be a blank book of

similar dimensions to what you're trying to copy and a bottle of ink."

"And... you know how to do this?" asked Zorian hopefully.

Ilisa hummed. "Well, I *am* an alteration expert... but even if I was willing to teach you, this is not exactly an easy spell combination. It requires a great deal of alteration expertise and great shaping control. It would take-

Zorian concentrated for a second and pulled at the heavy, metal lined book on the shelf next to him with his magic, not bothering to make a single gesture or hand motion. The book smoothly slid out of its shelf and floated in front of Ilisa, startling her. Before she could say anything, the book opened itself and started turning its pages, slowly at first but then speeding up until the last half of it passed in a blur and the book slammed itself shut. His point made, Zorian smoothly slotted the book back to its previous place on the shelf.

"I can't think of a proper way to prove my alteration expertise right now," said Zorian in the resulting silence, "but I'm perfectly capable of restructuring a metal pan into a fully functional metal watch. How much harder would this be compared to that?"

"Not exactly harder," Ilisa admitted, still staring at the book on the shelf with a frown. "But certainly different. You'd have to practice for a few days before you can get it right." She shook her head and tore her eyes away from the book to stare Zorian in the eyes. "We're going to have a talk about this on Monday, mister Kazinski."

"Does that mean you agree to teach it to me?" he asked.

"Not yet. I'll need to run some tests on you to see whether you can handle the spells safely."

Ilisa soon left, leaving Zorian alone to his own thoughts. He closed the book in front of him, setting it aside. Ilisa's spell combination wasn't exactly what he had been looking for when he searched

for a quick and dirty solution, but it could work. In fact, it was even better than his original idea in some regards. Much less annoying to use, for instance. Plus, he wouldn't need to painstakingly transcribe the information from his head every time he wanted to add or change something. He would give Ilsa's method a chance.

But he was going to steal a better library pass anyway.



Two weeks passed in a blur of activity. Most of it was routine, like him accompanying Taiven and her team to the Dungeon, teaching Kirielle or helping Kael with his alchemy (and having his soul occasionally scanned by the other boy, with little results thus far). It helped that Kirielle actually had a friend her age this time so she monopolized his time a lot less. Whatever dark secret her mother harbored, Zorian had to admit Nochka's presence made Kirielle a lot more manageable than she usually was, so he was definitely going to visit that bridge in future restarts as well.

Two main things stood out from the rest. The first one was that he had managed to learn the spells Ilsa had talked about, and they worked just as she said they would. He was happy that he could finally keep written notes on what happened in the time loop, since he now had a method of effectively transferring his notebooks into the next restart. Kael was happy too, since he could now be much more liberal about the amount of information he was sending over to his future self – he promptly gave Zorian four fully filled-out notebooks to store the blueprints of, with a promise of one more by the end of the restart. Zorian really hoped Kael wouldn't accumulate notebooks so rapidly in future restarts, because Zorian could only hold about 15 blueprints in his mind. The matriarch's memory packet didn't leave much room for anything else, really.

The second interesting thing was that he had all but confirmed that Xvim had his mind shielded at all times. He had barged into the man's office three different times, and the shield had always been active. Sadly, his unannounced visits seemed to have finally provoked the unflappable man somewhat, so now Zorian had 5 different shaping books on his reading list for their next session. Depending on which book Xvim decided to focus on, their next lesson would consist of Zorian making detailed shapes out of sand, telekinetically dismantling a watch without breaking any of its parts, playing around with candles and matches, trying to apply paint on canvas without using any brushes or carving glyphs into stones with his fingers. Or maybe all five if Xvim was feeling particularly vindictive.

But that was all background activity – the real focus of his efforts was tracking the Ibasans and the Cult of the Dragon Below, mapping the structure of their organization. Originally he wanted to be cautious, spending most of the restart just observing everything, identifying their members and locations they met and did business in, but... well, he saw his chance and he took it. While the Ibasans were mostly full blown mages and lived deep underground in heavily warded bases crawling with guards, only periodically visiting the surface, most of their allies in the city were far more modestly protected. Zorian followed around cultists and simple mercenaries that worked with the Ibasans, tracking them down to their homes and reading their thoughts as they skulked around. The wards on their houses, if they even had them, were hilariously easy to avoid or break, allowing Zorian to root through their stuff for additional clues and connections with other members of their conspiracy.

He had found out some interesting things. For instance, not all of the Ibasan agents in the city were aware of what they were getting themselves into. The various merchants that smuggled

food and other supplies to the invaders seemed entirely ignorant of whom they were really supporting. It was just business to them. Apparently there were numerous secret bases and operations happening in deep reaches of Cyoria's Dungeon, and most of them were fairly inoffensive – illegal harvesting operations for dangerous substances, secret research facilities by various trading groups, even a government black site of some sort. The merchants thought they were simply supplying one of these many shadowy factions and never pried much into the identity of their customers. A couple of mercenaries knew that the invaders planned to do some kind of terrorist strike during the summer festival, but didn't care about the details so long as they got paid – they didn't seem to be aware of the true scale of the invasion.

Then there was the Cult of the Dragon Below, who honestly baffled him. The cult had a very complex, confusing structure, with lots of different ranks and categories of membership, and every rank seemed to have been fed a different story. On top of that, some members seemed to be in it purely for the benefits and had never bought into the Cult's belief system in the first place. They were in it for the money – apparently, being a member of the Cult of Dragon could be pretty profitable if you played your cards right. They knew that the cult planned to release a primordial at the summer festival to ravage the city and everything around it, of course, but didn't believe the primordial in question even existed, so no harm in going along with it, right?

Right.

There was still no evidence that Red Robe was in any way operating among the invasion forces, nor that he had shared even a speck of knowledge with them before running off to do something else, so Zorian decided to be a little more aggressive and start actually practicing his memory reading on acceptable targets. To that end, he identified a small cultist gathering – organized by a trio of

magic-wielding members who appeared to be of a slightly higher rank than the usual dregs Zorian encountered thus far – and prepared to subdue them for questioning.

Eight armed cultists, three of whom were magic wielders. His old self would have called him crazy for trying to tackle them all on his lonesome, even from ambush, but they never really stood a chance – he trapped the house they were to meet in before they even got there, having found out about their chosen meeting place several days in advance, and took them down one by one as they came. Mostly by telepathically compelling them into falling asleep, much like the aranea had tried to do to him such a long time ago when he'd first encountered them. The last arrival was a mage who had a mind shield spell formula on a ring and fought his attempt off. Zorian was forced to deal with him via slamming him into a wall a couple of times with some judicious application of the 'force blast' spell.

Once they were all down and tied up, Zorian took a deep breath and concentrated on diving into the memories of his first victim.

Before he got instruction from the Yellow Cavern Guardians, Zorian sort of expected that probing someone's memories would be like one sometimes sees in adventure novels and the like – a walk through some psychedelic mindscape, where the intruder has to navigate deeply symbolical mazes and fight mental representations of the victim's psyche and what not. The reality was nothing like that. Or at least the way aranea did it was nothing like that, and the Yellow Cavern Guardians had seemed more than a little amused when Zorian had described the idea to them. Instead, memory probes simply consisted of a powerful telepathic probe that punched through the surface layers of the victim's mind and then started branching throughout their inner self in search of whatever the psychic was after.

It was by its very nature a dangerous procedure – unlike lighter, surface manipulations, deep scans like the one he was about to do could permanently ruin a mind. An amateur like Zorian was all but guaranteed to cause irreparable damage on his first try, unless they had spent years doing careful exercises which Zorian had no time for. Thus, he was not terribly surprised when that first man ended up as a mindless husk five minutes later. The convulsions and foaming at the mouth that preceded it were very disturbing, however, and almost made him give up on the whole thing right then and there. He didn't even manage to read anything out of his memories, so his death had been for nothing.

A few minutes later, after he'd had some time to calm down and drown out the little voice in his head telling him he was a monster for killing a defenseless man like that, he continued with victim number two. He decided not to stay so long inside the minds of the rest of them.

Number two, three, four, five and six survived his probes. They could even wake up some day. Well, they could have, if the time loop wasn't so close to its end. The sixth attempt actually yielded some results, too – he didn't find much in the man's memories before he had to withdraw, but he did add a few more names to his list to investigate, so at least *some* good came out of it. The last two suffered only light damage due to his probe. They knew nothing useful that could help him.

Zorian left the house feeling hollow, wondering whether he was really justified in doing this.

He came home to find Kirielle in tears and the entire household in an uproar. Rea and Sauh Sashal had been found dead in their home, brutally murdered by what appeared to be a monster missed by the many extermination squads operating in the city by now.

Of their daughter, there was no trace.

SHIFTING TRACKS

Zorian woke up very early in the morning, roused from his slumber by the faint, incoherent mumbling of Kirielle sleeping beside him. For a moment he wondered why Kirielle was sleeping in his bed instead of being in her own room, but then he snapped out of the confused half-dream state he was in and memories of the previous evening came rushing in to him.

Rea and her husband were dead, their daughter missing. An event that had completely blindsided Zorian, who had never heard of anything like that happening in the previous restarts. Was this something that usually happened and he just never heard of it, or did the many changes in the wake of the aranean destruction somehow cause this? That fact that Rea and Sauh had been killed by a wandering monster seemed to suggest the latter, but Zorian had a hunch there was nothing random about that monster attack. The cranium rats had been monitoring the Sashal household for a reason, after all, and the invaders were ever so fond of slaving dungeon denizens to their will and using them as their attack dogs.

Kirielle, of course, neither knew nor cared about Zorian's musings on the matter. Unlike him, who was not terribly close to the Sashal family and for whom their deaths would in no way be permanent, Kirielle had gotten very close to Nochka and was devas-

tated to hear about the attack. Not even pointing out that she may still be alive could get her to stop crying. After all, the police said her parents were killed by a dungeon denizen, and those weren't exactly known for kidnapping people and keeping them alive for ransom.

In the end, Kirielle only calmed down and went to sleep when Imaya gave her some 'homemade calming tea' that kicked in suspiciously quickly. Probably a mild opiate. He should have asked for a cup of that himself, in all likelihood – he had already been rather unnerved by his experience of reading the cultists' memories, and was thus ill-equipped to deal with this brand new crisis.

Moving slowly, Zorian carefully extricated himself out of his bed and vacated the room, trying not to wake up Kirielle. He was pretty sure he failed in that regard, as her mental signature abruptly got more active about halfway through his retreat from the room, but since she never said anything and kept her eyes closed, he figured she didn't want to talk to him yet. Or maybe she just wanted to go back to sleep. It *was* pretty early...

He found everyone else already awake and seated around the table when he entered the kitchen – Imaya, Kael and even Kana.

"Couldn't sleep either, huh?" Kael asked rhetorically.

"Kirielle snuck into my bed in the middle of the night," said Zorian with a sigh. "She's hard to bunk with even in normal circumstances, and considering the recent events..."

"Poor thing," Imaya said. "She was hit the hardest by this, I think. It's a disgrace that something like that could happen in the middle of the city, and after it was already known that monsters were getting unusually aggressive too!"

Imaya spent the next ten minutes or so blaming the city for poor handling of the monster crisis – a subject that she never showed all that much of an interest in before now. It didn't take an empath to figure out that Kirielle wasn't the only one greatly

affected by the killings. She had probably formed a friendship with Rea during the many times she had brought Nochka to meet with Kirielle.

Kael and Kana, on the other hand, seemed far less affected. Kael had virtually no interaction with either Nochka or Rea, and had never even met Sauh, so that was understandable. Kana had sometimes joined Nochka and Kirielle in their games, but had been nowhere near as close to Nochka as Kirielle had. She was also very young and probably didn't quite understand what was happening.

Eventually Imaya ran out of steam and fell silent, though Zorian could still feel a lot of frustration coming off her. An uneasy atmosphere descended on the table.

"Oh yes," Imaya said suddenly. "I forgot to tell you yesterday, but the police want to talk to you about... Rea and her family."

"Me?" asked Zorian in surprise. "What would I know about that?"

"You did speak to Rea and her husband relatively recently," pointed out Kael. "They probably want to see if they told you something of importance. Most likely they want to talk to everyone who knew the victim."

"I see," Zorian said, idly drumming his fingers on the table. "Are they going to drop by at some point or should I go visit the police station?"

"Detective Ikzeteri said he was going to be at the Sashal residence at noon today, and that you should meet him there if possible," Imaya said.

Zorian frowned. Ikzeteri? That sounded familiar, where did he... oh, his old divination teacher had that last name too, didn't he? And he was a detective, too...

"This detective Ikzeteri... he wouldn't be named Haslush, would he?" asked Zorian.

"I *think* that was his name, yes," Imaya said, frowning. "I have to say I don't really remember his introduction all that well. I was too shocked to really pay attention. Why, do you know him?"

"I've heard of him," said Zorian. "It's not really important, I was just curious. I'll go give him a visit later."

At that point Kirielle trudged into the kitchen, apparently having decided not to go back to sleep after all, and they all wordlessly decided to shelve the topic of the Sashal family for the moment.



The Sashal family home didn't look like a scene of death. That was the first thing Zorian noticed when he approached the house. He had expected to see some kind of damage on the building – broken windows, the door torn off its hinges, maybe a damaged wall section – but the house looked entirely intact. If it weren't for the trio of policemen hanging around the entrance and giving him severe looks as he approached, he would have never guessed the occupants had been killed.

Didn't look much like a monster attack to him. The chance of this being an actual random event kept getting lower and lower.

"I'm here to speak to detective Ikzeteri," he said to the tall, mustachioed, stern-looking policeman that looked like he was the leader of the group in front of him. "He told me I should look for him here. Is he present?"

"He's inside," the man nodded. "But I'm afraid I can't let you go look for him yourself. If you are willing to wait a little, I will notify him you're here."

"I'm fine with that," said Zorian, though internally he wasn't happy. He had wanted to take a look inside the place to see if he could spot any clues. He doubted the police would be willing to tell him any details about the killings, after all.

Inconvenient. He could just wait until they left the place alone and sneak in then, but that might take several days – most of the clues would have gone cold by then, assuming they hadn't been confiscated by the police as evidence. Besides, there wasn't all that much time left before the end of the restart, so his window of opportunity to conduct an investigation was very small.

Damn it, he *so* didn't need this right now...

"Wait here, then," the mustachioed policeman said. "What is your name, boy?"

Zorian gave him his name, and the man promptly disappeared through the door to fetch Haslush. After five minutes of waiting in uncomfortable silence while the other two policemen gave him suspicious looks, however, he could tell it would take a while for the man to return.

Zorian shuffled in place uncomfortably, probably looking mightily suspicious to the two policeman scrutinizing his every move. He knew it wasn't entirely rational, but he was profoundly unnerved about being so close to law enforcement. Logically speaking, they had no reason to suspect him of anything and this entire talk was likely just a formality. He'd had bad dealings with the police back in Cirin, though, and he was also dealing with Haslush – his old teacher could be scarily perceptive at times. Zorian wouldn't put it past the man to notice something strange about him and bring him in for more detailed questioning, which would be a gigantic waste of time at best, and at worst would necessitate an early end to the restart via suicide.

He'd prefer to avoid the latter possibility at all costs. Kirielle was already devastated about losing a friend, so having her brother suddenly blow himself up in the police station all of a sudden would be terrible. True, Zorian wouldn't be there to see her anguish, and the restart would end a few days later, but just imagining the possibility made him ill.

Maybe he should read Haslush's mind? Haslush was probably trained in detecting and resisting mental intrusion, being a mage working for law enforcement and all, but Zorian's particular brand of mind magic was very non-standard. He didn't use any obvious chants and gestures, so maybe he could get away with it. It would probably answer a lot of questions and would allow him to avoid any obvious blunders while talking to him...

...but no, that was too much of a risk. Besides, he had a much better target for something like that standing just beside him – he doubted those mundane policemen were trained in dealing with mind magic, beyond maybe being given a few pointers. A secret is only as strong as its weakest links.

He proceeded to worm his way into the two policeman's thoughts. He found out that they were really not as interested in him as he had been imagining, but they also weren't thinking about the Sashal family either – one of them was hungry and thinking of the dinner his wife was making him back home, and the other was fantasizing about some female administrative employee back in the station. Well, that was okay – he would talk to them and lead their thoughts back to the situation at hand.

"So, I don't want to get you gentlemen in trouble or anything, but is there anything you can tell me about what happened here? Sauh and Rea had been friends of mine and I was shocked to hear what happened to them... is there anything you can tell me about all this?"

Zorian didn't really expect them to say much – he fully expected them to give him the silent treatment until Haslush got outside, but simply mentioning the topic was usually enough to get a person to start thinking about it. He didn't expect to be hit by a veritable wave of distrust and derisiveness coming from his link to one of the policemen, though.

[And he looked like such a normal-looking kid, too,] the man

thought to himself. [I'd never have guessed he was hanging around a bunch of thieving cat shifters. Just shows you can never trust outward appearances when it comes to magic bullshit...]

Rea was a cat shifter? Huh. That made a lot of sense, actually – explained some things. What he didn't understand at all was that the policeman seemed to think this made Rea and her family bad people – so much so that Zorian was apparently bad just for associating with them.

Apparently he had physically reacted to this revelation, because the other policeman noticed it and spoke up to forestall any possible unpleasantness. He didn't seem to see Zorian's reaction as any evidence of mind reading, chalking up his reaction to him being able to sense the change in his partner's bearing and facial expression.

"We're just here to look tough and discourage curious neighbors from snooping around, kid," the other policeman said. "We don't know anything more about this than you do, in all likelihood – some sort of dungeon creature made its way into the house and killed the couple inside. For anything more you'll have to wait for officer Kalan to come back with the detective."

The first policeman lightly shook his head before catching himself and stopping. [The creature that killed them simply sauntered in through an unlocked door instead of breaking in and attacked absolutely no one else in this entire crowded neighborhood. If that was an actual monster incursion, I will eat my own shoes,] the man thought to himself. [The kitties probably stuck their noses in some shady business, like usual, and got offed for it when someone took offense. Gods know they got their paws on everything these days...]

Zorian frowned. "What about Nochka? Their daughter? I was told her body was never recovered and that she might still be alive?"

The two policemen suddenly became very uncomfortable. Even the first one, who clearly didn't like cat shifters as a whole, felt bad about the little girl who reminded him of his own daughter. Neither of them thought there was much chance of Nochka ever being found again, but they were unsurprisingly unwilling to tell this to Zorian and instead tried to think of a suitable non-answer they could give him.

They both breathed a sigh of relief when their exchange was interrupted by the arrival of their mustachioed friend who exited the house with Haslush in tow. Haslush, for his part, decided to lead Zorian on a walk away from the house, ruining his plan to keep mind reading the mundane policemen while they talked for additional clues.

It might be for the better, actually – paying attention to two different thought streams at the same time had already been rather hard. Trying to have a conversation with Haslush while doing the same would have probably been impossible.

"So, Zorian... I can call you Zorian, right?" Haslush asked. Zorian nodded, aware that the man had a massive dislike for formality. "Right. I'm guessing Miss Kuroshka has told you what happened back there, but just so we're clear: Rea and Sauh Sashal have been found dead in their home yesterday morning, along with the mangled corpses of two giant centipedes. Their daughter was nowhere to be found, and nobody has heard anything about her since. Any of that news to you?"

"Mister Tverinov and Miss Kuroshka already told me most of that, but not the part about the mangled centipedes," said Zorian.

"Yes, well, your younger sibling reacted so badly to the news that I censored myself a little. Called it a monster attack rather than dwelling on the details," Haslush shrugged. "I apologize for upsetting her so much. I'm told I can be a little tactless at times, but it's a hard trait to lose. This line of work tends to make you

more than a little bit morbid, and I sometimes forget most people aren't exposed to death and crime every waking moment of their lives."

Zorian thought about assuaging the man's worry and assuring him he didn't hold a grudge about that, but then figured the man would be more willing to share information with him if he appeared guilty, so he remained silent. Instead, he shifted the topic back to the killings.

"So they were killed by giant centipedes?" asked Zorian. "I didn't see any damage outside the house. How did they get in?"

"Through the door. Apparently the occupants had left it unlocked."

Zorian gave Haslush an incredulous look.

"I'm just telling you what we found," Haslush said defensively. "I know this case is strange, it's why we haven't pronounced it closed and moved on. And on that note, is there anything you could tell me about the Sashal family that would explain what happened to them?"

Of course he did – but nothing he could tell the man without getting himself in trouble. He told Haslush everything he had figured out about the apparent cat shifters though his interactions with them, but this was very sketchy information, and based on Haslush's unhappy expression probably wasn't anything new to the detective. Not that surprising – Imaya alone had probably told him everything Zorian just did and then some.

"This wasn't *really* a monster attack, was it?" Zorian asked.

Haslush gave Zorian a piercing look, which Zorian met unflinchingly. After a few seconds, Haslush withdrew a hip flask from his jacket, took a long, deep sip from it and then put it back into his jacket pocket.

"No, probably not," he admitted.

"Why were they targeted and by whom, if you don't mind me asking?" Zorian said, trying his luck. Hey, who knows? Maybe the man would even answer.

"Well now. If I knew that, I wouldn't be speaking to you now, would I?" Haslush pointed out.

"So you have no leads," Zorian concluded.

"I have *too many* leads," Haslush corrected. "The Sashals... well, how much do you *really* know about them?"

"I presume you're talking about them being cat shifters?" Zorian guessed.

"Ah, so you *do* know about that. I've been wondering about that – the rest of your housemates didn't seem aware of that fact, but Imaya said you were 'unreasonably suspicious' of Rea right from the start. Well, if you know what they are, then you surely know why this could be any number of things..."

"I don't, actually," said Zorian shaking his head in denial. "I was suspicious about Rea because she looked suspicious and I am a paranoid person. Them being cat shifters never factored into it, and to be frank I know virtually nothing about them. What's the deal with cat shifters anyway?"

"Bluntly put, most cat shifters are heavily involved with crime," Haslush said. "Theft, smuggling and spying, usually, but occasionally even assassination. Their alternate forms are tailor-made for such shady activities, after all. Cats are small, stealthy animals whose presence is hardly ever notable in and of itself. How many new, never-seen-them-before cats do you see in a week?"

"A lot."

"Right. In a big city like this, unfamiliar cats are ubiquitous. Few things threaten them aside from humans, and most humans don't hurt cats without reason. And on top of that, shifters get the ability to access traits of their animal form even while they're human, meaning cat shifters get things like night vision, a sense of

smell powerful enough to put most dogs to shame, superior balance and agility, and a whole bunch of other benefits.”

”I’m still a bit surprised this lets them be so active in crime,” said Zorian. ”You’d think the sheer flexibility of classical mages employed by the various police forces would allow them to shut down a shifter group operating like that, regardless of their special abilities.”

”Ah, but you’re assuming cat shifters work alone, which is not the case at all. They are hands down the most firmly assimilated shifter type of them all. They live in cities and towns among ordinary people, and are virtually indistinguishable from a normal human on casual inspection. Everything a regular citizen could do, cat shifters can as well – in particular, this means they have no problems in getting classical magic of their own. Hell, their links to crime mean they can get their hands on many things an average mage can’t, like permanent enhancement rituals or illegal spells for evading notice and influencing people...”

”Do you have any evidence that Rea and her family were that type of cat shifter though?” Zorian frowned. ”Maybe I’m naïve, but they didn’t look like that to me. Surely there are non-criminal cat shifters?”

”There are,” Haslush nodded. ”And every single cat shifter would have you believe they’re one of them. Considering what happened, I don’t think I’m willing to put much stock in the Sashal family being such counter-examples.”

Half an hour later, Haslush decided he’d gotten everything he needed out of Zorian and sent him on his way. Instead of going home, however, Zorian hung back. Once he had confirmed that Haslush was not going back to the scene of the crime, Zorian stealthily went back there in order to do some more fact-finding. There were guards posted in front of the house, but none were inside. Perfect. Zorian didn’t dare enter the house himself, afraid

that there was some kind of alarm on the house to notify the police of break-ins, but conjuring an ectoplasmic eyeball and sending it inside didn't seem to trip any wards so he closed his eyes and had his eyeball spy look around the house.

The bodies of Rea and Sauh were long gone by this time, but it was not hard to figure out where each had died due to all the blood stains. Tragically, Rea seemed to have been killed in front of her daughter's room, trying to keep the attackers away from Nochka. She didn't go down without a fight – the bodies of the two giant centipedes, which the police decided to leave in the house for some reason, littered the entire area. They had been quite literally torn to pieces, their bodies sliced into sections by some powerful severing attack. In the end, though, it hadn't been enough. The door to Nochka's room was smashed open – the only door in the house to have been dealt with so destructively – her bed flipped over, and Nochka herself nowhere to be found.

Zorian had been harboring a hope that maybe Nochka had turned into a cat when the attack had come and then escaped into the night, but that didn't seem likely anymore. It was beyond obvious now that Nochka had been taken by the attackers for some reason.

Half an hour later, not having found anything similarly notable, he was ready to call it a day and go home. That's when he searched the place where Rea had died again, and noticed something interesting on the severed head of one of the centipedes – faintly carved into the chitin of one of the forward sections of the centipede was a very familiar symbol – a circle with an archaic Ikosian pictogram for 'heart' inside of it. It wasn't the official symbol used by the Esoteric Order of the Celestial Dragon, but it was one of the several 'secret' signs that their lower order cultists used to signal other members of their membership.

After inspecting the rest of the centipede parts and failing

to find anything else significant, Zorian let the eye dissolve and walked away. So his initial suspicion was right – this wasn't some shady deal coming back to haunt Rea and her family, it was connected to the invasion somehow. Admittedly, Zorian had no idea *how*, but he knew where he could find that out.

The Cult of the Dragon Below was going to get a lot more visits from Zorian in the coming days.



After that day, Zorian's daily schedule changed completely. Kirielle lost all interest in magic and no longer attended the lessons he had organized for her, and he decided to free some more time by dropping his membership in Taiven's group and skipping most of his classes. He spent most of this extra time planning and executing attacks on known members of the Cult of the Dragon Below, trying to find out what they did with Nochka. He attacked them incessantly, hitting two or more locations a day, and ruthlessly memory-probed every cultist he disabled in those excursions.

He learned some interesting things doing that. For instance, while Sudomir Kandrei, the mayor of Knyazov Dveri, was indeed a member of the cult, he was a very independent-minded one... to the point that the cult was very annoyed with him. They seemed to have no idea he was killing soul mages around his town, nor did he have any links to the Ibasans as far as they knew – the man promised to give his flocks of iron beaks and hordes of winter wolves to the *Cult of the Dragon Below*, not to the invaders as a whole. Zorian supposed he might be in contact with the Ibasans on his own initiative, but it was equally possible that his soul mage killing practices were his own thing. What he hoped to accomplish with that, Zorian could only guess.

He also found some emergency resource caches that the Cult scattered around the city, its underworld, and surrounding villages. They looked very... steal-able. He made himself a note – a real written note, seeing as how he could now effectively take a notebook with him to the next restart – to search through those in some future restart for anything interesting or easy to sell for some quick cash.

When it came to locating Nochka, however, his successes had been underwhelming. He managed to track down the group that kidnapped her, but they had simply been following orders and had long since handed her off to another group. He then tracked down *that* group too, but they no longer had her either and also didn't know who had her now. He had dived deeply and aggressively into their memories, shattering their minds beyond repair, but to no avail – the man they handed Nochka to was a total unknown to them, other than being a high ranking member of the cult, and they had absolutely no idea where she might have ended up in.

Truthfully, Zorian had already suspected that kidnapping Nochka had been the whole point of the attack on the Sashal family, so his findings weren't a huge surprise. The fact that the order had come from the very top of the cult indicated they considered it to be of critical importance. They also told both groups that Nochka had to be delivered alive and unharmed to the transfer point, forbidding abuse under the pain of death, which was also fairly strange. Why? Why did they want Nochka so badly, and why was her continued health so important?

He suspected the answer was something in line with 'she's their sacrifice to the primordial to wake him up'. Demon summoning often involved ritual killings, so it wouldn't surprise him much if unbinding a primordial required the same. Still, why Nochka in particular? Because she was a shifter? The cultists did refer to the primordial as – among other names – He of the Flowing Flesh,

which could indicate an ability to change its physical form. There were other shifters in the city, though. Other *cat* shifters, even.

He didn't think he could get to the bottom of this by the end of the restart. If he had another week, maybe, but the restart was near its end and the Cult of the Dragon Below was getting more paranoid in the face of his constant assaults on them – they'd already tried to set up an ambush for him the last time he tried to attack a location, and only his ability to read people's surface thoughts kept him from stumbling into it and getting himself killed. He wasn't going to get much from them in the two days he had left before the summer festival.

Although, as horrible as Nochka's kidnapping was, it could prove to actually be a huge opportunity for him, so long as it happened predictably in every restart. If he could place some kind of tracker on Nochka, she could lead him to the highest echelons of the Cult of Dragon, those who had stayed well hidden from him up until now. Also, if she really was intended as a sacrifice like he suspected, she could lead him to the place where the cult intended to perform their unbinding ritual, which could be a key to a lot of mysteries surrounding the Cult's actions - perhaps even the time loop itself.

He would have to wait and see how events would play out in the next restart.



"Can we talk?"

Zorian looked away from the novel he was reading and glanced towards Kirielle, who was currently standing on the doorway, nervously gripping one of the support beams. Strange. Kirielle had been very subdued and asocial ever since Nochka had disappeared, rarely ever bothering him anymore, so her approaching him like this was quite unexpected.

"Sure," he agreed easily. He wasn't doing anything important at the moment, anyway. He was supposed to be organizing his notebooks so he could store the latest blueprints in his mind, but he just didn't feel like doing that at the moment and was instead procrastinating with some light reading. He could spare some time for his little sister. "What is it?"

She ran up to him and, before he could tell her to stop, hurled herself on top of him. As he was currently lying on his bed, she ended up basically re-enacting what had long become a *very* familiar scene to Zorian.

'Damn it, Kiri, I get enough of that crap at the beginning of each loop!' thought Zorian, but refrained from actually saying it out loud. Kirielle was already shaken up, no need to snap at her when she finally decided to open up a little.

"Where are your shoes?" he asked instead. "Don't tell me you've been walking around the house bare-footed again?"

Kirielle glanced at her feet and gave him a guilty look. "Don't be like Mom, Zorian. It was only one time."

"You're doing it right now, too," Zorian pointed out.

"Okay, two times," she said, pouting.

He put a bookmark into his novel, laid it aside, pushed her off of him and rose in a sitting position. She immediately mimicked him, sitting on the end of his bed beside him. They sat like that in silence for a while, Kirielle dangling her bare feet over the floor and staring at her toes like they were the most fascinating thing in the world.

"I'm sorry," she finally said.

"What are you sorry for?" asked Zorian, surprised.

"For being difficult."

"Difficult?" asked Zorian incredulously. He peered into her mind for a moment and found her thinking about Mother. Ugh. Yeah, that did kind of sound like something their mother would

say. She never did like crying much. One of the few things she praised him for was that he rarely cried, even as a young child. "Kiri, you lost your friend. It's okay to be sad about that. You weren't being difficult *at all*."

"But you've been avoiding me all week," she mumbled.

"I wasn't avoiding you," he protested, aghast that she would even think that. "I was just... giving you some space to grieve in peace. You know? And besides, I was..."

She gave him a curious look when he didn't continue. "You were what?"

Should he tell her?

"I was trying to find Nochka," he finally admitted.

Her eyes widened at this. "You were... Is that... you should have told me!"

"I didn't want to get your hopes up," Zorian said.

"I was hoping anyway," she said, gripping the sheets tightly in her little fists.

He put an arm around her shoulder and pulled her into an embrace. She was still tense, but gradually relaxed after a while and returned his hug.

"I didn't find her," he admitted after a while.

"Well, obviously," she said, as if it was the most self-evident thing ever. "But you tried. You knew you probably weren't going to find her, and you still went out and searched for her. You didn't cry and mope around the house all day like I did."

"Kiri, you're nine," Zorian sighed. "What else could you have done? You're being way too hard on yourself."

She didn't say anything to that. Eventually he decided to just spend some time playing cards with her and praising her drawings. Which did cheer her up in the end, so he chalked that up as one of his better ideas. One of these days, once he mastered the alteration spell he was using to transfer notes into subsequent restarts

sufficiently, he should gather some of her artwork into an art book of some sort and copy it into the next restart. Showing her the drawings she herself had made in previous restarts was bound to produce some amusing reactions.



Later that evening, Zorian decided he had given Kael enough time to wrap up his last minute experiments and went down into the basement to retrieve the last of the morlock's promised notebooks. The door was unlocked, so Zorian simply walked in and closed them behind him.

As the door clicked shut, Zorian felt the sounds of the house above them disappear, the privacy portion of the wards placed on the basement engaging and sound-proofing the room. Among many other things. The privacy measures were apparently a standard part of the warding package the academy used to secure their workshops, and thus got added automatically to Imaya's basement when Kael had requested they turn it into a proper alchemical workshop... something that was very convenient in moments like these, since it meant that Zorian didn't have to spend hours securing the room every time he wanted to talk to Kael about some sensitive subject.

"You done yet?" Zorian asked the other boy. Kael ignored him for a moment, staring at some passage in the book in front of him, but then shook his head and pushed it away from him, massaging his eyes.

"Yes, I'm done," he said. He pointed at the notebook placed on top of a large stack of books. "The notebook is there. Everything is ready on your end?"

"Mostly," Zorian said. "I still have to write down some stuff I found out today."

Kael raised an eyebrow at him. "I thought you said you were taking a break from the cult today?"

"I did," Zorian said. "Doesn't mean I did absolutely *nothing*, though."

"Oh?"

"Basically, I was thinking about warding, and how the upper level cultists all lived in warded houses that were a pain to break into and was thinking of how to speed the process up. And then I remembered that there is not only already a type of tool to do that present on the black market, I actually know where to find one for free. The aranea had stolen a ward scanner from one of the invaders a while before the start of the time loop, and the device was surely still in the destroyed colony."

"You said you don't like going there," Kael noted.

"I don't," Zorian sighed. "The place is... it has too many bad memories. And the corpses of the aranea are literally scattered all over the place, so it's hard to go there and not be reminded of that whole fiasco that saw them destroyed."

"I still think they were somehow ejected from the time loop rather than soul-killed," Kael said. "I agree with what other people told you – souls are indestructible. There has got to be a trick there."

"Yes, well, time travel is supposed to be impossible too," Zorian pointed out. "Though I'll admit that I'm hoping you're right. Never mind that for the moment, the point is that I went there to find the ward scanner... and I couldn't find it."

"So?" Kael asked.

"So, that means that either somebody already took it or that there is some secret part of the aranean complex that I'm unaware of. And frankly, I think it's the latter. I mean, once I thought about it a little, the sheer emptiness of the aranean settlement was very suspicious... The Cyorian web was very wealthy and surely had

a sizeable treasury. The matriarch often implied they have some kind of storage full of trade items and such. But I never saw anything like that when I checked the settlement out earlier, probably because I was very uncomfortable there and in a hurry to leave."

"You think there is something important there?"

"Time loop related? No, probably not," Zorian admitted. "But I need every advantage over Red Robe I can get, and there could be a lot of useful stuff there. Who knows what the aranea have squirrelled away over the years?"

"True," Kael agreed, rising from his seat and popping his spine. "Well, I'm tired. I think I'll go to sleep now. Is there anything else we need to talk about?"

"There's nothing pressing I can think of," Zorian said, shaking his head.

"I see. Just so you know, I'll be taking Kana with me on a trip to a nearby village on the day of the summer festival. I don't really want to be in Cyoria when the invasion comes, and I'm even less enthused about Kana being caught up in the invasion."

"I understand."

"I'm glad. If you want, I can take Kirielle with me," said Kael. "I know you've been agonizing about what to do with her for a while now."

"Yeah," agreed Zorian. "I don't want to leave her alone for the invasion, but at the same time I need to be able to move freely if I am to investigate what's happening with the invasion after all these changes. You think she'll agree to go with you?"

"I don't know, that's up to you," Kael shrugged. "All I can do is make an offer."

"Fine, fine, I'll talk to her," Zorian sighed. "That'll be a lovely talk, I can already tell."

"Notify me what you decided by tomorrow evening," said Kael.

And just like that, the restart was already almost done. Tomorrow he would see how the invasion of the city proceeded this time around.



Zorian looked over his things, trying to remember if he had forgotten something crucial in his rush to finish the preparations in time. He couldn't think of anything, but it would be just like him to forget something blindingly obvious while worrying about the irrelevant minutiae.

He still had several hours to burn until the start of the invasion, however, so he left the preparations alone for a now and left his room to find some quick diversion. Remembering that Imaya kept a whole miniature library of exotic works in her house, he set off to browse its shelves in search of a good time waster. He found Imaya already there, though, staring at her collection with a faraway look.

"Miss Kuroshka?" he asked worriedly. He was getting some worrying feelings from her with his empathy. "Are you alright?"

"Hm?" she mumbled, before her brain rebooted again and she truly focused on his presence. "Oh, Zorian. How long have you been standing there?"

"I only just came here. Been looking for a book to pass the time with, but you looked..."

"Don't worry," she sighed. "I'm just disturbed by the sudden quiet in the house. It looks so... lonely."

"Huh. I thought you'd be glad to have some peace and quiet for a change," Zorian said.

She snorted. "I think you're projecting your own attitude here a little," she said.

"Probably," admitted Zorian. He always did like to have some space from everybody else, and would have probably welcomed

a situation like this in her place. "But Kael and the girls are only gone for one day, so it's hardly a big deal. You could have gone with them, you know?"

"I know. But if there really is rioting during the festival, like you said there might be, I don't want to leave my house to the looters. It's... it's the only thing I have left."

"Oh..."

"Sorry, getting a little personal there," she smiled. "Is there any particular book you were looking f-"

There was a loud knock on the front door. Imaya and Zorian both raised their eyebrows at each other – apparently neither of the two knew who might be coming for a visit in this time of day. Most people were getting ready to attend the summer festival somewhere, either at some friend's house or some other venue. Imaya hurried towards the door to see who it was.

There was a brief pause where Imaya had a brief exchange with whoever was at the door, after which Imaya called out at Zorian to join them.

"Zorian, your date is here!" she yelled.

"My date?" he asked incredulously, more to himself than to anyone else. How could he have a date when he didn't-

She didn't.

But she totally did. As he came to the front door to see what Imaya was talking about, the frowning face of Akoja greeted him from the doorway.

"Hello, Ako," Zorian said blandly. "What a surprise to see you here. I suppose Ilsa had something to do with this?"

"I, yes," she fumbled, her composure breaking for a bit. "Miss Zileti told me to accompany you to the dance, since we are both without a partner."

Now wasn't that interesting. How the hell had Ilsa known that? True, Zorian had no date for the dance, and in fact had no

intention of attending the academy dance at all, but she shouldn't have been aware of that! Zorian had never told her anything to that effect, nor did he hint at that to anyone except... Imaya. Damn.

He gave his landlord a dirty look before refocusing back on Akoja. This was not part of the plan. He was supposed to roam around the city, observing the invaders in action and noting the changes to their tactics as a result of the various changes arising from the destruction of the aranea and that unfortunate mercenary band he'd hired to participate in the ambush.

Sometimes he hated his empathy. Without it, he would never have known just how much this meant for Akoja and how hard blowing her off to do his own thing would hit her.

"We still have several hours before we have to be at the dance hall. Come inside and wait with Imaya for a bit while I run some urgent errands in the city," he said.

"What?" she stammered, confused, as Zorian squeezed past her through the door and began walking into the city. "Wait, you can't just--"

Zorian quickly cast the teleport spell and let the city's teleport beacon draw him into Cyoria's teleport access point. He had lots of work to do and only so much time to execute it.



"What were you in such a hurry for, earlier?" Akoja asked as they slowly made their way towards the academy. She was surprisingly calm and polite, all things considered. Zorian had thought she'd be more annoyed at him because of his 'emergency exit' earlier.

"I had something already arranged before you arrived. I had to take care of some things when you came knocking at Imaya's door," Zorian said. "Cancel some things and adjust others."

Specifically, he was placing marker stones in various parts of the city to make scrying easier. Watching the invasion forces move through the city was not quite the same as ambushing isolated battlegroups and rooting through their minds, but at least it was something.

Maybe it was better this way. His original plan was kind of ambitious. Possibly *too* ambitious...

As they talked, Akoja told him a little about how the rest of his classmates handled the changes to the restart. It was mostly just idle chat, though it did remind him that he hadn't paid much attention to his class in this restart. There was just so much to do in this particular restart that interaction with his classmates sort of fell by the wayside. Considering that one of his motivations for coming back to Cyoria had been to see and talk to them again, that was something that should probably be remedied in the near future.

The night proceeded far more smoothly than the last one where he'd had Akoja as his date – she seemed to have far more respect and concern for his wishes this time around, though Zorian couldn't for the life of him figure out why. In some ways he had actually been a bigger jerk now than he had back then. Regardless, once the flares started hitting the city, he snuck away from her and started scrying the city for information.

The initial barrage of artillery spells was different this time around. While the old artillery barrage used by the invaders specifically targeted critical buildings whose destruction was calculated to send the city into chaos and cripple its ability to organize a defense, the new barrage was... uninspired. Oh, they still targeted the central police station, the city hall, and other obvious targets, but things like backup government buildings and armories were left intact. In fact, a lot of the flares seem to have been aimed completely at random, demolishing unremarkable clusters of houses

and civilian apartments – something that would admittedly greatly increase the number of deaths in the invasion, but was of questionable strategic benefit. Bizarrely, every single temple in the city was the target of at least one flare – Zorian had no idea what the invaders were trying to accomplish there, and it definitely wasn't something they did in their previous invasion plan.

The fights around the city were far fiercer than they had been in Zorian's previous restarts. Partly it was due to the defenders being in a lot better shape this time around, courtesy of the invasion's poor choice of targets for their initial strike, but there was more to it than that. The invasion forces seemed a lot less coordinated than he remembered them being. They moved a lot less purposefully through the city and often blew off their apparent goals to rampage through the undefended civilian neighborhoods. That happened sometimes in the past as well, but never in such high numbers.

As far as the initial attack on the academy went, the invaders chose their actions there just as poorly as they did elsewhere. The new barrage targeted the academy building directly instead of aiming for the less well defended dormitories and support buildings like the old barrage did. Consequently, the flares simply splashed harmlessly off the heavy wards protecting the main complex, doing minimal damage. With no need to render aid and run damage control in the peripheral part of the academy, the teachers were free to keep their forces concentrated and organize the evacuation of the student body and other non-combatant employees much more competently than they had before.

Funny, he originally thought the academy was massively incompetent for leading the students into massive underground death traps, especially since that involved going over vast swathes of open ground where they would be completely exposed. They didn't look so dumb right now. The evacuation went off without

a single problem, and no one attacked them when they were shoved inside the shelters.

Zorian was pretty sure at this point that he was looking at what the invasion was really like – what it would look like had Red Robe never given them any help. When he really thought about it, most of their ‘mistakes’ could be chalked up to being far less well informed and lacking the ability to bypass every ward and defense they encounter because they’ve been either keyed into them or knew how to counter it quickly.

It would appear that Red Robe really did abandon the invaders in this restart, right down to the very end. Was this a one-time thing or did Red Robe suddenly decide not to meddle in the invasion anymore?

His musings were interrupted by Ilsa coming to the shelter and demanding that every combat-capable student come with her to defend the academy. Thanks to him participating in monster hunts with Taiven’s group, that included him as well, so he got up from his spot on the floor and joined the group of students following her outside. There, he saw what had gotten Ilsa so concerned that she was recruiting students as defenders – the invaders were massing just outside the academy wards, preparing for an all-out assault. Entire regiments of war trolls, winter wolves and skeletons were present there, supported by their mage handlers and thick flocks of razor beaks. More unusually, there were a couple of flying drakes mixed in among the deadly corvids, and two bulky, elephant-sized lizards stalked in front of the miniature army.

“Thunder lizards,” Ilsa said distastefully from beside him. “Immensely tough and very destructive. They can breathe arcs of electricity in a straight line in front of them, so try not to fight them from the front if you are forced to engage them at all.”

Lovely. He never saw those in any previous restarts. Maybe this was something they never felt like committing to the battle-

field because they never felt they needed them?

But the time for considering such things was over. Although clearly not fully assembled for attack, the commander of the monstrous horde urged his forces to charge ahead. Maybe he felt that waiting for the rest of the forces would be a bad move since the academy defenders were busily fortifying their positions, or maybe he was just impatient. Either way, they surged ahead, thunder lizards leading the charge.

Zorian knew he could offer very little by simply pouring some more offensive spells into the attacking horde along with the rest of the defenders, but he had a better idea anyway. Focusing on the two thunder lizards, he felt their simplistic minds and was overjoyed to find out that they were far less magically resistant than he had feared. He suspected that might be the case – the invaders were probably controlling those things with mind magic to begin with, so it would only make sense that they were not all that resistant to it. Regardless, this meant he could manipulate them. Not to the extent of directing them like puppets, but enough to negate their attacks.

Sure enough, when the lizards started approaching the makeshift barricades that the teachers had made out of the ground via alteration spells, the two lizards opened their toothy mouths and tried to blow up the barricades with their thunder attack. Zorian quickly seized control of their movements and made them angle their heads towards one another, their thunder attacks colliding with each other's bodies. A surge of anger flooded the minds of the two thunder lizards, and they halted their charge in favor of roaring at each other, too dumb to realize their actions were caused by outside influence. Zorian seized on this opportunity, amplifying their wrath and urging them to fight each other, and the two of them promptly collided with each other and began fighting to the death.

To their credit, the rest of the invading forces simply flowed around the two battling behemoths, unconcerned with their failure. The battle was joined.



Zorian stared at the battle site full of corpses, more than a little bit dazed. He had been in a fair amount of battles ever since he'd gotten pulled into the time loop, but nothing quite like this. The fight had quickly turned chaotic once the two forces seriously started engaging one another, and even now that it was over Zorian still wasn't sure what exactly happened there.

They won in the end, repulsing the attackers – the mages decided to flee when enough of their monster minions got killed – but they lost far more people in the attack than Zorian had thought they would. Zorian himself was surrounded by a pack of winter wolves at one point and only survived thanks to no less than five blasting rods he had smuggled into the dance hall with him. Well, that and Kyron's timely arrival with reinforcements to drive the attackers back.

He jumped in fright when someone's heavy hand clasped his shoulder suddenly, almost blowing their head off with a reflexive piercer before he realized it was just Kyron.

"You're the one that was messing with the heavy-hitter monsters during the whole fight, aren't you?" his combat teacher asked.

"Yeah," Zorian shrugged. No need to keep it a secret this close to the end. "I felt that was the most effective way of contributing to the battle that I was capable of."

"Well, that flying drake would have roasted poor Nora alive if you hadn't made it plow into the ground suddenly, so thanks for that. Though we're really going to have to talk about how you learned how to do that and what exactly your limits are..."

"Ha," Zorian snorted. "It's far too late for that, I'm afraid."

"Oh?" Kyron asked, a mixture of warning and curiosity in his voice.

"Yes," Zorian confirmed. He consulted his watch to see what time it was. It was 2 hours and 39 minutes after midnight. "I'm afraid this loop is just about to end."

Kyron stared at him blankly for a few seconds before opening his mouth to say something. Before he could utter a single word, though, everything went black and Zorian woke up back in Cirin, ready to start this month anew.

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Repetition is the
mother of learning,
the father of action,
which makes it
the architect of
achievement.



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