

Domagoj Kurmaic

MOTHER OF LEARNING

Arc III - Part 4

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ILLUSORY

Standing on the roof of one of the academy buildings, the two groups stared at one another without speaking. The situation had already been tense, and Jornak's threats only made it more uneasy and unstable. Zorian suspected that if one of them made a single suspicious move, the other side would attack and the whole meeting would instantly degenerate into violence.

Probably the only reason that hadn't happened thus far was that both sides realized they couldn't meaningfully hurt the other. They had picked this place for a reason. It was too exposed, too close to powerful mages standing watch, and too heavily protected by a warding scheme that neither side was keyed in on. If a battle were to start, it would be hard to deal a finishing blow and decide anything. Even if one side gained the upper hand in the fighting, there was no way for them keep their opponents from simply running away. They would just be revealing their trump cards and making outside observers even more aware of the secret war being waged all around them.

Zorian watched the stone token in Jornak's hand while considering his threats in his head.

The wraith bombs were kind of expected, though Zorian did not really think they would be using them outside of Cyoria. He

thought they were intended to be used as support for the invasion itself, not as a way to blackmail them into a truce. As for the threat of an assassination campaign that could start another war... well, Zorian wasn't sure he entirely believed that. How would Jornak actually test this? Zach never mentioned any sudden wars erupting in the time loop, and he surely would have if he witnessed any. In Zorian's opinion, Jornak was just making an educated guess, based on the various information he gathered in the time loop, and it was an open question what would really happen if he were to kill a bunch of really important people in quick succession.

Then again, during that fateful incident where Quatach-Ichl tried to mutilate Zach's soul and brought Zorian into the time loop, Zach ended up in a coma for quite a few restarts... and it was very likely that Zorian spend a number of restarts in a similar state as well. Perhaps it was during some of these 'lost restarts' that Jornak tested such large-scale schemes for viability...

And then there was Oganj – the infamous dragon mage that had killed an entire army and one of the Immortal Eleven sent to deal with him, the terrifying dragon that had menaced northern Altazia for centuries now. Zorian was a little mystified why Jornak was invoking his name so smugly. Sure, Oganj was an immensely powerful opponent, even by dragon standards... but hadn't Zach already killed him once? He distinctly remembered Zach going through a great number of short restarts in order to–

Hmm.

He glanced at Zach again. His friend did not seem as calm about Oganj's involvement as Zorian thought he would be.

[What am I missing here?] Zorian asked Zach, sending him a telepathic message. [Didn't you already prove you can best Oganj?]

[I'm not even sure I could repeat that feat inside the time loop, let alone here in the outside world,] Zach immediately sent back.

[Are you saying you winning was a fluke?] Zorian asked, sur-

prised.

[It wasn't a *fluke*,] Zach responded, sounding faintly outraged in his thoughts. [I beat Oganj fair and square. However, I kind of brute forced things and took advantage of the fact I could learn from our fights and Oganj couldn't. Unless I caught him off-guard, unless I timed things just right, unless I knew what spells he usually uses and counters my moves with... I'm not sure I could beat him in a straight fight.]

Huh... Zorian did not often hear this kind of admission from Zach. If there was anything that Zach was good at, it was a straight fight. Then again, his main advantage – his massive mana reserves – was not as big of a deal against a dragon as it was against human mages. All dragons had impossibly huge mana reserves by human standards.

[Is Oganj more powerful than Quatach-Ichl?] Zorian asked.

[Not even close,] Zach said immediately. [He doesn't have the huge variety of spells that Quatach-Ichl does, his body is too large to teleport around easily, and if you kill his body, he will actually die. The old bag of bones is still the toughest opponent I ever faced. Still, Oganj is incredibly powerful. Even worse... he has students.]

[Students?] Zorian asked curiously. [As in, dragon ones?]

[What else?] Zach responded. [Even though dragons are usually solitary, dragon mages had to find a way to pass on their skills to a new generation. Otherwise, their traditions would never spread and would eventually die out. For that reason, all dragon mages occasionally take a young dragon as a student to pass on their teachings. Usually a dragon mage will only have one student at any particular time, but Oganj is more powerful and confident than most dragon mages. He currently has two students.]

Crap...

[Tree dragon mages...] he lamented. [Even if the two students

were mere beginners, this is still bad news.]

Three dragons working together was already a cause for panic for most people – having them all be dragon mages as well made a terrifying group that would give even Zach and Zorian pause.

"Are you done talking to each other?" Jornak suddenly asked. "Just so you know, when I say I can get Oganj and his group work with me, I don't just mean his two students. You see, Oganj has been making connections with other dragon mages, and even regular dragons. You may not know this, but human-dragon relations have been steadily becoming worse lately, what with Eldemar and other northern countries constantly pushing deeper into the wilderness with their colonists. As solitary as they are, dragons are still intelligent beings and they can see where this is going. Some of them have been wondering if they should temporarily band together to halt or at least divert human advances, and Oganj is something of a logical figure to rally around in that case. If he moves against Eldemar, there could be as many as 20, or even 30 dragons following behind him."

Zorian couldn't help but twitch at the explanation. His first instinct was to dismiss Jornak's claims are pure fiction, but... there were precedents for large-scale dragon attacks happening. Usually when humans attacked dragon nesting grounds or killed too many dragons in too short of a time, but still.

And 30 dragons? That would take an entire army to stop... except that an army was a lot less mobile than a group of 30 dragons, which meant Oganj's group could advance practically unchallenged through Eldemar's territory, laying waste to all they encountered and simply fleeing whenever they were confronted with a force big enough to deal real damage. It would take an entire group of ultra-powerful mages to counter such a flight of dragons, and assembling such a group would take months. If Eldemar was simultaneously suffering from assassinations of its prominent lead-

ers and the entire continent was tethering on the brink of another war... it was questionable whether it would be assembled at all.

It was interesting, though. Some dragons had friendly relations with humans, but Oganj wasn't one of them. Considering his antagonistic past with humanity, it couldn't have been easy to convince him to work with Jornak. Still, Zach was adamant that the stone token in Jornak's hands was Oganj's calling card and was genuine. That meant he probably did reach some kind of agreement with the old dragon mage.

It was becoming apparent that, while Zach and Zorian had largely focused on accumulation of personal power and skills, Jornak had spent most of his time trying to investigate the various states and organizations in their surroundings in order to figure out how to manipulate them. Probably a smart decision, considering he wanted to enact some kind of grand change in the entire continent and possibly create his own version of Ikosian Empire with him on top. Personal power alone couldn't do that.

Thinking on it some more, it was likely that Jornak's focus on recruiting others to help him originated from pure necessity. If he had started off as a temporary looper, like Zorian suspected, it made sense that he was focused on trying to leverage people around him to accomplish his goals. He was not a master mage, and he'd had a limited amount of time to work with, his time had been sharply limited, so slowly training to become good enough to accomplish things himself had not been a possible option.

"You know, nothing you said really addresses my question from earlier," Zorian pointed out to Jornak. "Delaying the conflict until the summer festival does not benefit us in any way. You and Silverlake will die if you can't release the primordial before the deadline, and you can only make an attempt on the day of the summer festival. So it makes sense that you want to postpone the conflict until then. However, Zach and me have every reason to

push things and try to resolve things sooner. Nothing you said changes that. In the end, all you did was name a bunch of threats and tried to blackmail us into agreeing to a terrible deal."

"Yes, that's entirely true," Jornak said calmly, nodding slightly at him in agreement. "The truth is I don't think I can keep the conflict manageable at the rate it is going. It's only been a few days, but we're already raising red flags everywhere. At this rate, we're going to end up dragging the Eldemarian government into it whether we want to or not. Not even the local mage guild, subverted as it is, can fully suppress what is happening. And if that happens, then the release of the primordial becomes all but impossible to pull off."

"You're losing the fight and getting desperate," Zach said.

"I wouldn't phrase it that way," Jornak said carefully. "But it is definitely true that I, and Silverlake here, are not in a good position. We made a deal with the primordial to release it or die, and we can't weasel out of it. If we can't release Panaxeth from his prison by the end of the month, everything else will become pointless. However, should everything really fall apart that severely, why wouldn't I drag you all down along with me? If you drive me into a corner like that, I will obviously turn to destructive and extreme methods."

"Zorian is right. This is just brazen blackmail," Zach said flatly, frowning at the man in front of him.

"I'm just explaining my logic," Jornak said. "I think it makes perfect sense for me to escalate things if we continue down this path. In the current situation, Eldemar can do as they wish and focus on sorting out the situation in Cyoria at their leisure. Meanwhile, if I kick off another Splinter War, release hundreds of wraiths in all major cities, and get a group of dragons to lay waste to entire northern Eldemar... well, it just *might* give them more pressing matters to worry about. And a narrow chance to live is better than having no chance at all. Wouldn't you agree?"

Zach and Zorian said nothing to that.

"See, I think you're reasonable people," Jornak continued, undaunted by their silence and frosty glares. If anything, he grew more animated in his speech and mannerisms. "You didn't immediately run off to inform the Crown about what is happening. You spared the life of Veyers, even though he was clearly connected to me in some way. You came to this meeting to see what I have to say. Therefore, I think you're going to be reasonable about this. After all, even if you agree to this truce, you still have a high chance of stopping us in the end. Letting us delay the battle until the end of the month may be a little suboptimal for you, but it's not a catastrophe. If you push me too far, we both lose."

"If the sides were reversed, would you take your own deal?" Xvim suddenly asked, interrupting his explanation.

Jornak hesitated for a moment, mouth open, before his mouth snapped shut and he shook his head.

"Not a chance," he admitted.

Silverlake laughed at the admission, a sharp cackling laughter that somehow looked more appropriate on her old withered form than on her current young one.

"Then how can you call it being reasonable?" Xvim probed further.

"Because you are not me," Jornak said. "I wouldn't accept it because I wouldn't care about the death and destruction, so long as I win in the end. I accepted this as a price for what I want to do a long time ago. You four? I'm guessing you are far more reluctant to make that sacrifice."

He was... probably right about that. If it were just Zorian and Xvim making decisions, *maybe* they would have decided to cold-heartedly ignore the threats and continue pressuring Jornak and his group. Maybe. However, there was no way either Alanic or Zach would be fine with that. Especially Alanic, since he clearly cared a lot about Eldemar – not just the people, but the country

itself, as well.

For a while the scene was quiet, as Zorian and the rest of his group discussed the situation in front of them via telepathy. Jornak and his group were probably discussing something through magical means too, considering their body language and brief looks, though Zorian did not really know if they were using telepathy or something else.

Probably something else, as all three were under the mind blank spell.

It was a good thing they had decided not to bring Spear of Resolve with them, he mused. Her telepathic prowess would have been largely useless against the people in front of them and her skills at other forms of magic were relatively humble. She couldn't teleport away, or even just fly off into the distance. If a fight were to break out, she would have been a rock around their neck – unable to contribute to the battle, incapable of quickly retreating, yet important enough that Jornak and Quatach-Ichl would definitely want to see her dead.

No, it was best she stayed safe in the depths of her web for now.

"If we agree to this, how can we be sure you won't be here tomorrow to demand further concessions in exchange for not wrecking everything?" Zach finally asked.

"As we have already established, this truce is more in our favor than yours. Why would I risk things like that?" Jornak asked with a raised eyebrow. "In my opinion, *I'm* the one who should be worried. You have every incentive to agree to the truce and then dishonor it later. How can I be sure you won't just take advantage of the truce to build up your forces and dishonor it a few days later? I can't. All I can do is immediately make good of my threats in response."

Zorian clacked his tongue at the explanation. So this truce was

basically toothless and could fall apart at any moment if one side pushed more than the other can tolerate. And there would definitely be plenty of pushing and testing of waters, that much was clear – if any side saw a chance to gain an advantage by dishonoring the deal, they would do so in a heartbeat.

"Threat, threat, and more threats. Just so you know, if you come later to demand more from us, I will immediately attack you, consequences be damned," Zach told him darkly.

"Does that mean we have an agreement?" Jornak said with a self-satisfied smirk.

"Ha ha! Of course they're going to agree," Silverlake suddenly piped in, jumping up from her conjured chair and stretching in an exaggerated manner. She ignored Jornak's annoyed look and stepped forward with a grin. "They're all too touchy-feely to risk such devastation just to stop us a little earlier... but more importantly, they recently found out that Zach will have issues surviving this month. It sure would be nice if they could take a step back from all the fighting in order to figure out what to do about that..."

The atmosphere immediately got even more tense and gloomy. Zorian had always known that Silverlake wouldn't have informed him about Zach's contract purely on a whim, and now it seemed like one of the big reasons for it was to put pressure on them to agree to this truce. It was as Silverlake said – they needed time and resources to figure out what could be done about this, and it would be hard to focus on this if they were constantly fighting their enemies during this time, spending their time, money, and mana on getting an upper hand.

"How did you even find out about that?" Zach asked with a frown, directing his question at Jornak instead of Silverlake. Clearly he felt the lawyer was the source of the information. "I mean, even I didn't know I made a deal with the angels, so how...?"

"You did know," Jornak said, shaking his head. "The angels

didn't tell you who they were, but you are not *completely* stupid." Zach scowled at him but said nothing. "There are only so many powers capable of doing what they did. You eventually figured out who it could be and raided church archives to see if they had records of similar deals being made. They did. In fact, they had examples of past angelic contracts – many, many examples. Even if none of them were directly applicable to your situation, they still held a lot of clues for those who knew how to read them. You brought them to me, and we worked together to piece together the general nature of your contract. I don't dare claim I understand it completely, since I've never seen the actual contract and you can't directly talk about it, but I know enough."

Zorian wasn't surprised at this. Back when the angel they had summoned caused the contract to appear, he immediately noticed that the contract was written in very legal terms. More importantly, they were *modern*, familiar legal terms, the sort you would see in any sort of legal document in Eldemar. At first glance at least, the contract looked like something you might get if you visited a mundane lawyer in Cyoria and asked them to write up a contract for a business deal or something similar.

That meant the angels had lots of experience when it came to making these contracts. Zach shouldn't be the only person working under this kind of contract. There should be others. Perhaps many others, and not all of them could have a contract backed by divine magic. No matter how secretive the angels were, examples of past contracts would exist somewhere out there.

And with examples of past contracts in hand, some creativity when answering questions, and an actual lawyer to consult with... it probably wasn't impossible to figure out what is happening and how to convey it to others without tripping the angelic restrictions.

"You know," Silverlake began, "Panaxeth's escape does not necessarily have to be for real."

Zorian gave her a strange look.

"The contract we're under says we just have to let Panaxeth out of the seal and our job is done," she continued. "If the primordial is resealed immediately afterwards, even if we are the ones who do it, the contract will not punish us."

"That just shows how utterly confident Panaxeth is in being able to handle everything, including all of us combined, once it is out of the cage made by the gods," Zorian told her. "Don't tell me actually think you can seal it back in?"

"I'm not sure you know this, but the gods placed numerous contingencies on Panaxeth's prison, and on the prisons of all trapped primordials for that matter," Silverlake said. "The moment he gets out, Panaxeth will get seriously weakened. Even the primordial is not sure how badly the contingencies will hurt him. If Panaxeth was at the peak of his powers, I would obviously be a fool to try and fight him, but if he's weakened badly enough it is entirely possible. Hell, those cultists trying to take control of Panaxeth? Maybe they're not as dumb as we thought they are. They've overestimated their mind magic capabilities, yes, but if they had a master telepath and his hundreds of aranean friends—"

"No," Zorian told her.

"It was just a thought," Silverlake said easily, not arguing him over it. "An idle thought. I don't really think us mere mortals could seriously control an entity on the level of Panaxeth, but perhaps we might be able to muddle his thoughts and hinder him long enough to push him back into the seal. Wouldn't that be nice? Me and Red Robe... sorry, Jornak... I still can't believe that little shit lied to me about something so petty... and that I fell for it..."

Zorian gave her an annoyed look as she started muttering to herself again and she cackled at him in response. Some habits were hard to break, it seemed, even if she had suddenly regained her youth.

"Anyway, if you agree to this, then this whole conflict could be avoided. We get to weasel out of our contract and the primordial would still be sealed at the end of the month, which means that part of the angelic contract will be fulfilled, at least. We no longer have any reason to fight you or support the invasion. Happy ending for everyone!"

"I know I've been quiet throughout this entire meeting, but surely you didn't forget I'm standing right here, listening to you?" Quatach-Ichl asked her, raising his eyebrow at him. "This ending of yours certainly isn't happy for me. And if *I'm* not happy, *no one* is going to be happy."

Silverlake clacked her tongue before giving Jornak a look of distaste.

"I told you we shouldn't have invited him along," she told him loudly. "What good is he here, anyway?"

"Actually, that reminds me of something I've been wondering about for a while now," Zorian spoke up, butting in on their argument. "Namely, why is Quatach-Ichl going along with this?"

The ancient lich gave him a curious look. "What do you mean?"

"Shouldn't you *want* for Jornak to make good on his threats?" Zorian asked him. "Why are you here, helping him bring about this truce? Why not purposely sabotage the talks and let Jornak damage Eldemar as much as possible. That's what you're here for, no?"

"Ha," Quatach-Ichl said. "No, not exactly. I'm trying to push the continent into something more favorable for Ulquaan Ibas, not cause widespread chaos and uncertainty."

"Oh, right. I remember now. You're trying to install Falkrinea as the local hegemon," Zorian said loudly, pretending he was just loudly thinking. He made a couple of 'random' gestures with his hands, which he hoped would look completely incomprehensible

to everyone except Quatach-Ichl. It was something he learned while traveling through Xlotic with Zach and Neolu, and should be completely opaque to anyone who has never been there. "Still, weakening Eldemar and the surrounding countries can only help you in that regard."

"You seem to know a fair deal about me," Quatach-Ichl noted, giving him a searching look. "We must have interacted pretty heavily in the past. Interesting, considering we seem to essentially be natural enemies. Anyway, I don't think I agree with you on this. Let's just leave it at that. Besides, why are you trying to convince me that I should start another continental war right now? Shouldn't *that* be against *your* goals?"

"I was just curious," Zorian said, before falling silent.

Jornak and Silverlake gave them both suspicious looks, faintly aware that something more had been said between the lines of that conversation, before shrugging it off and continuing with the negotiation.

The meeting lasted for another hour, most of which was spent of making vague (and not-so-vague) threats towards one another, but eventually they reached an agreement of sorts.

There would be a truce. How long it would last, Zorian wasn't sure. He would be first to admit that he intended to dishonor it the moment he saw a good chance to do so. He was sure Jornak and Silverlake felt the same way. For the moment, though, open conflict between the two groups was put on hold.

After everyone left, the roof of the academy building remained dark and silent for a while before two people teleported on top again.

One was Zorian.

And the other was Quatach-Ichl.

"So," the ancient lich began. "What exactly did you invite me here for, Mister Kazinski?"

"I'm going to try and talk you into giving up on this invasion," Zorian told him bluntly.

Quatach-Ichl raised his eyebrow at him. "Continue," he told him calmly.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Zorian began, "but your current thoughts are that if the primordial is released and lays waste to our surroundings, the angels are eventually going to stop it before it can do too much damage. After all, you have seen the might of the angels personally, and you are certain they can do it. So unsealing Panaxeth would destroy Cyoria and deal a lot of damage to Eldemar, but it would have no real effect on Ulquaan Ibasia or even the Altazian continent as a whole..."

The ancient lich stared at him silently for a second.

"I'll repeat what I said earlier... you seem to know a fair deal about me. Curious. Very curious. I wonder just how much help you got out of my... other self. But that's a topic for later. Yes, that is pretty much how I see the situation. Am I wrong?"

"You are wrong, yes," Zorian said. "I have summoned an angel and spoke with him. It. Whatever it was."

He took out the cube out of his pocket and showed it to the lich. He hadn't had a chance to study the cube yet and deciphered its uses, but he hoped that Quatach-Ichl, being experienced as he was, would be able to recognize it as an angelic artifact anyway.

Quatach-Ichl leaned forward, silently studying the cube in Zorian's hands. He did not ask to hold it (not that Zorian would have given it to him), but eventually he leaned back and took a deep breath.

"It must have been a pretty high-ranking angel you spoke with," Quatach-Ichl said, sounding honestly a little impressed. "Then again, considering what kind of situation you are involved in, I supposed it's to be expected."

"The angel told me about the contingencies that Silverlake had

spoken about earlier. They aren't just some simple local effect, like a divine warding field or a stored spell," Zorian said, putting the cube back into his pocket. "They are security measures woven into the core of the world... and triggering them could have effects that would be *global* in scale. I'm not sure how far-reaching the effects would be, but there is absolutely no guarantee that Ulquaan Ibasa would not be affected."

Quatach-Ichl frowned at him slightly, not saying anything.

"Just as importantly," continued Zorian, "if the primordial is released into the world, the angels will be given free rein to descend into the material world and intervene directly to stop the primordial. At that point, they also intend to get rid of all the loose ends wandering around. Like a bunch of people that escape from the time loop into the real world or that one annoying lich that made the whole thing possible to begin with..."

"I see," Quatach-Ichl said calmly. "You're saying the angels will go after me if I help release the primordial."

"Yes," Zorian confirmed.

The lich stared at him intensely, as if trying to look into his soul to see if he was telling the truth. Zorian's posture remained relaxed and his eyes stared right back at the undead mage in front of him. He was too old and experienced to be unnerved by something as simple as that.

"I think you're exaggerating things," Quatach-Ichl finally said, looking away from him for a moment and thoughtfully tapping his finger against his leg. "Yes, there is certainly a danger of that happening, but angels are laboring under many restrictions. In any case, if I were that skittish about taking chances, I would not be where I am right now. A big part of why being a lich is so great is that you can take crazy risks without dying for good."

Zorian frowned. Truthfully, he did not *really* think he could convince Quatach-Ichl to just give up on the invasion and go

home... but he didn't expect the lich to dismiss the threat of angels so readily. Then again, he was right about liches like him being uniquely suited for taking risks. They had their own personal resurrection point. It was almost like being a time looper, in a way.

Oh well. It was worth a try.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Zorian said, shaking his head. He turned to leave.

"You intend to evacuate your loved ones to Koth, at the Taramatula Estate, right?" Quatach-Ichl suddenly asked him.

Zorian jolted into full alertness, spinning around to face the lich. He gave him a shocked, searching look.

"Don't look at me like that. Silverlake knows about it, so obviously me and that Jornak fellow also know," Quatach-Ichl told him bluntly. "Don't do it. Jornak has somehow managed to reverse-engineer my permanent gates within the time loop, the thieving wretch. Even as we speak, he is sending a simulacrum to Koth to build a gate there. If you dump all your people in Koth, they will not be safe – you'll just place them all in one spot so Jornak can conveniently capture them all in one fell swoop. Then he'll have a whole bunch of hostages to threaten you with."

"Why—" began Zorian.

"I don't like him," Quatach-Ichl said. "Besides, he's trying to become the overlord of the entire continent. While I want to say he's an arrogant idiot who bit off more than he can chew, the truth is that this time loop you all underwent is one hell of a boon. If he's right about the first emperor of Ikosia using the same method for his ascent to power, then I cannot afford to dismiss his ambitions as a mere delusion. I'd prefer to have him dead by the end of all this, even if that means you emerge victorious as a consequence. At least you and Mister Noveda have no political ambitions."

"And if that causes your own invasion to fail?" Zorian asked

curiously.

"You agreed to this truce partially because you know you still have a good chance to win, even if you take a handicap like that," the lich said. "I believe the same about my chances. We'll see each other on the battlefield, Mister Kazinski."

Before Zorian could say anything else, Quatach-Ichl was gone.

- break -

Not long after the end of the meeting, Zorian went to meet with Spear of Resolve. Part of that was to inform her of what had happened there – although it was decided she would not participate in the talks, she was still a crucial part of their forces and someone who knew about the time loop. Additionally, she and her aranea normally constantly pressured the invaders and their cranium rat allies, so it was important he told her about the truce as soon as possible.

However, if anyone from their group were to see them at the moment, they would be shocked at what they were seeing. Zorian and Spear of Resolve were not meeting each other in the dark tunnels beneath Cyoria – instead, they were walking through the Cyoria's main square in plain view of everyone. Throngs of people of all ages wandered around the place, laughing and talking and arguing, but none of them paid much attention to a teenager and a huge jumping spider walking beside him. Some of them glanced curiously at Spear of Resolve – it was clear they could see her – but then they just continued on their merry way, completely unconcerned by the giant spider wandering around the town square.

Some children running past them accidentally dropped a ball near her and she deftly stopped it with her long, hairy leg – those spider limbs were more dexterous than Zorian gave them credit for – and lightly sent it back to them. They awkwardly thanked her for returning the ball to them and then ran off while loudly arguing about something completely unrelated.

"This is an interesting experience," Spear of Resolve commented, watching them fade into the throng of people surrounding them. She was talking vocally this time, making use of a sound spell, rather than speaking to him telepathically. "Anyway, back to our current topic... no, I don't think there was anything else you could have done. You could have just refused the truce, of course, but I have no doubt our enemy would have done as he promised. Personally, I am glad that crisis has been temporarily averted."

"Why?" Zorian gave her a curious look. "None of the threats would really affect you and your web."

"The wraith bombs terrify me," Spear of Resolve confided. "I had the misfortune to meet one of those things once. They can pass through solid stone and they only have to brush against you to do serious damage. They aren't immune to mind magic, thankfully, but they are *highly* resistant to it. Having hundreds, or even thousands of those things prowling around through Cyoria's underworld would essentially guarantee our extinction."

"Ah," nodded Zorian. "Yes, that makes sense."

"Still, while I'm glad we delayed a disaster, that's all this is. A delay. Even if the truth holds, we still must figure out a way to counter his threats before the end of the month," Spear of Resolve continued. "I'm sure you realized this, but this man is guaranteed to use these things in the end, no matter what deal was struck."

A massive flock of pigeons suddenly flew overhead. Some of the birds flew low, speeding right past Zorian and other nearby people, narrowly swerving left and right to avoid hitting anything. People around them stopped and pointed, animatedly discussing the disruption, but Zorian and Spear of Resolve just kept walking.

Eventually, the two of them left the town square and walked into a nearby street. They entered into a nearby restaurant and decided to sit down for a while. Of course, the chairs were designed

for humans and not very convenient for Spear of Resolve. Thus, they called the staff and got them to place a stack of wooden boards on top of the seat, so that the aranea could stand on them and still be high enough to interact with the table (and Zorian) properly.

"So," Zorian then began. "How many aranea in your web know about the time loop, anyway?"

"Pretty much all of them," Spear of Resolve said, curiously tinkering with the plate, metal utensils, and glass placed in front of her.

Zorian sighed heavily. "Of course."

"Sorry," she told him. She didn't sound very sorry, in all honesty. "Word spreads around fast among us. Especially if it's something so strange like time travel. It was inevitable that it would become known by everyone by now."

"What if you asked them to subject themselves to memory modification?" Zorian asked.

Spear of Resolve was silent for a while.

"It would be... difficult," she eventually said.

"But possible?" Zorian asked hopefully.

"Potentially possible," she admitted reluctantly. "There have been events where the entire web agreed to have memories of a certain incident erased for this or that reason. It is always a controversial decision, however. I would have to burn through a lot of social capital to make it happen. And for what? As things currently stand, our sacrifice will not save your friend. What about that unkillable lich that you never really managed to kill? What about Xvim and Alanic? What about *you*? I don't think it's fair to ask this of us."

"I've talked to Xvim and Alanic," Zorian said. "They are... not entirely opposed to losing some of their memory in the end. I think they could be convinced to go along with it in the end."

"That still leave the lich and you as the huge, looming issues," the matriarch remarked.

"Yes, that's true," Zorian agreed. "Incidentally, what about me? Do you think—"

"No," Spear of Resolve immediately said. "I've seen your thoughts. You are practically defined by this experience of being stuck in the time loop. You spent as much time inside as you did out of it. In my opinion, no one can erase your knowledge of the time loop without metaphorically taking a sledgehammer to your mind. I really wouldn't recommend it."

"I see," Zorian said quietly. Part of him was relieved to hear that. He really didn't like the idea of losing such a massive chunk of his memories for any reason.

But how can they save Zach, then? Was Panaxeth really right in saying that one of them would have to die?

He was far more selfish than Zach, he realized. Zach had already decided to die if it means he has to kill Zorian in order to live. If the situation was reversed, Zorian wasn't sure he could accept his own approaching death so easily.

He was quiet for a few seconds, lost in thought, before shaking his head and focusing on Spear of Resolve again. She was quietly studying him with her large, pitch black eyes, still standing on the stack of wooden boards that the staff of the restaurant placed on her chair.

The nearby waitress asked her if she wanted something to drink, undaunted by the fact she was talking to a giant spider, but the matriarch politely refused her.

"Anyway," Zorian suddenly said, sweeping his hand around them. "What do you think about all of this?"

"What, the city and the restaurant?" Spear of Resolve asked. Zorian nodded. "It's nice. Novel."

"Nothing jumps out of you?" he asked with interest.

"You mean, other than the fact people around us are ridiculously accepting of me?" the matriarch asked rhetorically. "Well, there are a few minor details here and there. The vibrations I'm sensing through my feet do not quite match up with what I'm used to, and it's sometimes obvious that the conversations in the background are pure gibberish if you listen to them closely, but otherwise it all looks very convincing."

"Recreating exotic senses like your tremor sense is a pain in the ass," Zorian admitted. "I did my best, but I'm not surprised I didn't quite succeed."

"I'm honestly shocked that you managed to make all this so convincing to my aranean senses," the matriarch said. "It's not just a matter of mind magic skill – you must have a very firm grasp of our perspective of seeing the world to succeed at this. I'm guessing you read many, many aranean minds inside the time loop."

"I actually shapeshifted into an aranea a bunch of times, just to really see what it was like," Zorian said.

"Ah. Maybe I should try that and be a human for a day," Spear of Resolve mused. "I'm betting it would be an unforgettable experience. Anyway, why don't we stop here for today?"

"Fine," Zorian agreed. "Truthfully, I'm starting to get a little mentally tired from maintaining this for so long."

Without warning, the world around them blurred and melted, like it was falling apart at the seams. In only a few moments, the two of them found themselves sitting on the cold stony floor of a small cavern in Cyoria's underground.

The city and the people in it were gone, like they never existed.

Indeed, that was what happened. Everything they saw had literally happened all in their heads. It was nothing but a mental illusion that Zorian had summoned around them.

"It's still going to need some work if you really want to use it in the way you hope to," Spear of Resolve remarked.

"I know," Zorian agreed. "I'm going to need your help with this."

"That won't be a problem," the matriarch said. "Maybe I'm not powerful enough to directly confront our enemies, but this is exactly my sort of problem. I assure you, I am *very* good at mind magic."

They talked for a few more minutes before Zorian decided it was time to go home for the day. It had been a long day and he had to sleep on things before he could consider how to go forward.

"One moment, please," the matriarch said before he could leave. "I understand the logic regarding my vulnerability to enemy action and I agree it is wisest for me to stay in the safety of our settlement for now... but I am a little unsatisfied with a current state of communication. No offense, but I'm not entirely comfortable being totally reliant on you for all contact between us."

"So...?" Zorian asked curiously.

"So I decided to assign you a liaison," she said.

"A liaison?" Zorian repeated. "I... guess that's fine, yes."

"Great. I'll go call her right now. I'm sure you'll get along perfectly," Spear of Resolve said with a trace of humor in her voice.

Why...?

Before he could say anything, a smallish aranea excitedly skittered into the room, jumped right next to him and then excitedly started circling around him, thoroughly checking him out.

[Hi, hi!] A cheerful, bubbly voice suddenly sounded in his mind. [I'm Enthusiastic Seeker of Novelty, but you can just call be Novelty! Do you want to be my friend?]

BENEATH THE SURFACE

After the two groups of time travelers agreed to the shaky truce, the daily fighting stopped and the situation in Cyoria stabilized. Zach and Zorian no longer sent their simulacrums to raid invader bases and assassinate their leaders, and the invaders seemed to have no interest in testing their luck with them. Zorian had been worried that their enemies would try to strike at them indirectly, perhaps by sending the law enforcement after them or by attacking targets technically unrelated to them, but fortunately, they did no such thing.

Not that the two groups were entirely ignoring each other just because they weren't fighting, of course. Zach and Zorian were constantly monitoring invader movements, trying to figure what they were doing and what their secrets were. Where they had placed all those wraith bombs Red Robe was threatening them with, for instance. Red Robe and his allies were similarly spying on them in return. Although both groups were clearly aware of each other's surveillance, there was an unspoken agreement that this was perfectly acceptable and the truce continued.

Even though this was just calm before the storm, Zorian found himself kind of enjoying it. Too many things had happened recently, barely days apart from each other, and he had never really

had time to sit down and process it all properly. They'd failed to get their group physically out of the time loop, and he ended up killing his old self after entering the real world. Zach had almost died at the start of the month, and he was certain to die at the end of it if they couldn't find a solution to the angelic contract he was working under. He doubted he would figure out something insightful about that just because he spent a few days mulling things over, but it would make him feel a little better, at least.

Of course, he couldn't really justify wasting a time right now, truce or no truce. Things still needed to be done, preparations made. Thus, he decided to simply spend more time in his workshop, building up his arsenal of bombs, golems, and magical devices. Something that was both useful and relaxing. He had actually wanted to set aside more time for magical artifice for a while now, but the frantic pace of their activities in these past few days made that all but impossible. Just building enough simulacrum bodies and equipping them for the daily skirmishes was challenging enough.

In any case, Zorian was currently sitting in his workshop – a spacious room in the Noveda Mansion that Zach had generously donated for his purposes – and staring at a shiny metal plate in his hands, considering things. The large wooden table in front of him was an absolute mess of tools, half-processed materials, technical reference books, and hastily drawn blueprints that probably only made sense to him and no one else. The rest of the room was not much better. Tall, dangerous looking golems stood lined up next to one of the walls, some of them with gaping holes in their chests, still missing critical components before they could be completed. A stack of small metal cylinders densely covered in glowing lines and magical glyphs lay seemingly forgotten in one of the corners.

Zorian glanced at the half-finished construction on the table in front of him before returning his attention to the metal plates

in his hand. The device he was building was still barely formed, but a perceptive onlooker would be able to puzzle out that it was a fairly large and very complicated cube. The center of it consisted of several rare and expensive crystals, which was then surrounded by a plethora of gears and interlocking pieces of metal, wood, and stone. Most of it was already done, just waiting for him to put it all together and cast the necessary spells, but he still had to make the outer chassis of the cube.

[What are you making?] a cheery, excitable voice suddenly sounded in his mind.

Zorian glanced at Novelty, who was currently wandering around the room and inspecting everything within her reach, caressing the items with her hairy spider legs and occasionally taking a nibble when she thought he wasn't looking. Most of his allies had no real interest in his workshop and what he did there, as they had no interest or deep understanding of magical artifice, but just about everything human-related was new and exciting for Novelty so she insisted on coming along. He suspected she would get bored of it all very soon, but for now she was surprisingly well behaved.

It was amusing, he thought to himself. Once upon a time, her presence here would have driven him up the wall and he would have done all he could to get rid of her. Now, he found her antics to be... kind of nostalgic. She reminded him of an older, simpler time. A time when Novelty had been entirely qualified to teach him mind magic and the aranea had been his only friend. Even though Spear of Resolve had intended to betray him in the end – something he had never actually revealed to the aranea here in the real world – he still felt gratitude towards her and her web.

He sometimes wondered what his life would have been like if they had somehow survived that fateful restart. Would the final outcome have been better with them around, or was their doom a

necessary price for him to develop into what he was today? After all, without that reckless ploy he and Spear of Resolve concocted, Red Robe might have decided to stick around in the time loop for a long time. Zorian could easily imagine a situation where he never contacted Zach at all, constantly moving in the shadows in fear of attracting Red Robe's attention, the aranea his only ally...

[Hey! Why aren't you answering me?] Novelty protested.

What? Oh right, his project...

[It's secret,] he told her, shaking his head.

[Secret project...] she said, tapping her legs on the floor excitedly. Rather than backing off, she seemed only more fascinated by the secrecy. [Is it a weapon? Ooh, maybe it's a collapsible golem that transforms into a giant spider when a command word is spoken!]

[Why would I make a golem in the form of a giant spider of all things?] he asked her, raising an eyebrow at her.

[Well, everything is better with spiders,] she told him matter-of-factly. [Plus, I heard you humans found us cute.]

Zorian gave her an incredulous look.

[What? What?] she demanded, shuffling from side to side in agitation.

[I... think one of your friends played a prank on you or something,] Zorian said diplomatically.

[No way!] she protested. [I have it on good authority that... I mean, you humans like small, furry animals, right? I saw your little sister playing with that black cat yesterday, and some people are taking care of dogs and stuff...]

[I'm afraid humans don't really place you in the same category as cats and dogs,] Zorian told her. [In fact, a sizeable number of humans think spiders are pretty... horrifying.]

[Even giant spiders?] Novelty asked, visibly incredulous.

[Especially giant spiders,] Zorian said, laughing.

[How mean!] Novelty whined, her entire body vibrating in a clear show of annoyance.

Idly, Zorian wondered if painting Novelty pink and wrapping her in ribbons and glitter would make her cute enough for people to coo over. He could probably talk Novelty into going along with it...

Well. Something to think about if they managed to survive the month.

Fortunately, Novelty got over the incident very quickly and continued her exploration of Zorian's workshop instead of brooding over the whole event.

Zorian let her to her exploration. He closed his eyes for a moment, took a deep breath, and when he opened his eyes again the metal plate in front of his was densely covered in spell formula markings.

They weren't real, of course. The whole thing was just a mental illusion – a visualization of what the end result would look like based on his plans. Spotting a few possible flaws and failure points, he quickly went through a lengthy series of complicated calculation inside his head, almost instantly calculating problems that would have taken another spell formula crafter an entire afternoon of diligent calculation using pen and paper. The visualization of the end result blurred for a moment and then shifted into a different configuration that took these new calculations into account.

The process repeated itself several times, gradually refining the design. Most other artificers would have to spend a lot of time and mana making test plates and waste hours upon hours every time something had to be recalculated or adjusted, but Zorian's mental enhancements allowed him to sidestep most of that process.

Of course, all this work wouldn't even have to be done if it weren't for the fact he had lost most of his spell formula blueprints

while crossing over into the real world. So much work lost...

Thankfully, spell formula were one of the fields he was most confident in.

He suddenly realized Novelty was poking a small metal sphere he left on a nearby chair. He pointed his hand towards her, causing invisible waves of telekinetic force to seize her entire body and then gently but firmly dragged her away from the offending object.

"Don't touch that," he told her verbally. "It's dangerous."

She gave him an undecipherable look, staring at him quietly for a few seconds.

"What?" he asked her.

[You're pretty scary,] she told him. [I didn't even see you cast anything. You just casually pointed at me and I suddenly couldn't move! And then you just dragged me off like it's nothing... I thought mages like you needed to mumble and wave when they do their weird human magic?]

"They do. I'm just very, very good at this," he told her. Though this did remind him that he needed to curb these kind of moments as much as possible, since this kind of casual use of unstructured magic was not something a teenage mage like him should possess. Holding back for years and years was going to be hard...

[How did you even know what I was doing?] she continued. [Your back was turned! I'm sure of it!]

"This whole room is crisscrossed with a mesh of hair-thin mana threads centered on me," Zorian told her. "Whenever you pass through them, I can sense it."

[Like an invisible web?] she asked.

"Yes, exactly," he agreed. It was a detection trick he had learned at some point in the time loop, inspired by Taiven's old trick of flooding her surroundings with her mana to detect hidden attacks and enemies. He didn't have the mana reserves to copy her trick exactly, but he didn't really have to. Shaping the mana into a mass

of threads was much cheaper than simply flooding every nook and cranny with his mana, yet just as effective for his purposes. The only downside was that this kind of 'detection web' required insanely good shaping skills to execute, but that was not really something Zorian had trouble with.

[Scary...] she repeated unhappily.

She glanced at the metal sphere she had been poking before he stopped her before giving him a speculative look.

[So what's that thing anyway?] she said, pointing at the small sphere with one of her legs. [You didn't complain when I was touch- err, I mean *looking* at the other things in the room, but you immediately reacted now? What is it?]

"It's a hollow metal sphere holding a pocket dimension inside," he told her. "It's supposed to suck in and contain a creature inside. Like a portable prison for powerful monsters."

[I... don't understand,] she complained. [That's meant to capture people? But it's so small! I'd never fit in inside!]

Oh, right... not everyone was familiar with the concept of expanded spaces and pocket dimensions and whatnot.

"It's bigger on the inside than on the outside. There is an entire room inside that little metal ball. You'd fit in just fine," he explained.

Novelty was quiet for a second, trying to process this.

[Oh. How weird,] she eventually said. [You shouldn't leave it lying around like that, then. What if someone stumbles upon it when you're not around and gets sucked in? They could starve to death before you remember to check inside!]

"Give me some credit. I did put some safeguards on it. It's just that it's meant specifically for capturing giant spiders, so I'm not sure if the safeguards would work properly for an aranea like you. I kind of forgot I left it lying around when I let you come today," Zorian explained.

[Oh. Wait, why are you making tools for capturing giant spiders?] Novelty asked, suddenly sounding concerned.

"It's a secret," Zorian said. "It has nothing to do with aranea, though, so you can rest easy."

Plus, if he wanted to deal with the aranea, he wouldn't need to resort to such complicated and expensive methods. But he didn't really say that out loud. Novelty already thought he was scarily powerful, after all, no need to feed her paranoia further.

[I kind of want to get inside now to see what it's like,] Novelty eventually admitted, staring intently at the sphere.

Zorian snorted at the admission. And here he thought he was scaring the poor thing. Nosy little spider couldn't resist sticking her legs and fangs absolutely everywhere...

"It's meant to be a prison, so it's pretty bare," Zorian told her. "Wait a few days and I show you something similar on a far larger, more interesting scale. There is an entire palace in there. And Princess. I guess I can introduce you to her at that time."

[Princess? You know royalty?] Novelty said, sounding very fascinated.

"Princess isn't really an officially recognized ruler of any place, but she's very... majestic. Very memorable. I'm sure you'll be suitably impressed after seeing her," Zorian said, smiling evilly inside.

[Huh. You know, you're pretty nice to me,] Novelty remarked.

"Yes, I'm a pretty great guy, aren't I?" Zorian indulgently agreed.

[Did we know each other? Before, I mean? In the future? Err, I mean... this is so confusing... you know what I mean!] Novelty fumbled, waving her front legs in front of her frustratingly.

Zorian tapped his finger on the table thoughtfully. He never actually told the aranea the fine details about what happened in the time loop, and definitely didn't mention Novelty, as she wasn't terribly relevant in the grand scheme of things.

"What gave you that idea?" he asked her.

[It just seems like you know me a little too well,] she said. [It's true, isn't it? We totally knew each other in the future you came from, didn't we?]

"You taught me mind magic a few times," Zorian admitted.

[I was your teacher?] Novelty said incredulously. If she was human, she would have probably gasped. [But that means... I wasn't just your friend, I was your *senior*! You should be paying your respects to me!]

"Keep dreaming," Zorian said. "It was just a couple of basic lessons, and you're younger than I am."

[The matriarch said you don't even qualify as a real adult in human terms, whereas I already went through the maturation ceremony. So there,] Novelty insisted stubbornly.

She almost immediately drooped down in an exaggerated gesture of defeat, though.

[Though... if I were honest... I kind of want you to be my teacher instead,] she admitted. [I kind to want to try learning human magic, and you're the only human mage I know, so... you'd be willing to help your future teacher out, would you?]

"Sure," Zorian shrugged. "I already have a huge list of people I need to help out once this is all settled, what's one more person on the list? You're going to have to wait for this month to end, though."

[Yes!] she cheered. [I'll wait! It's totally not a problem! Patience is my best feature!]

It took an inhuman amount of self-control for Zorian not to roll his eyes at her.

[What?] she demanded.

"Liar," he told her flatly.

[How can you talk like that to your teacher?] she complained. [Kids these days, no respect...]

Zorian blocked her out and turned back to the metal plate on the table in front of him.



In a small but familiar tavern in Cyoria, simulacrum number three sat alone in a corner, curiously studying his surroundings. The insides of the tavern were dark, the air stale, but the place was still familiar to the simulacrum even after all these years. This was the tavern where he used to talk with Haslush Ikzeteri, the detective that taught him divination way back when he had still been a novice mage. Now, he would be meeting his old divination teacher again, this time in the real world.

He was disguised for the occasion. At the moment, the simulacrum looked like an older middle-aged man, with graying hair and a bushy, prominent mustache. A formal brown suit, a weathered wooden cane, and a roll of yesterday's newspapers completed a picture of a regular, nondescript man that he hoped wouldn't attract too much attention. However, based on the frequent glances he was getting from other people, he was pretty sure he failed at looking like he belonged here. It was likely that regular visitors to this tavern already knew each other and that a newcomer like him was automatically noteworthy, or maybe he just wasn't as good at pretending as he thought he was. In any case, it didn't matter much, since he intended to discard this identity entirely after today's talk.

Eventually a familiar man approached his table. Middle aged, dressed in a cheap, rumpled suit and kind of unkempt, Haslush looked just like he remembered him. He scanned the tavern quickly, his eyes soon falling on the disguised simulacrum. The simulacrum met his gaze, and they stared at each other silently for a second. Haslush had a sleepy, lazy look on his face the whole time as he studied him, but the simulacrum could see a trace of wariness bleed into his posture. The information provided by

his empathy and soul perception reinforced this. Eventually, the detective averted his eyes, rubbed his nose for a second, and then casually ambled over to the simulacrum's table.

"Hi there. Do you mind if I sit here?" Haslush asked in a lazy voice.

"Not at all. After all, I did ask to meet you here," the simulacrum said.

"Ah, so you *were* the one that asked to see me," Haslush said, nodding to himself. He plopped heavily into the chair in front of him, ignoring the ominous creaking of the wood beneath him, and ordered himself a drink. "Why all this cloak and dagger stuff, if I may ask? You didn't even give me your name in that letter you sent me."

"With good reason," the simulacrum said. "We'd both be in danger if you knew who I am."

"But I already know your face now so—" Haslush began, before suddenly frowning. He narrowed his eyes at the simulacrum, his irises glittering with a subtle divination spell. "This isn't your real appearance, is it?"

"No," the simulacrum admitted, shaking his head. "For reasons of convenience, you can call me 'Kesir', though that isn't my real name either. I'm just a throwaway simulacrum. After this talk, I will vanish into ectoplasmic smoke and we'll hopefully never speak again."

"A simulacrum?" Haslush repeated, visibly taken aback.

Zorian understood the reaction. Simulacrums were high-level magic, not something that one regularly encountered.

Rather than saying anything, the simulacrum extended his arm between them and let it and willed it to unravel for a second. It quickly grew blurry and dissolved into a mass of glowing blue smoke, before suddenly reforming itself back into his arm.

For this particular meeting, he didn't inhabit the usual golem body that most of Zorian's simulacrum were equipped with these days. The less traces he left here today, the better. He was pretty sure he had covered his tracks well enough to stop Red Robe from knowing about this meeting, but it was still best to minimize risks.

"Well I'll be damned. That's not a piece of magic you see every day, that's for sure," Haslush said, recovering his calm, lazy façade. "Are you sure you got the right person for this, though? This sounds almost like a job for spies and crown agents, not little old me. I'm just your average detective, Mister Kesir."

"For reasons that will soon become obvious, I can't contact anyone particularly high ranked, or things will get really bad," the simulacrum said. He took out a large leather paper holder out of his jacket pocket, deliberately making the entire process visible to the man in front of him.

Haslush's eyes widened imperceptibly when the simulacrum retrieved a large object from a jacket pocket it couldn't possibly fit into. It was just a temporary pocket dimension, not even a permanent expanded space, but most people would have still never encountered that sort of thing in their entire life. More than even the simulacrum, pocket dimension creation was a rare form of magic.

"Please take a look at this," the simulacrum told the man, handing him a stack of pictures and documents before leaning back in his chair and patiently waiting.

Haslush cautiously leafed through the papers, periodically frowning and tapping his fingers on the table. His expression worsened as time went by, and at some point he ordered some really strong alcohol to get through the rest, but eventually he skimmed through the whole stack. There wasn't enough time for him to comb through the whole thing, but even a casual glance through the documents Zorian gathered painted a grim picture.

"This is insane," Haslush eventually said, downing an entire

glass of hard alcohol and slamming it on the table in front of him. Some of the nearby tavern patrons glanced at them curiously for a moment. "A full scale invasion of the city with the local mage guild in on the whole thing? How can something like this be real? A conspiracy this grand and far-reaching should be impossible to pull off."

"The invaders are using permanent gates – a concept that has not been known to exist until now. On top of that, the local authorities have been hopelessly infiltrated and are working with the invaders to cover up the whole thing. It's very real," the simulacrum said.

"You're one of them, aren't you?" Haslush suddenly said. "A defector. That's the only way you could possibly know all this and have this much evidence."

"I'm not one of them," the simulacrum insisted, "but they do have a certain amount of influence over me, or else I wouldn't be moving in the shadows like this. If I go public with this, the results will be... disastrous."

"Really?" Haslush asked, raising his eyebrow at him. "A mage of your caliber..."

"I didn't say I would die. Of course I can always run away and hide. I said the consequences would be *disastrous*," the simulacrum clarified.

"More disastrous than the city being invaded by monsters, demons, and the undead?" Haslush asked dubiously.

"Yes," the simulacrum said.

Haslush waited for a second, but the simulacrum didn't intend to clarify. What he was telling the detective was unbelievable enough without getting into the whole wraith bomb situation or the possibility of an army of dragons laying waste to northern Eldemar.

"Wouldn't the same be true if *I* were to make this public?" Haslush asked.

"Yes," the simulacrum admitted. "To be honest, the enemy would instantly realize where you got your information from, so you trying to alert people to this would be no different than me doing it myself. Well, other than the fact you'd be much easier to silence than me."

"Lovely," Haslush said calmly. "So you don't actually want me to make these documents known to anyone?"

"I obviously can't stop you from doing what you feel is right," the simulacrum said. "But I wouldn't recommend it, no."

"What do you expect me to do with this, then?" Haslush asked, waving the leather paper holder in front of him. He looked genuinely curious, rather than angry.

The simulacrum was actually rather impressed with how Haslush was behaving. Most people were either stubbornly disbelieving or had trouble thinking straight when something like this was dumped into their lap. In fact, Haslush wasn't the first person they were contacting about this, and he wouldn't be the last, but he was the one who had had the best reaction thus far. This didn't mean he would end up being useful in the end, of course, but it was encouraging.

"I don't know," the simulacrum said. "Although it may seem like I'm holding all the cards here, I'm actually not sure what should be done here. I'm not a professional spy or master manipulator. I'm hoping that you will know what to do with this better than I do."

Haslush stared at him quietly for a second before leafing through the pages a few more times. It was just an idle gesture. The simulacrum could see he wasn't really reading things, just idly flipping through the documents and he mulled things over.

He eventually snapped the paper holder shut and pushed it

aside before massaging his temples for a bit.

"This is insane," he said.

"Yes, you already said that," the simulacrum noted.

"Well, I feel like repeating myself," Haslush told him, giving him a weak glare. "I suppose this does help explain all the weird attacks and sudden deaths my department has been flooded with lately. Who else did you tell about this?"

"What makes you think I told others?" the simulacrum asked, surprised.

"Who?" Haslush insisted, not offering any explanations.

The simulacrum eventually relented and gave him some names. Kylae and the other priests in the city, which were slowly being informed about the invasion. Some of the shifters living in the city whose children were going to be used in the ritual. A few other policemen and detectives Zach and Zorian had identified as reliable while inside the time loop. And so on.

"That's more people than I thought," Haslush noted. "Aren't you afraid someone will talk?"

"It's always a possibility, but I feel I judged people correctly," the simulacrum said. "I'm a mind reader, after all."

Haslush immediately graced him with a string of colorful curses before casting mental defense spells on himself.

"Of course you're a mind mage, too..." the detective grumbled. "Anyway, since you so graciously left it up to me to decide how to handle this, I will visit these people and see if we can figure something out. But if we decide to go higher with this information..."

"Then everything goes to hell, probably," the simulacrum said. "Though... maybe that would be for the best. I don't think there is a perfect answer to be had, here. Maybe triggering everything sooner rather than later is actually the right move, I don't know. Whatever you decide, I'll support you as much as I can... but I'm

not all powerful. Don't be surprised if you end up dead after talking to the wrong person."

"I'll keep that in mind," Haslush said thoughtfully. "I'm still not tired of living, I can assure you that much. Plus, I know better than anyone how disgustingly underhanded the mage guild can be about protecting people who really don't deserve state protection, just because they are useful in some way... but let's not talk about that right now. Do you have anything else for me?"

"Yes," the simulacrum said, retraining a paper envelope sealed with ornate red wax. "Here, have this."

"What is it?" Haslush asked, flipping the envelope curiously in his hands.

"Don't open this until the end of the month," the simulacrum warned him. "Otherwise I will assume the letter has been compromised and abandon that particular place. That said, there is a key to a post office box inside. It's empty right now, but if the worst happens, there will be a package inside at the end of the month, explaining everything and containing some information to be distributed to various people."

"Insurance in case you die, eh?" Haslush guessed. He casually stuffed the envelope in his pocket, carelessly crumpling it in the process. "Alright. Do you think—"

But the simulacrum was already unraveling, quickly becoming intangible ectoplasmic smoke.

Before he completely dissolved, he thought he heard Haslush say something about rudeness.



In Imaya's kitchen, there was a large and curious gathering. Zorian, Imaya, Kirielle, Kael, Kana, Rea, Nochka, Taiven and Xvim were all present. They weren't doing anything terribly important

– the older people present were playing a game of cards and having scattered conversations, while the three little girls ran around playing with dolls. In the beginning they also participated in the card game, but they were not very good at it, so they eventually wandered off to do their thing.

These sorts of meetings had happened a few times already, but they'd never had so many people before. In addition, Xvim's presence was an unusual event, to say the least.

Zorian thoughtfully fingered one of the cards in his hand, purposely ignoring Taiven, who was sitting beside him and craning her neck in an attempt to 'stealthily' peek at his hand. Times like this were a bit of a guilty pleasure for him, since they were entirely unproductive and he realistically shouldn't waste time on them. The reasonable response to Imaya's request to join them in their game would be to say he's busy and go back to analyzing Zach's contract again, but... he was only human. Sometimes, he just wanted to play cards and relax, even with the fate of the whole city was at stake.

Xvim was present here for a reason, though. With the discovery of Zach's contract and the fact Red Robe was sending a simulacrum to Koth to take his friends hostage, he was presented again with a question of what to do about his friends and family in the upcoming invasion. He clearly couldn't leave them to wander the city on invasion day, ignorant of the threat. However, he also couldn't just tell them about the time loop and dump them all at the Taramatula Estate in Koth.

In the end, it was decided that Zach and Zorian shouldn't be doing the evacuation of all these people in the first place. Some people – Taiven for example – reacted very poorly to Zach and Zorian revealing crazy powerful abilities that they shouldn't have, and other might refuse to cooperate with a bunch of teenagers trying to drag them off to a completely unknown place all of a sud-

den. It was better to have an adult in the position of authority to contact the people. Someone in on the whole story, capable of advanced dimensionalism, and respectable looking. That made Xvim the prime candidate, especially since he claimed he could talk Ilsa into accompanying him and lending additional weight to his words. Ilsa was Imaya's best friend, so she would probably trust her if she said Imaya had accompany them and hide for a few days.

But it was still best if Xvim wasn't a total stranger to the people he intended to contact, so it was agreed that he would visit Imaya's place one day. Officially, the visit was because he had to discuss something with Zorian, since he was his mentor and all, but the real reason was so that he could introduce himself to everyone. That way, when he and Imaya came knocking to people and told them that they had to evacuate out of the city for a few days because an attack was imminent, they would hopefully be more open to the idea.

As for Zorian, it was his job to arrange things so that most people were actually present when Xvim visited.

He thought he had done a decent job there, to be honest.

"Mister Chao sure is diligent in his work," Rea remarked, throwing a card at the center of the table. "You don't often see teachers making a personal visit to their student's home. I only ever saw it once, and that was because the student in question had vandalized another student's belongings, not because of anything good. Then again, I did hear that Cyoria's Royal Academy of Magical Arts is on a different level than most places..."

"I usually don't make this kind of personal visit, of course," Xvim said, casually throwing a card of his own on top of hers. Zorian thought the man would be awkward or annoyed when presented with this kind of social gathering over a card game, but Xvim showed no discomfort with the situation whatsoever. He wasn't exactly relaxed, but he gave off the same sort of severe, dig-

nified atmosphere than he always did. "Sadly, most students today are very lazy and lack proper dedication to truly master their chosen fields. They want shortcuts and instant results, and the modern academy curriculum sadly encourages that sort of attitude."

"It's the Weeping, isn't it?" Kael said softly.

"Indeed," Xvim nodded solemnly. "With the death of so many mages, the academy received a directive from on high to lower its standards. In more ways than one. On one hand, this meant children from wealthy, but not traditionally magical families could attend our institution far more easily in the past, and I have no issue with that. Unfortunately, it also meant that some of the more boring and unpleasant but necessary lessons were removed in favor of 'practical education' and other nonsensical words. As if foundation building is not practical..."

The conversation continued for a while in this vein, with people chipping in with their thoughts from time to time. Zorian noticed Taiven staring at him at one time, but she averted her gaze when he glanced at her. She had probably started to notice that there was something weird going on with him. Well, other than him being a telepath and hanging out with sapient underground spiders. Thankfully, she was still wary of confronting him about it, so he didn't have to figure out how to explain anything for now. She was one of the people who reacted very badly to him being suddenly absurdly powerful and competent, so delaying that confrontation for as long as possible was for the best.

He was still debating whether it would be better to have her join the fighting on invasion day or to simply hide her along with all the rest. On one hand, having her join the chaotic final fight would be extremely dangerous and there was a high chance she could die. He would be devastated if that happened. On the other hand, she was a warrior mage looking for a chance to get actual experience and make a name for herself, and he was pretty sure

she would choose to stay and fight if she had a choice. Did he have the right to take that choice away from her just because he would hate to see her die or get seriously hurt?

He remembered his younger self and how much he hated his parent's attempts to dictate his life for him. Taiven's parents were already trying to keep her safe by steering her away from dangerous professions and she resented them for it. If he made this choice for her, how was he any different from his mother? He would be worse, probably, because at least his mother had never used advanced magic to compel him to obey.

Ugh. He put that decision aside for now. He could tackle that later.

He suddenly realized that Kirielle had brought her new toy to show off for her friends and that it was attracting attention from the adults as well. It was a small golem Zorian had made for her. Kirielle had already painted face on it and added hair and a dress and other little touches, so by now it looked almost like an animate doll rather than a golem.

[I hope you realize this is a very eye-catching toy, Mister Kazinski,] a voice said in his head. Zorian was startled to realize it was Xvim, contacting him telepathically. Xvim wasn't psychic and Zorian hadn't seen him casting any spells. Then again, it was Xvim... and as he liked to say, there was a shaping exercise for everything. [Laymen may ignore that golem as a curiosity, but any decent mage will know how difficult it is to produce such a thing.]

[I know, but that golem isn't just a toy,] Zorian sent back. [Beneath its harmless façade, that thing is packed full of weapons and defensive wards. It is a veritable tiny murder machine. This way I get to give Kirielle a powerful bodyguard without being too obvious about it.]

[Ah,] Xvim responded, surprised. [I am admittedly not an artificer, but your ability in that field never ceases to amaze me. I

suppose I could understand why you fear the government as much as you do. Your ability to make devices alone would make the authorities do everything in their power to gain control over you.]

[Yeah,] Zorian agreed uneasily. He knew that his abilities would get out at some point, but that would hopefully be years in the future. By that point he should have cemented his position a bit and would be able to resist being pressured against his will.

[I think your sister's friends are going to be very jealous of her, though,] Xvim noticed, observing their reactions.

[I'm actually hoping they will ask for a 'doll' of their own,] Zorian admitted. [That way I get to put another two bodyguards among people close to me.]

Xvim had nothing to say to that.

Eventually the game ended and people decided it was time to disperse. Zorian was about half-way back to his room when he suddenly felt a stream of knowledge flood into his mind.

It was from the simulacrum he had left studying Zach's contract.

The document was hard to understand. The language used was very complex and weirdly structured, and there was a lot of text to read through. However, Zorian was pretty sure he understood the basic points by now.

Two points stuck out to him.

One was that the release of the primordial was tied to the activation of the divine safeguards on its prison. If the safeguards activated before the month was done, regardless of the reason why, Zach was considered to have failed in his mission. Zach's perception did not matter here – the contract could detect the activation of the safeguards innately, and was apparently tied to them on some intangible level. Zorian could not detect this connection on Zach, but the contract claimed it existed, so it probably did. Divine magic was a headache-inducing bullshit, anyway. Zorian sus-

pected that this part of the contract was the core of it. It was clearly the most important part of it; it was defined near the very beginning of the document and had the most un-ambiguous terms.

The second thing was the definition of time loop knowledge. Zorian had been hoping that enforcement of this clause depended purely on Zach's perception of what counted and what didn't, which would make it really easy to manipulate it through warping Zach's perceptions, but it wasn't quite that simple. The contract defined exactly what counted as informing people about the existence of the time loop. Telling people he was a time traveler, describing his experiences in such a way as to make it clear he had gone through the same month multiple times, describing future events in a way that made it clear he had already experienced them all ran afoul of the terms of the contract. In fact, that part of the contract went into considerable detail to close any sort of loophole that would allow Zach to tell people about his experiences in the time loop. Even telling people he came 'from another world' was not okay. It was obvious for a while now that the angels *really* didn't want anyone to know about the time loop, but reading the contract really drove the point home for Zorian.

Which caused an ominous feeling to arise in his heart. After all, the contract had an expiration date. At the end of the month, it would dissolve and Zach would no longer be bound by it. That meant that after the month went by, Zach would be free to make his experiences as public as possible as he wanted to make them.

Were the angels really fine with that? The contract strongly suggested they weren't, but there was really nothing stopping Zach from doing just that. Maybe not immediately after the month ended, but as years and decades went by? A person might get tempted to write a book or something before he died...

It would be probably very convenient for the angels if Zach and Zorian stopped Panaxeth's release, but perished some time af-

terwards...

His paranoia aside, the good news was that the enforcement of that particular clause of the contract depended entirely on Zach's own perception, just like Zorian suspected. *Zach* was the one who determined whether a violation of the contract had occurred or not. If someone knew about the time loop but Zach never found out about it, the contract would never know either. It pulled information straight from Zach's senses, thoughts, and memories.

Zorian knew a couple of mental enhancements that might be used to manipulate that, but Zach's restrictions when it came to mind magic prevented him from teaching them to his fellow time traveler. Not that they had time for that, but still. Zorian had a feeling the mind magic restrictions weren't just due to 'ethical concerns'.

Curiously, there was nothing in the contract stopping Zach from doing what Zorian planned to do and just giving people research notes that they had written themselves. Even though such information was clearly made through time travel, and some of the more perceptive and open-minded recipients would probably realize they come from some future version of themselves, it wasn't actually against the rules. At least not to Zorian's amateur eyes. So long as the notes never said where they came from and only incidentally hinted at their origin, they were fine from the contract perspective.

This was good, because Zorian had an important task to accomplish in the coming days. He had to talk to his older brother Daimen. He obviously wasn't going to be sending his friends and family to the Taramatula estate now, since he knew that Red Robe was setting up an ambush party there to take advantage of that. Nonetheless, the fact remained that his older brother and the Taramatula were now in danger because of him. If only for that reason, he had to talk to them.

And he doubted he could convince Daimen to accept him as the legitimate Zorian without utilizing the notes his older brother had written for himself inside the time loop.

Even with them, he was definitely not looking forward for that conversation...

POWDERKEG

Arranging a meeting with Daimen was easy this time. Not that it had ever been truly difficult to do that, but after learning the basics of the local language and customs over the restarts, the task had become totally trivial. He just had to approach the Taramatula in the right way, and they didn't even bother trying to turn him away – they went to fetch Daimen after only a few minutes of convincing, leaving Zorian to wait at the entrance.

He was currently flipping through Daimen's notebooks to pass the time, ignoring the strange looks given to him by the gate guards. The notebook was coded, but that couldn't stop Zorian at all. With his mental enhancements active, he could decode the text in an instant, so long as he knew the key. Not that there was anything really interesting recorded in the notebooks. Daimen had written those in consultation with Zorian, so this was more about Zorian reminding himself what they put in there than discovering something new and exciting. He thought about trying to strike up the conversation with the guards currently observing him, but he knew from previous experience they weren't the talkative sort. It didn't help that his grasp of the local language was pretty shaky still.

After a while, Zorian flipped through the last of the notebooks he had brought along and closed it shut. He impatiently rocked back and forth in place, taking in the sights around him through his various senses. In his mind sense and soul sense, the bees coming and going from the Taramatula estate looked like streams of tiny glittering stars.

Pretty. He turned his back towards the gate and observed the wall of plant life surrounding the estate. He had been here many times in the past, but he had rarely paid much attention to the lands surrounding the place. Ignoring the guards and their alarmed inquiries about where he was going, he promptly wandered off into the wilds and started exploring.

The jungle surrounding the Taramatula estate was kind of beautiful, he realized. No doubt a large part of that was deliberate design by the Taramatula, but still. There were paths cut into the vegetation to make the area more accessible to humans, and flowers were everywhere. Zorian followed the paths with no particular purpose in mind, mentally repelling snakes and biting insects whenever they got too close to him. No large predatory animals bothered him. The Taramatula had probably cleared them all out from the vicinity of their home.

Eventually he stopped walking, staring at a particularly large white flower that had a great many bees swarming over it. A voice sounded from behind him not long afterwards.

"It really is you. Damn it, Zorian, couldn't you have waited at the entrance just a little bit? If you wanted to look at bees, there are like a million of them inside the estate..."

It was Daimen, of course. Zorian slowly turned around, observing his eldest brother with a complex expression. Interacting with people he had gotten to know as temporary loopers before the end was always rather uncomfortable, and never was this as true as it was right now. The last time he saw Daimen, his brother

had sacrificed himself to ensure Zorian could get out of the time loop alive.

Xvim had sacrificed himself too, of course. So had many other temporary loopers. However, Daimen's choice to burn his whole life force to stabilize the passage into the real world had left a particularly deep impression on Zorian because... it was Daimen. He would have never expected his eldest brother to sacrifice himself for him.

He had never completely forgiven Daimen for what happened in his childhood, he realized. Interacting with his eldest brother in the time loop, he grudgingly came to accept he was being kind of petty and that he needed his brother's help, but a part of him would always see Daimen as an enemy. Now that part of him was angry and upset, because he realized he owed a life debt to Daimen now. Even if the Daimen in front of him knew nothing of it, Zorian knew he could never pretend it wasn't real.

"What?" Daimen demanded. He sounded pretty annoyed. "Why are you staring at me like that?"

"We haven't seen each other in a while, but I feel like I saw you only days ago," said Zorian after a second of pause.

"Ha! Yes, your big brother is just as handsome and dashing as always," Daimen said, puffing his chest in an exaggerated manner. He then gave Zorian a scrutinizing look. "You've certainly changed, though."

Like always, Daimen doubted his identity upon their first meeting. Quite sensible, considering the distances he would have to traverse just to end up here.

"Yeah, well, people change rapidly during their teenage years," Zorian commented calmly.

"No, it's more than that," Daimen said, shaking his head. "Even your posture is different. You look calmer. More confident."

"Confident?" Zorian asked incredulously. He felt anything but

confident at the moment. He was under a tremendous amount of stress at the moment.

"Yeah," Daimen said. "It seems the academy has been a good influence on you."

He looked around until he spotted a nearby fallen tree and then casually waved his hand at it. A gust of wind immediately blew away all the dirt and leaves on top of it, after which Daimen plopped down on the tree with a heavy sigh. He then gave Zorian a piercing look.

"Why are you here, Zorian?" he asked. "Actually, scratch that. *How* are you here?"

"Teleportation," Zorian said. In reality he had opened a dimensional gate straight to Koth, but it was best to keep that secret for now. "I got someone to transport me directly to you."

"Transport you directly... Zorian, do you have any idea how dangerous that is!" Daimen spluttered at him.

"Of course I do," Zorian told him. "It's just that I had no choice but to do this. I had to talk to you as soon as possible."

Daimen stared at him for a few seconds, discreetly casting a few divination spells at Zorian and considering something. Zorian patiently waited for him to finish and pretended he didn't notice the divination spells directed at him.

"You're in trouble, aren't you?" Daimen finally asked with a long-suffering a sigh.

"Yes," Zorian admitted. "Big trouble."

"I knew it," Daimen said flatly. "Damn it, Zorian... this is the sort of thing I'd expect out of Fortov, not you. Alright, just... tell me what you have gotten yourself into and I'll see how I can help you. But you owe me big time for this! How did you get enough money to pay for teleportation here, anyway? You didn't steal from Mother and Father, did you?"

"No, I have plenty of money," Zorian said, shaking his head.

Daimen swore under his breath. He seemed even more displeased with that idea than with Zorian stealing money from his family. I guess he assumed Zorian must have gotten the money illegally.

Which, now that he thought about it, was pretty much correct. He got most of his current funds by stealing it from the invaders, after all.

"Anyway, my issue is that invaders from Ulquaan Ibasas and the cultists of the Dragon Below are going to jointly invade Cyoria on the night of the summer festival in order to release the primordial trapped beneath the city and harvest the souls of everyone living in the city," Zorian summarized.

Daimen gave him a strange look.

"What?" he asked with an incredulous laugh.

"Ulquaan Ibasas, the isle of the exiles, is invading Cyoria through a permanent dimensional portal hidden beneath the city," Zorian said.

"A-ha," Daimen said slowly.

"Much of the city's leadership has been subverted by the Eoteric Order of the Celestial Dragon, better known as the Cult of the Dragon Below. They are working together with the Ibasans to keep the invasion preparation secret and will directly aid them when they actually invade the city," Zorian continued.

"I see," Daimen said, giving him a sour look. "You are definitely Zorian. Only he would come here with such a ridiculous story. A real imposter would surely cobble together a far more convincing scheme than this."

"I'm glad you think so," Zorian told him calmly. "Anyway, I don't really expect you to do much about the invasion itself. That whole situation is kind of beyond you. Unfortunately, the invaders know I'm one of the chief people opposing them, so they're going to go after you and the Taramatula to get leverage over me. That's

why I hurried over here like this. I had to warn you before it was too late."

Daimen suddenly frowned, becoming a little more serious.

"Zorian, this isn't funny," Daimen protested severely.

"I know," Zorian sighed. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry for getting you into this mess. All I can do is offer you information, and maybe shelter, if you need one. Though convincing Taramatula to evacuate their ancestral estate and leave it at the mercy of the invaders is probably a tall order, so..."

"You know what? I don't have time for your bullshit," Daimen told him, anger and annoyance mixing in his voice and posture. He got up from his seat and dusted himself off. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'll be going back to my work. When you're ready to have a serious talk, we can--"

Zorian took out the imperial orb out of his jacket pocket and held it in front of him, in plain view of Daimen.

Daimen froze at the sight, staring dumbfounded at the orb for several seconds.

"Is that...?" he began.

"It's the imperial orb, yes," Zorian nodded. "Sorry about that. I know you've been looking for it for a while now, but I have dire need of it."

"What? Why..." Daimen said in an uncomprehending manner, unable to accept what he was seeing.

"Considering my earlier story, it should be self-explanatory why I need it," Zorian noted.

"Not that! I mean... aargh!" Daimen groaned. "How did you get that!? Why do you have that? This doesn't make any sense!"

"Here," Zorian said, reaching into his jacket pocket again and handing Daimen the notebooks he had written for himself during the time loop. "Read this and things will hopefully make more sense."

Daimen quickly snatched the notebooks out of Zorian's hands before giving the imperial orb an intense look. He then snatched the imperial orb as well before retreating back to his log to study them both. Zorian let the orb go, unconcerned. Daimen was a great mage, but he was no Quatach-Ichl. If Zorian wanted to get the orb back, he could do so at any time, regardless of Daimen's wishes.

Daimen flipped through the notebooks with one hand while fondling the imperial orb in the other, occasionally muttering to himself in a low voice.

"What? This can't be right... oh, I remember this one. I was going to check this in the next few months... how does he even *know* this?" Daimen muttered. "Wait a minute..."

He suddenly shut up and started pacing like a caged tiger, reading a particular passage. He eventually spun in place and turned towards Zorian in an aggressive manner.

"What is this!?" he demanded. "Did... did I write this?"

"Yes," Zorian confirmed.

"But... I don't remember ever writing this," Daimen frowned.

"Yes," Zorian agreed.

"Don't you 'yes' at me!" Daimen protested. "Give me an explanation!"

"I can't," Zorian said, shaking his head.

"Oh come on, do you seriously expect me to believe you have no idea how this came to be?" Daimen said, waving the notebook in front of Zorian's face.

"I know how the notebooks came to be, of course," Zorian said. "I even helped you write them. It's just that I can't give you an explanation."

"You... helped me write these?" Daimen asked, looking at him strangely. He shook his head to clear his thoughts. "No, ignore that question. *Why* can't you give me an explanation?"

"Because lives depend on it," Zorian told him. "I know I'm asking a lot here, but please trust me on this. The consequences of me telling you these things would be truly dire. My friend could die. I could die. The whole city of Cyoria could die."

"That thing again," Daimen frowned at him. "This... invasion of yours."

"In the end, everything comes back to that," Zorian confirmed, nodding. "Oh, and give me back the imperial orb, please."

He stretched out his hand towards Daimen, observing his reaction. Daimen glanced at the imperial orb in his hand, and then back at Zorian again, his expression deep in thought for a moment.

Then he thrust the orb back into Zorian's outstretched hand and returned to his log, flipping through the notebooks again.

"I don't want to believe this, but there is so much stuff here," Daimen eventually said, his voice a little more subdued. "These notebooks... they represent years of work, and I remember nothing of it. Did I really lose years of my life somehow? It couldn't be. I would have notice something like big, there is no way you can rip out such vast swathes of someone's memory without completely messing them up!"

"As I said, I can't talk about that," Zorian told him.

"I can't accept that," Daimen said, not taking his eyes of the notebook he was reading.

Zorian ignored him.

"You're in danger," he told Daimen. "You and the Taramatula both. Originally I intended to evacuate my friends and Kirielle here to shelter them from the attack and unfortunately the enemy got their hands on that information. Now they intend to attack this place to get their hands on some hostages to pressure me with. You need to alert the Taramatula and prepare yourself for the incoming attack, okay?"

Truthfully, Zorian could simply destroy Red Robe's simulacrum once it arrives to Koth, ending the possibility of the threat that way. However, he did not want to do that. As callous as it was, he felt that making Red Robe waste all his time and mana on this was preferable to him scrapping the plan entirely and trying to get him in some other fashion. A predictable threat was better than a completely unknown one.

"So this invasion of yours is so powerful their reach extends all the way to Koth as well?" Daimen asked him, looking at him like he's an idiot.

"I already told you they have access to permanent gates, so why does this surprise you?" Zorian asked, giving him the same look back. "They only need one person to build a gate and they can shuffle their forces to and from any place on the globe."

"And what do you mean you wanted to evacuate Kirielle here, isn't she with Mother and Father?" Daimen continued, ignoring Zorian's remark.

"No, she's with me," Zorian said.

Daimen made a show of looking around, even peering beneath the log he was sitting on. Zorian rolled his eyes at him.

"I left her in Cyoria, of course," Zorian told him.

"You left her alone while you travel to Koth?" Daimen asked flatly, sounding very unamused.

"Calm down," Zorian told him. "It's only for a few hours."

"What? What do you mean 'for a few hours'?" Daimen protested. "Traveling to Koth takes *days*, even with teleportation!"

"We'll discuss that later, okay?" Zorian tried.

"No, we can't discuss that later! This whole thing is insane and quite frankly I'm starting to question if you're even actually Zorian!" Daimen said, giving him a heated glare. "My brother is fifteen years old and there is no way he would involve himself with

something like this. In fact, even if he wanted to get involved, he doesn't have the skills to do so! Who are you really and what did you do to Zorian?"

Zorian was silent for a moment. It was a good question, really. In truth, the real Zorian had died at the start of the month. He had stolen his body and identity, letting his soul move on to the afterlife. Daimen wasn't actually wrong to think of him as an imposter.

If the Daimen in front of him knew the truth, would he consider him his real brother or would he do his best to avenge the real Zorian? Temporary looper Daimen felt that sacrificing his life so that Zorian could replace the original was right and proper, but this Daimen might not agree.

It was amusing, Zorian thought to himself bitterly. Years ago, he wouldn't have given a damn about what Daimen thought of him and his choices. Now he found himself dreading his judgment, should his eldest brother ever find out the truth.

"The notebook in your hand," said Zorian, pointing his finger at the book Daimen was tightly clutching in his hands, "is proof that things have happened which you have no memory of. Therefore, should it really surprise you that I am also not how you remember me? I could show you some skills you taught me. Minor things, but things should be immediately obvious as your own magical insights. Would that convince you?"

"I need an explanation," Daimen insisted, clutching the notebook in his hands so tightly his fingers turned white from blood loss.

"I'll give you one at the end of the month," said Zorian. "After the summer festival."

It was amusing. Zorian had used this excuse so many times in the past, while he was still inside the time loop. The only difference was that, back then, this offer meant he didn't really have to explain

anything. The loop would restart before the deadline was reached.

"After this *invasion* of yours," Daimen noted shrewdly.

"Yes. As I said, lives depend on it," Zorian insisted.

"You expect me to help you out for a mere promise of an explanation after the deed is done?" Daimen asked him.

"No," Zorian said, shaking his head. "All I want is for you to take my warning seriously and to make sure the Taramatula do the same. So long as you survive the month and protect your fiancée's family from the invaders, I will consider this a success."

Daimen stared at him angrily for a few seconds, before rising from his log again.

"Let's go," he told Zorian.

"Go where?" Zorian asked, taken aback at the statement.

"To Cyoria," Daimen said matter-of-factly. "You're going back there now, aren't you?"

"Yeah," Zorian admitted. "So you want to go with me?"

"I need to confirm things personally," Daimen said. "And check up on Kirielle, just in case. Let's go."

"Just like that?" Zorian asked for confirmation.

"Is there a problem?" Daimen asked, frowning at him.

"Well, aren't your fiancée and her family going to freak out if you suddenly disappear for a few days?" Zorian told him, cocking his head sideways. "I mean, surely you want to explain things to them before we set off."

Of course, Zorian could just get him back to Koth in a few hours, but Daimen didn't really know he could open a Gate between continents at will...

Sure enough, Daimen's eyes widened in sudden realization and he slapped himself in the forehead a few times.

"Focus, focus..." he mumbled to himself. "Alright, so we're going to put the journey on hold for now. I... need to talk to a few people first."



In the depths of the Ziggurat of the Sun taken over by the sulrothum, a strange meeting was taking place. Zach and Zorian stood before a huge stone dais that contained this tribe's sacred fire. The high priest and his honor guard stood in front of the fire, looking down at the two arrivals. The massive bonfire writhed and crackled in a strange, somewhat ominous manner, casting light and shadows alike on the surrounding walls.

Both sides silently scrutinized each other for a full minute before the sulrothum high priest decided to break the ice.

"Welcome, guests," the high priest said. "We have been expecting you."

"You have?" Zorian asked curiously.

That was quite unusual, since their visit here was completely unannounced.

"The angels have informed us of your coming," the high priest told them.

Of course. Zorian had kind of expected that, to be honest. Funny enough, the angels were not nearly as willing to contact human organizations to help them out. For example, Zach and Zorian had been in secret talks with the Triumvirate Church representatives, and at no point did the angels contact the Church hierarchy to make the negotiations go more smoothly. But a random sulrothum tribe in the middle of the Xlotic desert merited them sending actual instruction? Just what made this tribe of devil wasps so special, anyway?

"Did they inform you *why* we were coming?" Zach asked them.

"You're here to ask for help, of course," the high priest said easily. "A great battle is about to take place, pitting the allies of heaven against an ancient evil."

"Well... yeah, that's what we're here for," Zach admitted after a second.

"We accept," the high priest immediately said.

"Just like that?" Zach asked incredulously, arching his eyebrow.

"What more is there to say?" the high priest asked rhetorically. "Only cowards would shirk from this kind of battle. To fight and die in the name of heaven is glorious. Surely you understand this? I can sense the mark of the angels shining bright on you."

"The mark of heaven..." Zach said sourly. "Yay. What an *honor*."

The high priest's multifaceted eyes stared at Zach for a second, antennae twitching, trying to interpret his statement.

"Children often do not understand the importance of what their parents try to teach them," the high priest eventually remarked.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Zach asked, annoyed.

"Just a random remark," the sulrothum high priest said, waving his hand in front of him dismissively. A very human gesture. Zorian wondered if sulrothum really did that, or if the high priest was familiar enough with human customs to mimic their habits. "I just realized you are quite young in human terms."

"We thank you for your help from the bottom of our hearts," Zorian quickly said, cutting Zach off from continuing the pointless argument. "If it's all right with you, we'd like to discuss battle plans."

"Let's," agreed the high priest.



In a small, out-of-the-way alley on the outskirts of Cyoria, simulacrum number two was painting a picture on a wall. It was a small, abstract picture the size of a human head, vaguely resembling an eyeball if one viewed it from the right angle.

To a casual observer, the painting would likely look like a random graffiti, the likes of which were quite common in Cyoria. The city was crawling with young beginner mages, after all, and they often used their newly gained magic skills to vandalize the walls of nearby buildings. Painting spells were beginner stuff, and nearly every mage was capable of using them.

But the painting was more than just idle amusement. So much more. After half an hour, the simulacrum carefully connected the last two lines of the drawing, causing a faint blue sigil to momentarily flash into existence within the painting, before quickly fading away from sight.

After observing his handiwork for a few more seconds, the simulacrum placed his hand on the painting, activated the spell formula hidden within it, and then dove into it with his mind.

Almost immediately, a sea of glowing suns popped into existence inside his mind, connected by a dense web of light. His mind raced from one sun to the next, his mind sense and telepathy manifesting itself throughout the whole network. There were sigils like this one scattered throughout most of the city by now, and through them, Zorian's mind powers could envelop nearly all of Cyoria. Every building, every street was within his reach. He could see and invade anyone and anything, from the lowest pigeon to the most high-ranking mage...

He quickly retracted his mind from the sigil, afraid he would get noticed by someone. This had to stay absolute secret. No one, not even his closest allies, was allowed to know about the sigil network.

Taking one last look at the painting, simulacrum number two nodded to himself and wandered off to place more sigils elsewhere. Some of these paintings were bound to be found and erased by the city authorities and building owners, so it best if he had some spared scattered around.

"99 telepathy nodes on the wall, 99 telepathy nodes... take one down, wipe it away, 98 telepathy nodes on the wall..." the simulacrum hummed to himself.

He had lots of work to do today.



In of the empty academy classrooms, Zorian and Tinami sat facing each other, both silent.

Well, for a few moments, at least.

"Are you serious?" Tinami asked incredulously. "You can connect me with the legendary aranea?"

"I'm not sure I would call them 'legendary'," Zorian remarked. "They're more common than you'd think, and a bit underwhelming once you get to know them. But yes, I can indeed do that."

He had gotten to talk to Tinami the same way he did in the past – by answering her call to have someone help her practice her telepathy skills. Naturally, the moment she experienced his innate mental skills, she wanted to know how she got them, and that quickly led the conversation to the topic of aranea.

The point of all this, of course, was to get House Aoep involved in preparations for the invasion. They had shown themselves to be quite resourceful and capable the one time he and Spear of Resolve had brought them into the whole invasion conspiracy. The awful, catastrophic outcome of that restart aside, the Aoep had played their part perfectly.

Hopefully the rumors of House Aoep being bad luck were just superstitious nonsense and history wouldn't really repeat itself like that, right? After all, House Aoep couldn't have reached its current status if it was really cursed...

Paranoia aside, he was taking quite a risk by interacting with Tinami like this. Not because he thought House Aoep would mess

up their invasion preparations or anything like that, but because of the attention it would bring to him personally. Officially, Zorian was just connecting Tinami and House Aope with the aranea, and anything else they talked about had nothing to do with him. In practice, there was no way the leaders of House Aope would be naïve enough to swallow that story. This was equivalent to putting a giant beacon on top of his head, telling the Aope leadership that he was worth paying attention to. Not exactly conducive for his plans to lay low after this whole thing is resolved.

Still, there was no helping it. The situation was precarious enough that he needed their help if he could get it.

"You know, you're more interesting than I thought you were," Tinami remarked, giving him a shrewd look.

"Err, thanks," Zorian said awkwardly.

"Not that way," she hurriedly clarified. "What I meant was... you're venturing into the tunnels beneath the city and taking lessons from giant sapient spiders living there. I never would have guessed you were that... driven."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Zorian said after a short pause.

"It is," Tinami confirmed. "By the way, how come you're missing so many classes? You know that looks pretty bad on your record, right? Even if you're more capable than you look, you should still pay attention to your reputation."

"Don't lecture me. You sound like my mother," Zorian told her. Tinami didn't seem amused. "Anyway, I'm really busy with something right now and I can't come to class. I already told my mentor about it and he said it was alright. I should be able to start attending classes again after the summer festival."

Assuming he was still alive and the city remained standing, that is.

"It's your life, I guess," Tinami shrugged. "These meetings... we'll continue with these, yes?"

"Sure," Zorian said. "As long as you wish."

"I get the feeling this is far more to my benefit than yours," Tinami noted.

"Kind of," Zorian agreed. "But I *am* learning thing here, so it's okay. This isn't a zero sum game."

He wasn't even lying. Attending these practice sessions with Tinami would hopefully clue him in on what kind of skill level was considered normal among human mind mages. He had a feeling that would be crucial information in the near future.

Tinami gave him a weird look when he said that, though.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said quickly. "Nothing at all."



In the skies above Iasku Mansion, a lone iron beak was slowly circling the surrounding forest. The huge flock of iron beaks that guarded the place had long since noticed it, and were watching it carefully, but they did feel a certain level of kinship with a fellow iron beak, even if it was a foreign one, so they did not attack it.

The iron beak was actually Zorian, who had used a potion to shapeshift into the said bird. What he was doing was crazy, but if it could work...

He slowly approached the iron beak flock, probing it with his mind and soul, looking for flock leaders and weak links. Sudomir and the invaders had these iron beaks controlled through blackmail, having sized their nests and subverted their leadership, but the flock had never really submitted totally. It was intelligent enough to recognize blackmail and listen to simple orders, but also smart enough to hold a grudge and plot revenge.

For hours Zorian circled the flock, speaking to them mind-to-mind, subtly subverting the mind magic used by invaders to

control iron beak leaders. If it were anyone else doing it, they would have likely made a mistake somewhere and alerted the monster handlers that something was happening and that the flock had gone out of control. But Zorian was good. Too good for the Ibasan monster controllers to detect anything.

As time went by, the iron beak flock paid more and more attention to the thoughts and images being fed into their heads. They were quiet and still, but their eyes shone with increasingly malicious glee.

Soon.



The day of the summer festival swiftly approached. Most of the preparations were complete, but there was always more that could be done and their actions got ever more frantic and desperate as the deadline approached. Perhaps it was just Zorian's mind playing tricks on him, but it seemed to him that even uninvolved people, like Imaya and Kirielle, could sense the heavy atmosphere and became more serious as a result.

As the end approached, Zach and Zorian evacuated most of the people close to them out of the city. Having already seen how that sort of thing could go wrong with their original plan to get everyone to Koth, they did not group everyone together at the same place like they had before. Instead they picked five different sanctuaries and distributed people among them. In addition to Xvim, Daimen also got himself involved with the evacuation, drawing on his own connections and experience to make things go more smoothly.

His brother was still not happy with the amount of secrecy Zorian presented him with, but he seemed to realize the seriousness of the situation in the end, and agreed to cooperate with them until the situation was resolved.

After the summer festival was over, however, he was going to come to Zorian for that explanation he was promised. He was quite vocal about *that*.

Unfortunately, the evacuation wasn't entirely successful. While most people agreed to go into hiding when told there would be fighting in the city during the summer festival, Taiven and Rea refused to go.

In Taiven's case, the reason was exactly what Zorian had been afraid of – she thought of it more as an opportunity to prove herself than a dangerous situation to avoid. She was a fully-qualified battlemage, after all. All she needed now was some actual field experience. Zorian understood all that, but he also understood that she was a known friend of his to their enemies, which meant they would be directing far more forces at her than her skills and reputation warranted. Her combat skills, impressive as they were for her age, were not enough.

Was he selfish for not explaining that to her? Probably. If he told her the invaders would be gunning for her because of him, that would raise all sorts of questions about why that is so, and probably lead to her either finding out everything about him or feeling betrayed and hating him forever for it.

But maybe her hating him forever was worth it if it meant she would survive the month...

As for Rea, she was fine with having her daughter and husband out of danger, but she refused to go into hiding herself. Her explanation for this was that she was confident enough in her own combat skills and had to guard their house from looting. They were a very poor family, she said, and their move to Cyoria had exhausted all of their savings. If their house ended up looted or destroyed, they would be utterly ruined.

Zorian was wracking his head about how to talk her into abandoning the house – when Rea ended up inviting him to her house

on her own initiative. Zorian was quite surprised at this, as this wasn't something Rea typically did. Did she somehow catch wind of his own involvement in all this?

When he finally arrived at her place, however, he was greeted with another surprise: there were two more people already there.

One was Haslush, the detective that taught his divination and that he had already recruited into their anti-invasion efforts. He gave Zorian a curious look, but there was no trace of recognition in his eyes. He probably did not suspect Zorian.

The other was, shockingly, Raynie. His classmate was clutching a cup of hot, steaming tea that Rea brought her with pale fingers, a blank expression on her face. She looked terrible.

It took a while for her to wrench herself out of her thoughts and notice someone had arrived, but when she did she gave him a shocked look.

"Zorian? What are you doing here?" Raynie asked.

"I invited him here," Rea said matter-of-factly.

"Him? He's the guy you said could help me?" Raynie asked incredulously. "But he's just a student! What could he possibly do?"

"I have a feeling mister Kazinski here is more than *just* a student," said Rea, giving Zorian a knowing look. "In any case, why don't you tell Zorian what happened so that he knows what he's dealing with."

Haslush observed the situation calmly, giving Zorian a thorough look but not saying anything. Zorian was really uncomfortable at the whole situation.

Raynie stared at him questioningly for a few seconds, before she once again lowered her head and stared at her tea cup in a defeated manner.

"My brother has been kidnapped," she quietly said.

SACRIFICE

Standing in Rea's home, Zorian ignored the curious gazes leveled at him from Rea and Haslush and kept silent, calmly considering things. A million questions swam through his head. Why were these three gathered in Rea's house, despite the fact they shouldn't even know about each other? Why did Rea think he could help in this situation and what were their enemies even thinking when they orchestrated this kidnaping? Was this some kind of strike against him and Zach? Why not go after all of his classmates, then?

Raynie did not give him a lot of time to ponder those questions, though, and took his silence as a sign she should keep going.

"My family doesn't live in Cyoria, so I didn't even know it happened at first. It wasn't until my family discovered some signs the kidnappers might have originated from Cyoria that they contacted me, several days later, and asked me for help," Raynie explained quietly. "I was shocked. Shocked that it happened, and... umm..."

She fumbled with her words for a few seconds before falling into an awkward silence and lowering her head even further. She looked quite pitiable at the moment.

"That they asked for your help with this?" Zorian tried.

She flinched slightly and gave him a shocked look for a second. Guilt, sadness, and confusion emanated from her in an equal

mix. However, she quickly schooled her expression and cleared her throat with a trace of panic.

"Y-Yes, exactly! I'm just an academy student, what can I even do?" She said hurriedly. "I want to help my little brother, of course, but this is way above me! So I... contacted the police about it... and they eventually pointed me at detective Ikzeteri here, who agreed to help. And... here we are, I guess." She took a deep breath after finishing her explanation and gave Zorian a disbelieving, but slightly hopeful look. "No offense, Zorian, but I'm still not sure how you can help me with this."

"Neither am I," Zorian told her honestly.

He could *help*, of course. How he should go about doing that, however, was something he couldn't decide on at the moment.

Raynie's expression immediately dimmed after his admission, but he didn't let that bother him. He couldn't ruin all their plans just to assure her everything would be alright.

He glanced at Rea and she glanced back at him, completely unconcerned with whether or not she had judged him wrong. What exactly gave her the confidence that he was someone who could make a difference here? No matter how he wracked his head, he couldn't figure it out.

"You're pretty calm about this," Haslush commented from the side, giving him a shrewd look.

"Panicking wouldn't help anyone," Zorian commented, unconcerned with the veiled accusation. That wasn't enough to prove anything.

"That's not how people work, but alright," Haslush said with a light shrug. "I guess you're just an exceptionally calm person."

This probably wasn't a deliberate attack on him and Zach, Zorian decided. While Raynie was one of their classmates, neither of them were very close to her in the time loop. Zorian did feel a certain kinship towards her, due to her messed up family situation,

but Silverlake shouldn't know that. Therefore, Jornak and the rest shouldn't either.

The fact their enemies kidnapped Raynie's brother was probably just an accident. Since Zorian sabotaged their efforts to kidnap shifter children in the city of Cyoria and its surroundings, they looked further away for suitable targets. They *needed* those sacrifices, after all. Without the primordial essence contained in the blood of shifter children, the primordial's prison couldn't be cracked open. In the time loop, the Sovereign Gate could serve as a substitute key, but out here in the real world that wasn't possible.

As it turned out, Raynie's brother was one of the children the invaders ended up targeting in their expanded search. Did they even know they were targeting the family of someone who went to class with Zach and Zorian? Then again, even if they did, they may have thought it wouldn't matter. Raynie's relationship with her family was not exactly the best. It wouldn't be out of line to assume she would be glad to have her brother out of the picture.

"I have to say, though, I'm surprised to see you here," Zorian told Raynie. "I didn't know you and Rea knew each other."

In fact, considering her disdain towards cat shifters, he would expect Raynie to purposely stay away from Rea.

"Err, we don't," Raynie said, giving Rea an unsure look. "Detective Ikzeteri is the one who brought me here. He thought she might be able to help."

"We have received reports of a group targeting shifter children some time ago, so we have been in contact with city shifters about the issue," Haslush clarified, idly studying some kind of metal disc in his hands, flipping it over from time to time. Zorian recognized it as one of the communication devices the cultists and Ibasans sometimes used to coordinate their actions. Apparently the detective hadn't been sitting idly all this time. "Ms. Sashal was one

of the... *less adversarial* contacts we established during that time. I figured it wouldn't hurt to bring your classmate here to see if she had some insight into the situation."

"I'm just a humble housewife, so how could I offer insight into a situation like that?" Rea said with a slight smile, shaking her head lightly. "Still, the mother in me can't help but empathize with the pain of having your little brother stolen away by some heartless fiends. In another life, that could have been my little Nochka in his place, no?"

She gave Zorian a piercing look, but he just raised his eyebrow at her in response.

"What are you implying?" he bluntly asked after a few seconds.

"I know you are connected to the evacuation effort that has been going on recently, and that it's not a minor connection either," Rea told him with an exaggerated sigh. "Your scent is present on almost everyone that has come to talk to me about getting Nochka and the rest of us out of the city. You have several adult friends who all treat you with respect, and even a little deference, more like you're their leader than a precocious teenager. You are known as a diligent and hard-working student, but you've been skipping all your classes for weeks now, doing gods know what."

'Stupid cat shifters and their superhuman sense of smell...' Zorian grumbled internally. He was pretty sure she wouldn't have gotten suspicious and started connecting things if there were no scent clues to attract her attention.

"Plus, when Ms. Sashal mentioned you, I couldn't help but notice that your older brother Daimen, who is said to be in Koth, has been very active in the city lately," Haslush added from the side. He placed the communication disc he was fiddling with in his pocket and focused his full attention on Zorian. "Almost like some kind of emergency has popped up, forcing him to drop whatever he had

been doing to rush back to Eldemar, no?"

"Oh come on. Me and my brother almost never interact with one another," Zorian told him. "You seem to have investigated me, surely you know *that* much? How would I know anything about what he has been doing?"

"But you do know he's here in Cyoria right now?" Haslush pressed.

"Of course. He dropped by to let me know he's in the city. It's just common courtesy. We *are* family, after all," Zorian said with a shrug. He saw no point in telling an obvious lie and pretending he never saw Daimen recently.

"Do you two seriously believe Zorian is some kind of secret agent?" Raynie asked incredulously from the side, her eyes shifting between three of them in rapid succession.

"He definitely knows more than he lets on," Rea shrugged. "Considering the situation, I figured it wouldn't hurt to try to wring some information out of him. It's your brother's life on the line here."

"It, it doesn't have to be," Raynie tried anxiously. "Maybe it's just a ransom thing and they just haven't gotten to state their demands. It's--"

"You're lying to yourself and you know it," Rea said, giving her a knowing look. "When a shifter child gets kidnapped, nine times out of ten it's because the kidnappers want their blood essence. With so much time having passed, it's a question whether your brother is still alive at this point."

Raynie paled at the reminder.

"Let's not be all doom and gloom here. I'm sure her brother is still very much alive," Haslush hurriedly assured Raynie. "The ritual they are kidnapping all these children for is only due to happen on the night of the summer festival. They need to keep her brother alive for a while yet."

"Hm. If you say so," Rea said. "Still, that date is just around the corner. If that's our deadline, we don't really have much to work with."

"Look, what do you even expect of me?" Zorian asked Rea, frowning at her slightly. "I don't know where any kidnapped children are being kept. Do you think I would just sit on that information if I knew?"

It wasn't like Zach and Zorian didn't try to sabotage the primordial release ritual by denying the invaders the needed sacrifices. The problem was that they couldn't possibly round up every shifter child on the continent and hide them away – no matter how thorough they were, their enemies could always throw a wider net and go after some shifter community that Zach and Zorian didn't even know about. Jornak had spent decades preparing for this. Zorian suspected the power-mad lawyer would have found the needed sacrifices no matter what they did.

Of course, if Zach and Zorian could locate the place where the shifter children were being kept, he was all for launching a rescue operation. Without the needed sacrifices, Panaxeth couldn't get free, which would be an automatic win in a sense. It would be worth it to trigger the final battle before the summer festival if they could inflict such a critical blow on their opposition. The problem was that Zorian genuinely had no idea where Raynie's brother could be helped. It could very well be that those children were being kept on Ulquaan Ibas, Koth or some other distant place.

They could be anywhere on the planet, so finding them was like searching for a needle in a haystack.

"I don't know," Rea admitted. "I know you're involved with this somehow, but I don't know in what way. Maybe you really can't do anything for poor Raynie here, but I'm hoping you can. I know she thinks I'm just a scheming, skulking cat, but I really do want to help her."

"What!?" Raynie protested. "I don't--"

"It's fine," Rea said with a chuckle, gesturing with her hand towards Raynie to quiet her down. "I get it. There's too much bad blood between our peoples to let go on a whim. And I get why Zorian here is feeling defensive and denying everything. I suppose it must feel like I led him here into some sort of ambush."

"Didn't you?" Zorian asked, raising his eyebrow at her.

"No... well, yes, I guess I kind of did," Rea admitted. "But considering you've been less than honest with me these past few weeks, I think you should be able to stomach a little underhandedness."

Zorian opened his mouth to defend himself but she raised her palm to stop him.

"I understand," Rea said. "I'm not angry with you. You wanted to get your sister's friend and her family out of danger, but you didn't want to reveal your secrets. I would have probably made the same choice in your place. I'm just curious... was our first meeting really an accident?"

"Yes," Zorian said easily. From a certain perspective it was true. "I'm not terribly social. If my little sister wasn't such a giant busybody and insisted I accompany Nochka to her home, the idea would have never occurred to me. Getting Nochka's bike out of the river so she could stop crying would be enough for me."

"Oh, is that what really happened?" Rea laughed. "You know, Nochka later told me a bunch of mean boys were trying to take her bike away from her and you chased them off and then escorted her home in case they came back."

Oops. He should have synchronized stories with Nochka, apparently. He didn't think it was a big secret!

"Err, of course Nochka's version is the correct one," Zorian assured her. "Don't mind my earlier ramblings, I just got confused for a moment."

"Sure, sure," Rea said indulgently. "It was very heroic of you to defend my precious daughter from random ruffians like that..."

For a while, Haslush and Raynie watched them curiously as they talked, not interrupting their interaction. However, while Haslush was a grown man and an experienced detective, Raynie was just a teenager and under a lot of stress at the moment. As such, she soon became impatient.

"You... Zorian can you help me with this or not?" she loudly asked, impatience and frustration in her voice.

Zorian stared at her for a second before opening his mouth to apologize and tell her he was just an academy student and that there was nothing he could do to help her brother...

...but then he shut his mouth and started thinking about something.

It suddenly dawned on him that their enemies may have made a huge mistake when they kidnapped Raynie's brother.

After a few seconds, he focused back on the redheaded girl staring at him expectantly and stared back straight into her eyes.

"You know what?" he told her. "I actually think there is something I can do. But I'm going to need your help."

Haslush silently leaned forward, his lazy-looking posture shifting into one of alertness.

"Me?" she asked, taken aback. She shifted in her seat uncomfortably. "But I'm just an academy student."

"So am I," Zorian told her. "Here's what we need to do..."



In the port city of Luja, there was a small abandoned warehouse. It was a dark, uninviting place – the walls were moldy and crumbling, the floors were full of rat droppings and glass shards from broken bottles, and the windows and doors were crudely

barricaded with wooden boards. There were a number of such places in Luja, as it was a large port town where trading companies were starting up and going bankrupt on a regular basis. Most abandoned warehouses would eventually find a new buyer and be fixed up into useable condition, but it wasn't unusual for places like this to stay unoccupied for months or even years as old owners tried to hold on to it in hopes of getting a better price later.

As it happened though, this particular place held a dark secret. In the back of the warehouse, shielded from view by a mountain of rotting crates and boards, there was a black egg-like object attached to the floor with a mass of root-like tendrils. Spiral lines were etched into the black oval, beginning at the bottom and reaching all the way to the tip. Perceptive individuals would note that the oval almost looked like a giant black flower bulb on the verge of unfolding into a proper flower.

Or maybe a container, patiently waiting for the day it could unleash its contents upon its oblivious surroundings.

Zach, Zorian and Alanic stood some distance away from the black oval, staring at it grimly. They dared not approach, lest they activate the hidden wards and traps strategically placed around it.

"This is the fourth one we found," Alanic commented. "One in Cyoria, two in Korsia, and now one in Luja. Just how many wraith bombs did these people make?"

"There has to be more than one of these things in Cyoria," Zorian commented. "There is no way they would place two in Korsia and then leave only one for Cyoria. Korsia is important, but Cyoria is a far more critical location. We just haven't found the others."

"There is probably a few in the capital city as well," Zach said. "Jornak seems to have a downright personal grudge with our country's leadership. No way would he miss the chance to strike at them at the heart of their power. Plus, considering what he said about Sulamnon and Falkrine, there's bound to be a few of these bombs

reserved for them as well..."

"We'll never be able to find more than a fraction of them," Alanic commented grimly. "This is going to be a disaster. Entire city districts could end up being devoured by wraiths. The cleanup will take years."

He glanced at Zach and Zorian unhappily, but neither of them said anything. There was nothing to say, really. They knew this as well.

"You still don't know how to neutralize these things without triggering them?" Alanic asked with a trace of resignation in his voice. He already suspected the answer he was going to get.

Sure enough, Zach and Zorian shook their heads in denial.

"They're superbly well made," Zorian told him. "Jornak must have spent ages refining the design in the time loop. Any tampering I can think of will set one off, as well as alert our enemies to our actions. The only way we can deal with these is by employing the same tactics we used on the previous wraith bombs – set up a specialized ward field just outside the bomb's defensive field and try to contain the wraiths once they're released. It should be effective, but I obviously haven't tested it, so..."

"I see," Alanic said. He turned around towards the wraith bomb again, staring at it as if it that was going to suddenly provide him with some new insights. "You don't have to waste time on that. I'll contact the church higher ups and tend them to perform another containment job here. I still say we should trigger these things the moment we find them and deal with the consequences."

"And I still say we shouldn't," Zorian argued back. "These wraith bombs *can* be harmlessly disarmed. Jornak has a method to do so, I'm sure. I just need to rip it out of his head."

"You really think you can do that?" Zach asked doubtfully. "We'd have to capture Jornak alive for that to happen. That seems... difficult."

"These wraith bombs are set to collectively go off the instant Jornak dies, so we want to avoid killing him if at all possible, anyway," Zorian pointed out. "Not to mention the other surprises he may have left for us in the case of his death. For all his megalomania, he clearly realized there's a real chance he's going to lose this conflict and made contingencies to account for it."

Zach snorted derisively.

"Too many contingencies, if you ask me," Zach said. "He put so much time into making sure everyone suffers if he loses... what does he even gain out of that? It's just petty. Sore loser."

"Well, we were just discussing how we should try to capture him instead of killing him outright," Alanic noted. "So it's not *just* pettiness. But yes, I get the feeling this is more than just about power for Jornak. He wants revenge."

"Revenge?" Zach asked, surprised. "On who?"

"Everyone," Alanic said, still staring the black oval in front of them.

The smooth, glossy surface of the object squirmed and shuddered, as if hundreds of worms were moving just beneath the surface, before once again becoming still and quiet. Neither of the three was disturbed at the sight. Wraith bombs did that sometimes. On occasion, one could even see a faint outline of hands and faces on the surface of the oval – leering, maddened, crying, screaming, begging – as if a person was desperately trying to break out from the inside before being forcibly wrenched back into the depths of the device.

"Speaking from personal experience here, maybe?" Zach tried, giving Alanic a curious look.

Alanic didn't say anything for a second.

"I was a very angry person when I was young," he eventually said. "I don't want to talk about it."

All three stayed silent for a few seconds, and Zorian quietly considered the battle-priest's words. Alanic had never told them about his past, and Zorian had always respected that. Truthfully, he sometimes wondered why the man was so helpful to them in the first place. Did he see them as young troublemakers that needed steered from a dark path, just like someone had once steered him away from one? Or was he simply so discerning that he could accurately judge them with even the slightest exposure? Whatever the answer, Zorian was grateful for the priest's help and had no desire to open old wounds if he didn't have to.

As for the priest's speculation of Jornak's motivation... well, it could be true. Jornak – the old Jornak, the one that Zorian had talked to in the time loop – was definitely bitter and resentful about having his rightful inheritance stolen away from him. He could see how that could grow and fester once he became a temporary looper and looked into the abyss of corruption and power plays that was Altazian politics.

In the end, it didn't even matter. No matter what reasons he had, Zorian would still have to defeat him in the end.

"In somewhat unrelated news, Silverlake is gone," Zorian suddenly spoke up, breaking the silence. "The old Silverlake, that is. She just packed up everything portable out of her hideout and disappeared one day. I don't have the faintest idea where she left."

"Do you think she'll join the battle on our enemy's side?" Zach asked, frowning.

"No, I doubt it," Zorian said. "I think she just realized she was being heavily scrutinized by some very powerful forces and got spooked. She's a coward. No way she would dive into this conflict unless someone arm-twisted her into it, and new Silverlake seemed like she wouldn't support that."

"If she's really going to stay out of this, I'm fine with her going away," Zach shrugged. "One less thing to worry about."

"I've heard reports that several mercenary companies from the neighboring countries have taken on secretive, well-paid contracts," Alanic said. "I'm not completely sure but I strongly suspect our enemies have bought themselves some more soldiers from the final battle."

Zach scowled at the news, uttering a nasty curse. Zorian's reaction was more restrained, but his face still darkened in response.

"The invaders have in general been getting restless and increasingly reckless as of late. Their preparations might be nearing their end," Alanic continued, becoming more animated. "What are we waiting for? We should attack now and seize the initiative."

"Well... the idea was always to be proactive and launch at attack before the day of the summer festival," Zach said, giving Zorian a questioning look. "However, Zorian keeps stalling, saying he needs more time. So the timing depends on him, really."

Alanic's eyes softened a bit at the statement, his posture deflating.

"Ah, the situation with Zach, right?" he asked softly. "Did you find...?"

"I'm sorry. I couldn't find a solution no matter where I looked," Zorian said with a wooden voice, not a trace of emotion on his face.

"It's fine," Zach sighed. "I've already come to term with things. I've already written my final will and everything."

"Right. In any case, you're right. There is no point in waiting anymore. We're just giving our enemies more time. We'll attack two days from now, the day before the summer festival. I still have one final idea I want to try," Zorian said.

"The shifter thing?" Zach asked curiously. "You really think that will work?"

"If it does, it will be a huge success," Zorian pointed out.

"True," Zach agreed. "It's worth a try."



Just outside of Cyoria, there was a spherical ritual room made by Zorian and his simulacrum. Everything here was carefully crafted for only one purpose: to power up and enhance one particular divination spell. All of the walls were densely packed with complicated series of lines and endless rows of cryptic sigils, all made from precious metals and rare alchemical materials. The ground was etched with no less than six blood red magical circles, and in the center stood a small golden cube with a seemingly mundane pottery bowl. Hundreds of tiny white stars hung in the air, illuminating the space. These were actually tiny dimensional gates that connected the room to various places in the country and beyond.

Every place that was likely to house the kidnapped shifter children, in Zorian's opinion.

Currently the ritual room contained Raynie, Haslush, Rea, and three of Zorian's simulacrum. Two simulacrum were disguised as adult mages, grim and silent, and were here for the sake of pretending this was a secret government operation, rather than something Zorian set up himself. Only one of them would be necessary for the ritual itself, but having two wouldn't hurt and it would be more realistic for something of this scale to require multiple people to execute.

The last simulacrum looked just like Zorian and pretended to be the original – his job was mostly to stay next to Haslush and Rea and pretend to be normal. Though considering the looks on their faces as they studied the ritual grounds, he felt he mostly failed at that already.

"My, mister Kazinski... I knew you couldn't be normal, but I have to say I didn't expect you're connected to people like *this*..." Rea said quietly. For the first time since he met her, she didn't

sound confident and in control, and he instead sensed a trace of fear in her voice.

"You have no idea," Haslush said, his voice quivering. His reaction was even more extreme than Rea's; he seemed downright horrified by what he was seeing. "More money went into this room than my entire police department gets in a year. And it's all meant to empower one specific spell that is only useful for this one thing! The whole thing will be useless after today! The extravagance is mind-boggling."

Simulacrum number one shifted in place, a little uncomfortable. Zorian's perspective on money was a little skewed, yeah. This could be a real problem in the future, but at the moment he really didn't care. He'd pay twice this much if he thought it would help.

"You don't even understand what this room means, do you?" Haslush asked Zorian, giving him a strange look.

"No?" the simulacrum told him uncertainly.

And he really couldn't. Sure, the room was the best thing he could make on a short notice, which probably made it amazing by regular mage's standards, but he was sure a country as big and influential as Eldemar could pull this off.

It was kind of funny, really... the original went through so much trouble to make his abilities seem more humble than they were and to attribute his achievements to some nebulous government organization. He'd even succeeded. But in the end, the mere fact he was associated with people like that was enough to alarm and awe Haslush and Rea.

He'd normally get a headache out of this, but he was just a simulacrum and wouldn't even exist in a couple of house, so imagining Zorian having to deal with this in the future just made him laugh.

"Ah, forget it," Haslush sighed. "You're still too young and inexperienced. You're tangling with some really dangerous stuff, is all I'm going to say."

"Don't I know it," the simulacrum mumbled.

Raynie, on the other hand, was currently sitting in the middle of the ritual room, next to the golden cube and the bowl, taking deep breaths to calm herself. She was chanting some sort of song to herself in a language Zorian's simulacrum couldn't recognize. It was probably the language of her tribe. The two disguised simulacrams were also sitting around the cube, forming a triangular formation around it together with Raynie. They were naturally far more calm and collected, and patiently waited for Raynie to psych herself for the upcoming ritual.

The pressure on her was enormous. This ritual would succeed or fail purely based on how she performed. Simulacrum number one was certain his fellow simulacrams would perform their part of the ritual flawlessly, but the core part of the divination ritual was something only Raynie could do... because it was her brother they were trying to track down with the spell.

Divination spells were more effective the more they had to work with. In case of tracking spells, the caster needed something connected to the target. A personal item, a drop of blood, things like that. They were even more effective if the caster was personally connected to the target in some way: if they had personally spoken to the target at some point, if they were friends with them, or if they were married to one another.

As far as connections go, though, there were few things more potent than being literal family: parent and child, brother and sister.

And more potent still was to use literal blood magic to form a resonance between their common bloodline.

Finally, there was the primordial essence that existed in the blood of every shifter. Raynie was already a teenager, so most of that primordial essence was gone, integrated into her body and soul. However, traces of it should remain still. Zorian had spent

quite some time with the leaders of the Cult of the Dragon Below, studying their method of releasing Panaxeth, and he knew how they used primordial essence to resonate with the one in the prison and act as a key. The same method could be used to fool any mortal defensive ward or anti-divination method.

Raynie and her brother were siblings. Even if they had never interacted much, the link between them was strong. Blood magic could make it even stronger. They also both had primordial essence in their blood, and that could be used to bypass any form of divination defense the invaders put up around her brother and the rest of the sacrifices.

If the ritual they were about to undertake successfully located Raynie's brother, Zach and Zorian could liberate all the shifter children the invaders gathered during the past few weeks. Not only did that mean doing a good deed and saving a bunch of children from a gruesome death, it would also irreparably sabotage the Panaxeth release ritual. There was only one day before the summer festival. There was no way that the invaders could gather another batch of sacrifices in that short of a time.

There were a lot of ways the ritual could fail, even if they executed it flawlessly. For one thing, Zorian couldn't blanket the entire planet with dimensional gates, no matter how small they were. Not even close. It was possible he had failed to pick the right place to search at, in which case all of this was for naught. It was also possible that the invaders were keeping all the kidnapped children separated until the final moment, in which case they will just end up saving Raynie's brother and no one else. Their enemies also may have gathered enough spare children to form a second group, in which case they could still try to release Panaxeth as normal.

Zorian had a good feeling about this, though. This could work, he was sure of it. The only question now was whether Raynie was capable of doing her part.

The necessary blood magic itself wasn't that difficult. Blood magic was famously easy to perform. Too easy, according to some. Additionally, blood magic tracking spells were a very common use of blood magic and there was no need for Zorian to reinvent the wheel to make one. There were plenty of tried and true methods that Raynie could use for her attempt.

It was still blood magic, however. Raynie would have to ritually cut herself during the casting, and remain clearheaded despite the resulting pain. The mana shaping requirements for successful casting were low, but Raynie was a total beginner when it came to magic, so even that may be too much for her. Finally, whether she succeeded or failed, she would be severely weakened for at least a week after the attempt, and the traces of primordial essence in her blood would be spent.

She had one try. Not one more. If she made even a single mistake, the whole ritual would be ruined, and that would be it.

So Zorian's simulacrum patiently waited, not trying to hurry her up in any way.

Likewise, on the edge of the ritual room, Rea, Haslush and the simulacrum that actually looked like Zorian patiently waited as well.

Well, simulacrum number one patiently waited. Haslush and Rea were clearly anxious as hell about the eventual result of the ritual.

"The center of the ritual circle is protected from sounds, right?" Haslush softly asked simulacrum number one. "They can't hear us if we talk?"

"Yes," the simulacrum calmly said. "It's also protected against outside mana intrusion and the like. Unless you really go out of the way to make yourself known, you shouldn't be able to disturb them."

Of course, simulacrum number one was always mentally con-

nected with his fellow simulacrum and the original, but the two simulacrum participating in the ritual were too experienced and skilled to be distracted by something like that.

"What's up with you, kid?" Haslush complained, glaring at him slightly. "Are you made of ice or something?"

"I'm just naturally stoic," the simulacrum bragged, puffing his chest up proudly. "It's okay, old man, you'll learn how to be as cool as me one of these days."

Haslush clacked his tongue at the response and no longer bothered to talk to him.

"I've looked into your classmate's family situation," Rea commented idly.

"Oh?" the simulacrum said, raised an eyebrow at him.

"It seems Raynie's relationship with her family is... less than harmonious," Rea said, cocking her head to the side and closing her eyes as if listening to something. "Her brother essentially replaced her as the clan heir when he was born. There are rumors that she was extremely resentful about it."

Simulacrum number one said nothing.

"You knew," Rea said after a while.

"Yeah," the simulacrum admitted. "Yeah, I did."

"You think she's going to purposely botch the spell?" Haslush asked, frowning.

"Quite the contrary," Rea said calmly, shaking her head. "I think she's desperate for it to succeed. She probably wished ill on her brother a lot, and now that it finally happened she feels guilty and responsible for it. Shifter tribes have a somewhat superstitious view of curses and wishing misfortune to someone in your head is not just harmless catharsis to a lot of them."

"That's true for a lot of regular people, too," Haslush shrugged. "It's just mages that really disdain that kind of thinking."

Rea hummed thoughtfully, but did not respond. The whole group suddenly became silent as it became obvious that Raynie was finally ready to begin with the ritual.

The red-headed wolf shifter started chanting, softly at first but getting more confident as time went on. Her hand trembled as she raised a dagger above her palm and slashed into it once, twice, thrice... the motions were crude and she cut a little too deeply than was really necessary, but simulacrum number one supposed that was better than being too timid.

She held her bloodied hand above the simple-looking pottery bowl and dropped blood into it. The bowl promptly lit up with glowing blood red lines and diagrams, and a barely perceptible magical pulse spread out from the golden cube upon which the bowl sat. The white stars above them dimmed and brightened like a hundred tiny hearts.

Thin, hair-like streams of blood, barely visible from where simulacrum number one was standing, rose from the bowl and reached for the tiny dimensional gates above it. Raynie loudly gasped and swayed unsteadily as some of her life force left her, some of the threads reaching for the wounds on her hand like dozens of hungry leeches. Overwhelmed by the pain and vertigo, she dropped her dagger and almost collapsed face-first into the bowl in front of her, but with the support of two disguised simulacra and her own willpower she managed to retain consciousness. Gritting her teeth, she started slowly making gestures with her healthy hand.

Finally the last gesture of the spell was made and everything snapped into place. The dimensional gates floating above them shone with blinding light, forcing Haslush and Rea to shield their eyes, and a flood of information entered the minds of the three simulacra present.

So much information. Hundreds of places, most of them com-

pletely disconnected from each other, all of them mixing together into a giant incomprehensible mess. The spell, too vast in scope, struggled to narrow down the search on its own. It passed the task to the caster of the spell. If Raynie was doing this alone, she would have outright failed here... a beginner mage simply wasn't capable of controlling a spell of this sophistication and magnitude. But she wasn't doing this alone. Zorian's simulacrum were present, and they were capable. In fact, a single one of them would have sufficed. Having three of them do this together was just overkill.

After a few seconds, simulacrum number one smiled. Almost immediately afterwards, a quick message was sent to the original by all three simulacrum. It only consisted of a single word.

"Success," simulacrum number one mumbled.



Sitting next to a table full of battle maps, surrounded by Zach, Xvim, Alanic and the rest of the members of their little conspiracy, Zorian suddenly became alert and cleared his throat to get the attention of other people in the room. They immediately stopped whatever argument they were having and turned to him.

"We found them," Zorian said. "Start the attack."



On a peaceful and sunny day, just one day before the summer festival, the city of Cyoria suddenly went to hell. It was around noon when, without warning, dozens of places in the city suddenly launched volleys of magical artillery projectiles to some unseen targets just outside the city. These targets, almost as if they had been expecting something like this might happen, almost immediately responded with a magical artillery barrage of their own. In a matter of minutes, the city was burning. Numerous buildings had

been partially or completely destroyed, and rogue fire elementals started wandering the city, setting everything they encountered ablaze. Neither of the two sides were done yet, though, and the exchange of magical artillery continued on for quite some time.

Then the monsters came. Skeletons, war trolls, giant lizards, massive flocks of iron beaks... all of these came pouring out of the local underworld, spreading chaos as they went. A lot of these invading monsters met a grisly end, triggering hidden traps when they tried to move through upper levels of Cyoria's underworld, almost as if someone had foreseen their invasion routes. A lot more were held back in the depths of the earth, fighting some unseen enemy beneath the city. But even the fraction of the forces that reached the surface was nothing to scoff at.

The final battle had begun. Soon, the leaders of the two opposing forces would clash as well.

THE SWITCH

Cyoria was burning. A number of important buildings had been leveled to the ground by the initial artillery exchange, and several sections of the city were ablaze with sapient fire that deliberately sought to burn as much of the city as possible. The invading soldiers did not help matters, as they had a tendency to set buildings ablaze unless there were defending forces to stop them from running amok.

Despite this, Zorian felt the situation was actually pretty good. Based on the previous invasions he had witnessed in the time loop, he had expected the city to suffer far more than it had so far. The city leadership was extremely quick to react and organize itself, despite the fact that the city hall and main barracks got totally destroyed early on, and the defending forces were far better equipped than he remembered. This was only partially the result of Zach and Zorian's machinations – it seemed that despite the two sides' agreement to keep things relatively secret and low-key, some awareness of what was happening still ended up trickling down to the Cyoria's authorities.

That was good. Zach and Zorian had more important battles to fight, and couldn't afford to come to the aid of the city at this time. It was up to the city itself to douse the fires before they went

out of control and repulse the invaders pouring out of tunnels beneath the city.

Was it cold-hearted of them to leave Cyoria entirely to its own devices in a time like this? A little. However, Zorian firmly believed that what they were doing was the best way to minimize the number of casualties. Getting involved in the city fighting would no doubt cause Quatach-Ichl and other invasion leaders to make their own appearance there as well. It was not in the interest of Cyoria and its inhabitants to have a bunch of ultra-powerful mages duking it out in the city streets.

No, it was far better to go on the offense against the invaders and force the high-level mage fights to happen elsewhere. Somewhere where the invaders would have to worry about collateral damage.

This was why one of Zorian's simulacrums was leading a force composed out of golems, Alanic's recruits, and mind-controlled monsters straight towards the Ibasan underground base. The base held the dimensional gate through which the Ibasan forces intended to retreat once their goals had been achieved, which meant it had to be held at all costs.

Thus, the moment the invaders realized there was a powerful army heading towards their retreat point, they had no choice but to redirect most of their forces to try and stop them. The defenders on the surface probably didn't realize this, but they were fighting a mere fraction of the invading enemies, because most of them were currently busy fighting Zorian's army in the tunnels below.

Well, the original Zorian was busy with other matter entirely, so it was more accurate to say they were fighting an army led by his simulacrum... but on this particular day, it hardly mattered. Zorian and his simulacrums were truly one, their minds fused together to an unprecedented degree. He felt less like a man with a couple of copies running around, and more like a single mind con-

trolling multiple bodies. It was the culmination of all his research into the way Princess and the cranium rat swarms functioned, and he previously did not dare use it outside of a testing chamber. He was afraid of such magic warping his personality and sense of self, especially if used on a regular basis, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

It should be safe to use it just this once.

Hopefully.

Currently, Zorian's simulacrum body advanced confidently towards the mass of enemies blocking the nearby tunnel entrance, unintimidated by their attempt at setting up blockade. His army, composed out of several hundred golems of various sizes, almost a hundred mages that Alanic recruited for their cause, and several hundred hook goblins and other Dungeon denizens, swarmed behind him, waiting for orders.

A pair of shining projectiles, one red, one blue, came flying at him from the enemy barricade ahead. They shone so bright they were painful to look at, at their flight created a startlingly loud screaming sound as they homed in on Zorian. He did not even bother to defend himself; it would be a waste of his limited mana. The huge bodyguard golem that never left his side raised his massive hands in front of Zorian and slapped down the incoming spells like a pair of annoying flies.

They exploded into a pair of blinding explosions that somehow strengthened and reinforced each other, becoming stronger than the sum of its parts, but it simply wasn't enough. The defensive wards of the massive bodyguard golem harmlessly neutralized the blast, leaving Zorian completely untouched.

The golem was left without so much as a scratch, too.

Without saying anything, and before the explosion was even fully over, Zorian pointed the huge magical rifle in his hands at one of the mages that launched the attack and fired. The bullet reached

the target at supersonic speeds, effortlessly punching through the defensive wards Ibasans put on their little barricade, hitting the enemy mage in the chest before he could put up any sort of defense. It wasn't a killing blow, but the mage was out of the fight for the foreseeable future, so it might as well have been. Zorian coldly turned his rifle towards the other mage responsible for the attack, ignoring the barrage of spells coming his way or the target's frantic attempts to coat himself in as many shielding spells as humanely possible.

More than a dozen nearby golems suddenly turned towards Zorian's target, pointing their own heavy rifles at him in a single, synchronized motion.

The mage's shields blocked the first five bullets. Then the other ten or so tore into him and killed him on the spot.

As for the barrage of weak spells that was meant to distract him, it was unceremoniously blocked by a bunch of heavily-build golems that stepped up in front of him to soak them up with their tough bodies and well-made defensive wards.

Zorian gave them a thought, and a screeching swarm of hook goblins, giant centipedes, and cave lizards surged forward and charged the enemy position. The enemy responded by sending hordes of skeletons and zombies forward, and the two groups of expendable meat shields crashed against each other in the middle of the battlefield, attempting to overpower the other.

However, it quickly became obvious that the undead were losing. They may have been fearless, but they ultimately just a mindless mob. Zorian's monster swarm, on the other hand, was more advanced than it appeared. This wasn't the first time Zorian used mind-controlled monsters as meat shields and shock troopers like this, and his methods had evolved greatly over time. His monsters no longer mindlessly charged forward, getting into each other's way and spreading their attacks thin over the entire

battlefield, like they did in the past. Instead, they worked together like a cranium rat swarm, sharing senses, focusing attacks on perceived weak points, ganging up on tough opponents, and sacrificing themselves for the good of the whole if necessary.

Suddenly, Zorian sensed ten mental and soul signatures rapidly moving towards them from all sides, invisibly tunneling towards the back of his army through solid stone.

Rock worms. Zorian scoffed inwardly and telepathically ordered the rest of the army to advance forward. The golems mindlessly obeyed, of course, but some of the Alanic's human volunteers visibly flinched at the mental command, still unused to this form of communication and a little fearful of him. They did obey in the end, though, and this was all that mattered in the end. He had avoided using them so far, both because he was trying to preserve their strength for a battle that really mattered and because he was still very uncomfortable with ordering people into battles where some of them were guaranteed to die. Unlike the mindless golems and the animal-level monsters that made up the rest of his army, the human mages and soldiers were not expendable.

The Ibasans in front of them sent out war trolls to charge out and meet them, probably hoping to capitalize on the moment of shock when the rock worms suddenly burst out of the ground and attack them. That wouldn't be happening, of course. Silverlake must have informed Jornak about Zorian's potent mind magic capabilities, but either the information never trickled down to the people commanding the troops or they dismissed them as ridiculous, or else they would never dare use a ploy like this against him.

It happened in an instant. The charging line of war trolls was only moments away from crashing into the line of battle golems in front of them, perfectly synchronized with the tunneling rock worms that were just about to emerge in the middle of Zorian's army. Whoever was commanding the situation really knew how

to arrange things to deal a maximum amount of damage and confusion in an enemy, and Zorian could literally sense the glee and anticipation in the minds of Ibasan mages as they waited with baited breaths for the inevitable catastrophe to befall the enemy...

...and then Zorian suddenly reached out to the ten approaching rock worms with his mind, tearing through the Ibasan mind-control schemes like they were made of cobwebs, and commanded them to switch targets.

And so they did. Just before the golems and war trolls were about to clash, eight of the rack worms burst out of the floor and ceiling, tackling the biggest, meanest-looking trolls to the ground and breaking their momentum. When the two groups finally met, the war troll regiment immediately crumbled before the pitiless advance of metal puppets. Tougher than steel and armed with scorching hot blades specifically designed to neutralize the trolls' natural regeneration, the golems wouldn't have had an issue even without the rock worms' help. With them distracting the leaders of the war trolls regiment, the war trolls had no chance.

Zorian kept advancing forward. In fact, he had never stopped doing so. As he got closer to the battle between the golems and war trolls, one of the war trolls leaders stumbled in close to him, a rock worm stubbornly wrapped around him like a giant snake. The rock worm kept snapping its massive jaws at the war trolls face, while the war troll used both hands to desperately keep it at bay. Zorian gave a command to his huge bodyguard golem, and the metal puppet reached down with one of its massive hands, grabbed the war trolls by its left leg and picked it up in the air.

The rock worm immediately let go of the troll and found another target to menace, as the massive golem started to spin the war troll above its head a few times and then hurled it straight at the barricade that the Ibasans had set up in Zorian's path.

It wouldn't have been a very effective attack normally, but the

Ibasans were a bit busy at the moment. The last two rock worms that Zorian didn't send after the war trolls were instead pointed at the mages normally responsible for commanding them. Additionally, Zorian's monster horde had mostly dismembered the undead chaff sent to stop them and were currently attacking every available weak point of the barricade in the attempt to break through. As such, they could do nothing but watch as their own war trolls, large even by troll standards and clad in heavy steel armor, spun through the air and physically slammed into the boxy stone cube that served as the core of barricade's defensive wards.

The cube shattered into hundreds of pieces, and the wards covering the fortification immediately went down with it. Without breaking his stride, Zorian retrieved the bulky grenade launcher gun from his back and fired three frost grenades straight into the biggest clumps of Ibasan mages he could see. Barely a moment afterwards, his human underlings joined him in the attack, unwilling to let such an obvious opportunity go to waste, and a wave of energy spells, bullets, and grenades came raining down on the Ibasans.

Demoralized by their repeated failures, the Ibasan forces abandoned their blockade and ran. Zorian was about to command his forces to give chase and thin down their forces when a familiar figure materialized in the air in front of him.

It was a floating humanoid wearing a scarlet red robe, his face hidden beneath a hood that masked his features under a veil of darkness.

Even after unmasking himself to them, Jornak still used his Red Robe outfit to face.

"You have been hiding your abilities when we fought earlier," said Jornak, idly blocking a handful of bullets Zorian's soldiers had fired at him while simultaneously firing a streak of lightning back at them.

The lightning line hit the first target in an instant, killing him on the spot, before arcing from target to target five more times, claiming three more lives and disabling two more. Zorian immediately ordered them all to withdraw. They might have held some usefulness as a distraction, but they would have to die in droves to achieve that, and he didn't want that on his soul.

The Jornak in front of him was just a simulacrum anyway, so it wasn't like they would accomplish much by putting him down.

"We both hid about true abilities," Zorian told him, firing a few rounds from his rifle at the floating figure without missing a beat. Jornak blocked them just as easily as he did the bullets from before, looking completely unconcerned. Some kind of shield specialized in defending against physical attacks like bullets? "There is nothing strange or unexpected about that."

"I really hate those things," Jornak commented. Zorian was pretty sure he was talking about the rifle in his hands. "They caused so much grief and suffering. I wish they were never invented. I'd certainly never use one of those unless I had no choice. I believe Zach feels the same. That's why it surprised me so much when you used one against me the first time we fought. In a way, you're even more honorless than I am."

Zorian did not feel like being lectured to by someone like Jornak, so he simply ordered his golems to attack and prepared to cast a spell. He didn't think the man was really here for a philosophical discussion anyway – he probably just wanted to stall Zorian with pointless talk while the enemy forces converged together and regroup.

Almost simultaneously, both of them hasted themselves in an attempt to catch each other off-guard and let loose three spells each. The walls of the tunnels around them instantly melted, warped, and shattered. They were both unharmed for it. A faint shock-wave of the clash propagated itself to the spot where Zorian's hu-

man army had retreated, prompting them to fearfully retreat even further.

Zorian frowned, looking at the red robed figure in front of him. Truthfully, he had known something like this would happen when he started this attack. He would have been seriously worried if someone hadn't shown up to stop him, since he would soon be approaching the Ibasan base. Their enemies *had* to stop him before he could shut down the dimensional portal they used to shuffle their forces from place to place. Without it, the invasion was finished before it even began.

The trouble was, the original was already fighting elsewhere, and that fight was way more important than this one. This was also the reason why the only serious opposition their enemies had sent to stop him was one of Jornak's simulacrums – they were already pressed elsewhere and couldn't spare anyone else.

Truthfully, this whole operation was a bit of a deliberate distraction. He had never really expected to take the Ibasan base, because most of their forces were busy elsewhere. His main purpose was to lessen the pressure on the city and to threaten the Ibasan retreat point to the point where they would be forced to send someone important to defend it. Both of the goals had been pretty much achieved. The very fact Jornak had been forced to send one of his simulacrums and waste his mana on this was a success. At this point, it would serve his purposes just fine to simply drag this fight out as much as possible, wasting Jornak's mana and preventing him from fully committing elsewhere.

Or he could take a risk and try to eliminate the simulacrum for real – something that would force the enemy to shift even more resources on this conflict, but had a high chance of blowing up in his face if his simulacrum ended up being destroyed in the clash. All of the human recruits that followed him to this place would die soon afterwards, and the Ibasans would once again be free to

focus their effort on the city above.

The indecision only lasted for a moment. He swiftly ordered his golem army into motion and then created a swarm of tiny projectiles around him. Each one was smaller than his thumb and glowed with bright orange light, circling around him like a river of stars. Though seemingly weak, each of the little orange stars contained a force of a fully-powered fireball. They were fast, maneuverable, and Zorian could hold them in reserve until he needed them. He immediately sent three of them at Jornak on curved, complicated trajectories and then followed it up with a lance of force aimed straight at his head.

Jornak's reaction to the small army of golems trying to tackle him surprised Zorian, however. Rather than use magic to evade them or wasting huge amount of mana to batter their spell-resistant bodies, he simply... punched them away. The simulacrum Jornak send here was clearly special in some way that Zorian did not understand, because he possessed downright incomprehensible physical strength. His mere punches send man-sized golems flying away like discarded dolls, and a well-placed kick could easily snap a knee joint and render the golem useless. Worse, Jornak's simulacrum seemed able to regenerate its ectoplasmic body with minimal effort on his part. Twice Zorian managed to severely damage him, blowing off his arm once and piercing a big hole with a force land in his torso the other time, and in both cases the damage went away in mere seconds.

Zorian ordered his bodyguard golem to join the fray, hoping to use its size and powerful wards to simply overpower Jornak with raw strength, but this quickly backfired. Jornak took out three grenades out of his pocket and three them above his head before teleporting out of the huge golem's reach. Before Zorian could order him to withdraw, the grenades detonated without the slightest sound. A web of hair-thin dimensional fractures flashed faintly in

the air, space itself shattering before the magical grenade blast, and enveloped the golem.

As potent as the great golem's defenses were, very few things could stand up to the cutting power of dimensional fractures. The thin black lines went through the golem's bulk with hardly any resistance, snuffing out its animation core and cutting up its bulk into hundreds of tiny pieces.

Zorian could only helplessly watch as his creation, one which had been crucial in his coming this far so easily, fell apart in front of his eyes.

Okay, now he was kind of angry.

He launched all of the fire stars he had circling him straight at Jornak's simulacrum, forcing him on the defensive, and then physically charged straight at him. The enemy simulacrum hesitated for a second, no doubt wondering what had possessed Zorian to do something that stupid, before deciding this was too good of a chance to pass up. He charged as well, rushing to meet Zorian head on. Jornak's simulacrum was clearly far more powerful up close than Zorian's.

Just before they slammed into each other, Jornak's whole body became shrouded in arcing red electricity that reminded Zorian of Quatach-Ichl's favorite spell. In a blindly fast movement, Jornak's hand flashed forward and punched straight through the chest of Zorian's simulacrum. Despite being made out of metal and alchemically treated materials, his body provided very little resistance before the ectoplasmic hand, which passed through him like a very sharp blade. Damaging red lightning immediately began spreading itself through the chest cavity of the simulacrum, irreparably damaging sensitive components.

Zorian ignored the damage. Instead, he reached out with both hands and firmly gripped the hand sticking out of his chest. Realizing that something was wrong, Jornak's simulacrum tried to

wrench its hand free of the grasp, but he wasn't fast enough. Hundreds of mana threads erupted out of Zorian's palms, burrowing themselves into Jornak's ectoplasmic flesh.

Jornak's simulacrum shuddered and twitched as it tried to move, but failed to wrench itself out of Zorian's grasp. Even as Zorian's chest started to flake off around the hand stuck in it, internal components seeping out as fine black sand, Jornak's own form was getting blurrier and more indistinct. Moreover, the degradation of Jornak's simulacrum was clearly progressing faster than that of Zorian's own puppet body, more and more mana threads spreading throughout its ectoplasmic form and disrupting it on a fundamental level.

"You..." Jornak croaked incredulously, before his entire body, red cloak and all, warped and flickered like a badly-made illusion and collapsed into smoke.

Zorian's own simulacrum body then promptly collapsed on the floor, now that Jornak's hand was no longer keeping his body standing. His internals were far too ruined for him to move his limbs anymore, and just about the only thing he could still move was his head.

Eventually, the human soldiers under his command decided to check things out and cautiously approached the place of the battle.

"Hey," Zorian suddenly called out from the ground, where his crumpled simulacrum body lay motionless. A bunch of people looked at themselves before the closest soldier pointed to himself curiously. "Yeah, you with the beard. Cut off my head."

"I beg your pardon?" The man asked, shocked.

"I can't move my body so it's mostly just useless weight at this point. Sadly, none of my golems are too good at fine manual dexterity, so it's up to you to cut off my head and carry it with you. You'll be my official head carrier from now on."

The man gave the body on the floor a strange look before sighing.

"This is not what I signed up for," he mumbled under his breath.



At the same time, one Zorian was fighting in the tunnels beneath Cyoria, but he was also in Koth, preparing to participate in the assault on the Ibasan base there. Jornak had made a portal link to Koth earlier in the month, in order to eventually take Zorian's friends and family hostage, and now there was a small Ibasan base hidden out there in the jungle, relatively close to the Taramatula estate.

Zorian couldn't tell if Jornak still placed any hopes on this plan. On one hand, the base was still there and the portal connection was not shut down – surely their enemies would not have done this if they knew that Zorian had opted out of using the Taramatula estate as his sanctuary? On the other hand, the base looked pretty small and understaffed to Zorian's eyes. Just a single regiment of war trolls and a small horde of undead, led by a handful of human mages? This was a pretty half-hearted operation.

Or that's what *he* thought, anyway. Orissa and the other Taramatula around him apparently did not share his sentiments.

"What a nasty surprise these people had planned for us. This would have been a disaster if the attackers had caught us off guard," Orissa commented.

"I've seen you fight," Zorian said, frowning. "A House with several dozen mages like you should have no problems repulsing a force like this, even if the war trolls and undead are more resistant to bee attacks than most targets."

Since most of their attention was placed elsewhere, Zorian was here only as a simulacrum. Moreover, he did not have any army of

golems with him like the simulacrum beneath Cyoria did. He was here mostly as an advisor than anything – the Taramatula would be the one who did all the fighting.

"You did?" Orissa asked curiously. "How strange. I don't remember fighting anyone while you were around. Still, while I thank you for the compliments, the simple counterpoint to your claim is that our House *doesn't* have several dozen mages like me. I am very much exceptional, both in talent and the amount of resources that have been spent on me. Most of the members of our House aren't particularly good at fighting to begin with. Most of them are primarily trackers and surveyors, using their bees purely to find things and fighting only as a last resort."

"Ah," said Zorian, wincing a little internally. Yes, he probably shouldn't take someone like Orissa to be the benchmark for your average member of the House. "So why did you insist on making this attack, then? Why not just defend your estate like I advised you to?"

"There is too much risk involved in that," Orissa said. "If our main hives are damaged in the fighting, it would be a huge blow to our operations. But more importantly... the elders want that portal."

Zorian raised his eyebrow at her. The portal... of course. The base Jornak made for this operation connected Koth directly to Al-tazia, bridging the vast distances between two continents with a permanent dimensional connection. The value of this was incalculable.

"And... you think you can take out this force, which you aren't sure you could defend against effectively, in such a way that you can seize the portal intact?" Zorian asked her curiously.

"There is a chance, yes," Orissa told him with a mysterious smile. "In a direct fight, I wouldn't be too confident of my chances, but thanks to your information we have a chance to take them

off guard. If we can sneak in enough bees into their base without them noticing, then their first indication of an impending attack will consist of getting swarmed by hundreds of magical bees each."

"You'd have to make sure to get them all or the whole thing will fail," Zorian pointed out. "If even one survives the initial attack, he will close the portal."

"Of course," Orissa. "That's why it's important to be patient and do this slowly. You said there was no rush, yes?"

"None," Zorian admitted. This fight was relatively irrelevant in the grand scheme of things. If the Taramatula could really seize the portal, Zorian supposed they could send in some of their forces to the other side to assist them, but that was unlikely to be decisive in any way. "In fact, I wholly support your decision to be careful."

"Less chance of your needing to pull us out of the fire if we flounder?" Orissa asked knowingly.

"I'm just a moderately talented teenager," Zorian said. "I could hardly turn the tide of battle all on my own."

"Yes, I'm sure," Orissa said. "How many living people did you say were in the base?"

"Twenty eight," Zorian said with barely a thought. He then quickly pointed out to her where exactly everyone currently was so her forces wouldn't waste time scouting the base for no reason.

"You know exactly where everyone in that base is, even from this distance," Orissa said lightly. "But you're just a moderately talented teenager? Your brother should have taught you how to lie better."

"It's just a standard mind sense that all psychic people have," Zorian protested. "Just an innate ability, nothing more."

"I'm quite sure that Daimen couldn't replicate what you just did, despite being way older than you," Orissa said.

Ugh. Why was he so bad at this 'look relatively normal' thing? This was going to be a real problem in the future, he could already

tell...

"You know what? I'm shutting up now," Zorian sighed. "You have a surprise attack to plan, so you should get on that, and I'll... just stand on the sidelines and let the adults handle everything from now on. Please protect me, Daimen's fiancée. My brother will never forgive you if you get his beloved little brother killed."

She set loose some of her bees on him for that.



Zorian was in the tunnels beneath Cyoria, he was in Koth, and he was even in the academy in Cyoria, setting things up in case things failed to develop as they hoped.

But mostly he was at Iasku's Mansion.

In fact, Zach, Xvim, Alanic, Daimen, and most of their forces were also at Iasku's Mansion... because that's where the Ibasans held their kidnapped shifter children.

It was a bit of an obvious choice, in retrospect. It was heavily defended, it was really far from any other civilization, and it had a gate connection to the Ibasan base beneath Cyoria.

However, there had been lots of 'obvious choices' when it came to the place where the Ibasans held the shifter children, and the cost of attack Iasku Mansion was huge. It wasn't something they would be willing to commit to unless they *knew* there was something of critical importance there.

Well, now they knew, and the mansion and its surroundings had become the site of a bitter battle. Zorian's real body was here, standing on the back of Princess as the forest burned and shuddered around them. Thousands upon thousands of undead were charging at them, ranging from simple undead boars to towering mountains of stitched up flesh that could rival even the biggest of Zorian's golems in size. Zorian's golems took care of most of them,

tearing into them with grenade throwers and dismembering them with giant blades, but there was just too many of them...

Fortunately, Princess was unafraid of the horde of the walking dead, and her eight heads were ever-vigilant. Any undead that dared approach her was immediately dealt with, with Zorian not having to do anything.

Immediately behind the undead horde was a rapidly approaching mass of monsters – mostly war trolls and winter wolves, with a huge swarm of iron beaks hovering above them, cawing ominously. Some rock worms were moving invisibly beneath the surface of the earth, but their controllers were wiser than the ones beneath Cyoria and made sure the worms avoided Zorian like a plague and stayed as far away from him as possible.

And in the distance, perched on the roof of the mansion, were three dragons staring intently at them.

Three live, perfectly healthy dragons, completely unrelated to the skeletal monstrosity hidden in the depths of Iasku Mansion.

Oganj and his two students, Zorian was sure. They weren't doing anything for now, but Zorian knew this wouldn't last as they got closer to the mansion itself.

The attack was meant to be a surprise, but their enemies had clearly been ready for them anyway.

Well. It would have been nice to catch their enemies completely off-guard, but he had never really thought this would be an easy battle, anyway.

After some back and forth with Zach, Zorian gave a silent signal to the menacing mass of iron beaks in the sky and suddenly the whole flock swerved to the side as one, before letting loose a massive volley of knife-like feathers at the seemingly empty patch of land.

Distant screams filled the air as the mages who were moving there under the cover of invisibility suddenly came under attack

by the forces they believed were on *their* side.

Before the enemy mages could regroup, Zorian ordered Princess to charge forward towards the mansion. She did so with relish, but not before letting loose a challenging roar from all eight of her heads at the trio of dragons in the distance. Clearly riled up by the provocation, one of the dragons shook and almost flew up in the air to intercept her, but the biggest of the dragons casually slapped him down with his tail and gave him a silent glare. Visibly chastised, the smaller dragon immediately backed down.

Zorian was impressed. Although Oganj was clearly the biggest and meanest of the trio, the other two were still adult dragons. They were not known for accepting such clearly subordinate positions lightly. Oganj must be more than just a good mage if he could convince a pair of adult dragons to follow his orders like that.

In any case, Princess was like an eight-headed train that didn't need train tracks to get around. Her great speed and bulk meant that she could simply barrel through the undead horde with minimal resistance, trampling smaller corpses without slowing down and knocking the bigger stuff aside to continue forward.

Then Alanic and his fellow mages finished their spell and summoned a fiery twister inside the heart of the undead horde, where it began to suck in the undead towards the center and got increasingly bigger and stronger the more undead it consumed.

Zorian had seen that spell before, and now he even knew what the secret behind it was. The fire twister was actually trapping the souls of the undead it consumed and used them to power itself, which was why it seemingly never ran out of mana and only got stronger as it killed more and more undead. It was a rather dark piece of magic by church standards, almost *necromantic* in the way it functioned, but fighting fire with fire and all that. The fire twister would release the souls it had gathered when the spell eventually ended, letting them move on to the afterlife.

Before Zorian could celebrate too much, hundreds of red figures poured out of the mansion, flying into the sky. Zorian squinted at the sight, finding the enemies in front of his unfamiliar. They looked almost like bats, but with disturbingly humanoid bodies and faces, and a snake-like tail trailing behind them. The tail had a toothy mouth at the end, Zorian eventually realized, and the tails moved around like they had a mind of their own.

[Demons,] Alanic sent to him through their telepathic link.

[Minor or major?] Zorian asked.

[There is no such thing as a minor demon,] Alanic answered him. [But I suppose these would count as 'minor'.]

Zorian clacked his tongue. Sadly, due to the way the time loop functioned, he had no experience at all in how to fight something like this. All he knew was that demons were an incredibly diverse bunch, with many strange powers that sometimes varied from individual to individual, never mind different species. Fighting them was almost as bad as fighting a human mage. You never really knew what to expect.

[Let us handle them,] another voice demanded over the telepathic link.

Zorian didn't argue, he gave his permission and a swarm of sulrothum suddenly rose into the sky with a terrible buzzing sound and flew off to intercept the demon bets.

For a while, Zorian busied himself with guiding several severing discs and decapitating war trolls and winter wolves while Princess trampled everything in her path, but gradually things began to bother him. Things were going pretty good, but he couldn't help but feel that this was because the mansion defenders weren't really giving it their all to stop them. They were just sending disposable troops to buy themselves more time for... something.

The fact Oganj and his two students were just sitting there on the mansion roof and watching the battle with seemingly no inten-

tion to get involved was especially bothering him. Why were the freaking dragons not attacking!?

Hell, they hadn't even sent the skeletal dragon into the fray!

He nervously fingered the cube given to him by the angel he summoned, wondering if he should—

No. No, this wasn't the right time. Using it now would be a mistake. Something in the back of his mind insisted that this was true.

He put the cube back into his jacket pocket and made a quick conversation with Zach, Alanic, and everyone else.

Soon, an absolutely massive creature rose into the air in the distance before rapidly approaching. It was the Sulrothum holy beast, the massive sandworm that had given them so much trouble when they had tried to fight it. Now it was on their side. Flying on hundreds of translucent butterfly-like wings, the worm made a beeline for the three dragons.

At the same time, the others also made their own moves. Zorian projected a blast of repelling force in front of Princess, knocking aside some troublesome opponents that had halted her advance and ordered her to head straight for the mansion and its guardian dragons, damn everything else. Meanwhile, a milky white orb suddenly rose in the air, carrying Zach, Xvim, Alanic, and Daimen towards the dragons with incredible speed and agility.

The dragons immediately realized they were being targeted, and rose into the air as one. Oganj bellowed out something to his two students and they each picked their own opponent – the left one went to intercept Zorian and Princess, the right one flew off to engage the massive sandworm in the sky above the mansion. As for Oganj, he seemed to have identified Zach's group as the biggest danger out of them all, and thus something he should deal with personally.

Zorian was modest enough to admit the dragon mage was

probably right.

In any case, once Oganj decided it was time to fight, he did not hold back in the slightest. Zach's sphere was too fast and maneuverable for the great dragon to dodge it or breathe fire on it, so he instead reached for his magic. Waving his hands in a surprisingly human-like gesture, Oganj created an incandescent white sphere in his hand and thrust it in the sphere's general direction.

Even though the attack wasn't aimed at him, and he was quite a distance away, Zorian could still feel his neck hairs raise at the amount of mana Oganj poured into the spell. Dragon magic was bullshit.

Thankfully, all of them were quite unusual in their own way, and Zach had three other people supporting him. Before the destructive sphere could actually get close to Zach's sphere and detonate, space started to bend around it, like something invisible was being wrapped around it, and then the sphere seemingly winked out of existence.

Moment later, a terrifying detonation sounded in the distance. Xvim had teleported Oganj's projectile away into a nearby region, but its detonation still sent vibrations to Zorian's chest and lit up the sky like a second sun.

Gods... no wonder Zach had died to Oganj so many times. How were they even supposed to fight someone like this!?

"Watch out, you stupid savage!" Sudomir's voice suddenly echoed all around the mansion, magically amplified and projected so that it could be heard clearly in the whole region. "You're lucky they got rid of that projectile or you'd have leveled the whole mansion! Since when is this kind of magic acceptable when you're defending a place!?"

"Shut up!" Oganj yelled back in clear human tongue, his voice just as loud as Sudomir's, despite using no magic to amplify it. "I know what I'm doing! Go whine to your dead wife instead of both-

ering me when I'm fighting!"

Zorian ignored the bickering between Sudomir and Oganj, because he had more immediate issues to worry about. Oganj's student was probably not as powerful as his master, but he was still a dragon mage and he was coming for him.

Zorian fired a force lance at the incoming dragon's wing, hoping to ground it. Dragon flight was magical, but they still needed their wings intact if they wanted to use it, so wing membranes were a big, well-known weakness.

Too well-known, apparently. The dragon tried to swerve out of the way of the force lance, but when Zorian reveled he could make the lance pivot in the middle of flight and change directions on a whim, he found out that the dragon also erected a shield around himself just in case. The force lance hit the shield and shattered harmlessly upon it.

Visibly narrowing eyes at Zorian and Princess, the dragon took a deep breath and fires a stream of fire at them. Apparently this dragon practiced magic that allowed him to shape his breath into various projectiles like exploding fireballs and fast-moving beams of flame.

He still couldn't hit Princess. With her eight heads and her strangely-shaped body, she kind of looked like she should be clumsy and slow... but she was a divinely-enhanced beast and this impression was totally wrong. Princess was both fast and maneuverable, and not only did she skillfully dodge every projectile the young dragon mage directed at her, she even found the time to pick up various loose stones and small winter wolves that hadn't moved away fast enough and hurl them straight at the dragon in the air. She was a pretty good shot, too.

Plus, of course, she had Zorian riding on her back. Whenever she couldn't dodge something, he would just deflect it away while periodically annoying the dragon with simple force projectiles. He

was pretty sure that this was the dragon that had wanted to fight Princess when she had bellowed out a challenge at the start of the battle, so he should be a fairly irritable sort.

Annoyingly, the dragon had placed mental shields on itself before the battle had even begun. They weren't much, but dragons were already a pain to affect with his powers, even without dedicated mental defenses, due to their magic resistance. The mental shield, crude as it was, simply made the idea of targeting it with mind magic a complete non-starter.

Thankfully, Zorian's hopes about the dragon's irritability proved to be correct. After repeatedly dodging his projectiles and harassing him with force spells, the dragon had apparently had enough. He could have continued flying high, outside of Zorian's and Princess's effective reach, but instead he decided to descend closer to the ground so he could catch them with a more powerful attack.

It was a good attack, Zorian had to admit. The dragon created a translucent blue ball in front of him and launched them at the pair. As it got closer, it suddenly extended into a large gelatinous dome and trapped them inside it. Princess tried to bit through it, but the gelatinous barrier resisted her effort and even glued one of her jaws shut, forcing Zorian to cut her free. Meanwhile, the dragon clearly took time powering up some kind of massive fire spell that would incinerate them both to ashes, now that they were both trapped in a small area with no way to dodge.

Unfortunately for him, Princess could teleport.

Just before the dragon could release his spell, Princess quickly curled up into a ball and disappeared from her gelatinous prison, taking Zorian with her.

Before the dragon could realize what happened, he had already launched the fire attack at the empty dome, wasting his spell and hitting nothing. Then Princess popped into practically next to him

and Zorian quickly fired a whole bundle of severing whips at the dragon's torso.

Being considerably tougher than a human, the dragon mage was not cut into tiny chunks by the severing whips, but they did cut into his flesh, drawing blood and wrapping too tightly around him to be easily dislodged. Especially since any struggle would just worsen his wounds. Zorian anchored the severing whips to Princess's back and ordered her to *pull*.

She did. The dragon let loose an almost girlish scream and he plummeted to the ground, severing whips digging ever more deeper into his flesh. Before he could gather his bearings Princess was already upon him, heads biting and snarling, and they both went down in a tangle of limbs and necks. The fight quickly degenerated into a weird but vicious wrestling match, the dragon and divine hydra rolling around the ground, knocking down small trees and smashing boulders into powder.

As for Zorian, he had thankfully already jumped off Princess's back when she went after the downed dragon, and was currently flying towards the other two dragon fights in a similar milky white sphere than Zach used to confront Oganj. He felt a little bad leaving Princess to fight the dragon on her own, but he had faith she wasn't going to get herself killed in his absence. She was a pretty tough girl.

The other two fights, he soon realized, were still ongoing. In fact, they had merged into some kind of confused combined battle, thanks to two facts. One, Oganj's student couldn't really stop the flying sand worm – he could keep it busy, but the sand worm was too big and massive for the relatively tiny dragon to stop it from going wherever it wished. Secondly, the iron beaks decided, on their own initiative, to pick a fight with the two dragons. Zorian had no idea how that had happened, since picking up a reason from the minds of iron beaks itself proved unhelpful – they just very,

very angry and apparently hated the three dragons from the very moment they had shown up and 'arrogantly' claimed the mansion's roof like they owned the whole place.

Compared to dragons, the iron beaks were nothing. However, there was a lot of them, and they knew when to attack and when to retreat. Moreover, Zach and the others were protecting them, since they found the vicious corvids useful as a distraction.

Also, apparently Sudomir really didn't like the fact his mansion, which contained his beloved wife's spirit, was being in danger by all this fighting around it. As such, his voice constantly sounded from the mansion, shouting instructions at the two dragons and insults at Zach and the others. He was starting to sound increasingly incoherent as time went by, and by the time Zorian got close to the battlefield, the man had apparently had enough.

The roof of the mansion crumbled and the skeletal dragon hidden inside the top half of it started to pick itself up from the rubble.

Oganj gave the skeletal dragon an angry, and the mansion itself, a contemptuous snort before focusing back on his current fight.

Of course, the other combatants wouldn't allow another powerful creature to join the fight like that, so before the skeletal dragon could launch itself into the air Daimen suddenly materialized a giant ectoplasmic body around himself and tackled it off the roof and into the ground below. Daimen had once used this spell to tangle with Princess, back before they had realized how to take control of her, and now it was being used to restrain Sudomir's skeletal dragon.

Sadly, Sudomir was no amateur when it came to building his artificial horrors, and the skeletal dragon wouldn't be so easily restrained. Daimen gave it his best, but it was clear that he was losing... and none of the others could afford to turn their back on the other two dragons to give him a hand.

But Zorian, who had just arrived on the scene, could.

Before the two dragons could react, Zorian reached into the imperial orb that he carried with him and an absolutely massive golem popped into existence. It was six meters tall and fully made from gleaming, nigh-indestructible metal. The ground sank under its weight as it barreled towards the skeletal dragon being desperately pinned to the ground by Daimen's conjured giant. Perhaps it was just Zorian's imagination, but he could almost see an expression of pure panic in the dragon's empty eye sockets just before the metal colossus jumped on top of him and brought down its heavy spiked fists right on top of its skull.

Sadly, the moment was slightly ruined by the fact said heavy metal fists didn't shatter the skeletal dragon's skull into tiny fragments with a single blow. Instead, the golem 'just' chipped the skull and ended any hope it had of getting into the air, where its maneuverability would make a huge threat to everyone on the enemy side.

Before Zorian could celebrate and focus on grinding the stupid bone dragon to dust, though, a strange ripple emanated from the mansion, causing both him and everyone else to halt in his tracks.

"I really hoped this wouldn't be necessary..." Sudomir's voice sounded again, this time sounding calmer and more subdued.

[Shit!] Zach suddenly swore over their telepathic connection, and then Zorian's entire perception lurched and twisted. His vision warped, his knees buckled and bile rose to his throat, threatening to make him puke.

He immediately recognized the symptoms. It reminded him of a botched teleportation spell, except...

He quickly looked around. He was still next to Iasku Mansion, the colossus golem was still holding the skeletal dragon pinned to the ground not far from him, and the iron beaks cawed frantically in the sky above, their synchronized murder-flock wobbling chaot-

ically in a disorganized fashion. He was impressed they hadn't dropped from the sky when the dizziness hit them.

Beyond the Iasku Mansion, though, Zorian could see a building. A familiar building. And in the distance, he could see burning fires and hear the sound of city defenders facing off against marauding war trolls and hordes of undead.

It took him only a moment to realize what had transpired. During the last planar alignment, a group of mages managed to perform an incredible feat of transplanting their city from one continent to another. Compared to that, what Jornak and his allies did was relatively tame in comparison.

They had simply switched Iasku Mansion and its surroundings space with a piece of Cyoria.

Zorian sighed. He gave a mental order to the colossus golem and he brought down his fist once again on the skeletal dragon's skull, this time shattering it to pieces, causing the rest of its bony body to fall limp and lifeless.

Despite all their attempts, it would all end here in the end.

In the sky above, Oganj gave a bellowing roar as the battle began anew.

GIANTS

In the middle of Cyoria, relatively close to the massive bottomless hole around which the city was built, there was an anomaly. A large mansion sat there like a lonely sentinel, surrounded by trees. No road led to it, and the surrounding forest was far too thick and wild for a city park. The area was perfectly circular, even cutting several buildings in half at the edges, as if someone had switched a portion of the northern forest with a random city district with zero care as to how it would naturally fit inside.

Which is exactly what had happened, of course. While Zorian and the others had been fighting the dragons and trying to break into Iasku Mansion, their enemies had been performing a powerful teleportation ritual to send said mansion straight into the heart of Cyoria, right next to the place where the primordial release ritual were to take place.

Zorian took a few moments to replenish his mana reserves a little and marveled at the sheer audacity of the feat. He had been curious for a while now why Quatach-Ichl, Silverlake, and Jornak weren't helping their dragon allies defend the mansion. Now he knew. This kind of ritual spell wasn't something that could be done on a whim, or stopped in the middle without consequences. Quatach-Ichl, Jornak, and Silverlake were probably all required to

pull this off, and they absolutely couldn't afford to get distracted for even a moment. That's why they got the three dragon mages to guard them at this critical time. That's why they were so defensive in general.

They should have pushed them harder, Zorian thought to himself regretfully. If they had held nothing back right from the start and tried to break into the mansion with absolutely everything at their disposal, then maybe...

He shook his head, putting such thoughts to the side. This was no time for regrets and hypotheticals. Besides, in a way, luck had been on their side. Zorian had not invested too much time studying these kinds of ritual spells, but everything he knew about them told him they had to have started the ritual a long time ago. Long before Zorian had given everyone a signal to start the attack, Jor-nak and his allies had started casting their spell. If they had moved any slower, it was possible the fight would have started with the mansion's sudden teleportation in the middle of Cyoria. Now *that* would have been a disaster!

He observed the battleground around him, trying to figure out his next course of action.

Princess had been too far to get caught in the teleportation effect, which meant she was effectively out of the fight. It would take too much time and mana to get her to Cyoria, assuming she could even finish her fight with her draconic opponent in a timely manner. The sulrothum's flying sandworm had also been left behind, being far, *far* too big for the teleportation spell.

On the bright side, both of the divine beasts had tied up one of the dragon mages through their efforts. The one Princess had been fighting was obviously too far to get teleported, and the second one had been hit by the sandworm and flung into the distance at the time the teleportation effect hit, causing it to be left behind as well. The only dragon mage left now was Oganj, who was cur-

rently fighting Zorian's allies in the sky above the mansion.

Unfortunately, Oganj was by far the most powerful dragon mage out of the three. And they were now fighting above a highly populated city, where collateral damage was very much an issue.

On the bright side, Zach and his entire group had followed Oganj to Cyoria, and they were joined by most of the iron beaks and the sulrothum. Zach and the other human mages were currently busy keeping Oganj from leveling down the city, but the other two were basically unopposed. Under the leadership of their high priest, the devil wasps had thoroughly beaten the demon bats, and were currently just mopping them up. As for the iron beaks, they were quickly recovering from their sudden change in scenery and their fighting spirit didn't seem lessened by the experience. Both groups would soon be free to join the other battlefields.

Which was good, because a flood of war trolls, various monsters, undead, and enemy mages suddenly started pouring out of Iasku Mansion.

Zorian was not surprised by this. Why else would their enemies bother transporting the entire Iasku Mansion to Cyoria unless it was filled to the brim with troops? Still, he was kind of surprised that they managed to keep so many of their forces in reserve like this. The amount of soldiers and monsters they had placed beneath Cyoria to fake the main attack wasn't small, and they had also lost a great many of their minions trying to delay them from reaching Iasku Mansion. Jornak and Quatach-Ichl must have been far more active with recruiting than they thought. It wasn't just the Altazian mercenary groups, either – looking at the enemy forces spreading out into the city, Zorian could see that many of them were of clear Ulquaan Ibasan origin. Quatach-Ichl must have paid a heavy price to reinforce his existing soldiers with these new ones.

This was a risky move by the ancient lich, Zorian felt. There were too many Ibasans here for them to retreat from the city in

a timely manner, even with the help of a permanent dimensional gate. The plan was probably for the Ibasan forces to retreat the same way they had come in: by retreating to Iasku Mansion and then have it teleported again, this time out of the city. However, this was something that was much easier to disrupt than his original plan, which meant Quatach-Ichl risked losing a lot of forces today.

Idly, Zorian wondered how a huge loss in lives and tamed monsters here would reflect on Quatach-Ichl's reputation back on Ulquaan Ibas, before deciding this wasn't the time for such thoughts. He directed the iron beaks at these new forces threatening the city, and sent a message to the Sulrothum asking them to support them. He received no response from the sulrothum high priest, but the devil wasps did start to fly towards the forces exiting Iasku Mansion, so had they clearly gotten the message.

He also sent a signal to the academy. Up until this moment, the academy staff had taken a purely defensive stance and had not gotten involved in the city fighting much, but an improvised combat force had long been gathered and organized. Now that a mass of enemies had materialized practically on their doorstep – the academy was also close to the Hole, after all – they also began pouring out and started to actively confront them.

As for Zorian, he did nothing to help their allies against the enemy forces running amok in the city. He'd done all he could for them. They would lose or triumph based on their own merits. Instead, he kept replenishing his mana and waited for-

Ah. They were finally here.

Quatach-Ichl, Silverlake, and Jornak. The three of them marched out of Iasku Mansion once the flow of troops leaving their base had slowed down to a trickle, their bearings proud and their steps never faltering. All three of them were as Zorian had come to know them. The ancient lich was in his skeletal

battle form, black bones encased in gold-decorated armor and the imperial crown placed securely on top of his bony head. Sickly green light emanated from him, something that he now knew was a visible trace of a powerful ward anchored to the fancy armor he was wearing. His appearance wasn't *just* for the sake of appearances and intimidation. Jornak was still dressed in that distinctive red robe he loved to wear, his face hidden in darkness. Truthfully, Zorian still often thought of him as 'Red Robe' in his head, even though he was completely sure of his identity by this point. Finally, Silverlake was looking the most relaxed out of the three, dressed in an expensive red dress, hands clasped behind her back as she was looking around at everything around her. Zorian couldn't really hear her due to the distance between him and their group of three, but she seemed to be quietly humming some kind of tune as she walked. It was hard to connect the beautiful, black-haired woman in front of him with the withered old witch he had come to know in the time loop, but they were clearly one and the same.

All three were under the effect of mind blank. Of course.

Two more new arrivals also caught his attention. At the same time their three main enemies marched out of the mansion, a large procession of people in robes also left the mansion through another entrance. The lead people were dressed in the same kind of red robe that Jornak was wearing, and guarded tightly in the center of the procession was a large armored carriage that seems to be shaking from time to time, as if someone was pounding on it from the inside. The group immediately set off in the direction of the Hole, barely glancing at the fights occurring around the mansion.

The second thing that caught his attention was... another Quatach-Ichl. This one was identical to the ancient lich that had just marched out of the mansion, except this one was holding a glowing red gem the size of a human fist, and was standing

directly on top of the ruined roof of Iasku Mansion.

Quatach-Ichl was using a simulacrum? How interesting. As far as Zorian could tell, Quatach-Ichl was like Zach, in that he didn't like using those unless he had to. He didn't have the convenient telepathic link to his copies like Zorian did, and he probably worried about what he would do if one of his copies would do without his supervision. It was hard enough for Zorian to keep his copies in line, he couldn't imagine how much headaches other people experienced with them.

So that probably means...

The second Quatach-Ichl raised his black, skeletal hand in the air, his palm pointed at the sky, holding the glowing red gem exposed for all to see. A complicated magic circle made out of blood red light suddenly sprung around his position. Red streams of light emanated from the gem like many whip-like tentacles, and the air above the mansion started to twist and distort like hot summer air.

Yeah. It was time.

He reached into his jacket pocket and retrieved an angel cube. Then, he deployed the imperial orb and retrieved from it a much bigger, metal cube of his own design.

Glancing to the side, he could see Daimen approaching him. His older brother had chosen to stay still for a while after the teleportation event, rather than immediately rejoining Zach and the others in fighting Oganj. He had spent a lot of mana fighting Sudomir's skeletal dragon until Zorian had come, so he probably felt it prudent to take a breather and recover some strength while he could.

"That thing on the roof is going to summon something," Daimen told him, concern creeping into his voice. "Something big."

"Demons," Zorian said. "I know. But look at those three marching towards us. Do you think we can push through them to

stop the summoning?"

Daimen looked at the ancient lich, the humming witch, and the man in the red robe. He didn't know them like Zorian did, but he was a powerful and experienced mage, and could make a decent judgment. He then looked at the battle in the sky, where Zach, Alanic, and Xvim were fighting Oganj, and scowled. Their companions were too busy to come to their aid.

"Can you help me hold them off while I do some summoning of my own?" Zorian asked, giving Daimen a brief side-glance while focusing on the angel cube in his hands. He had never actually done a summoning like this before. He really hoped he didn't mess things up. That would be really anti-climactic.

He swept his hands around him and invisible forces cut deep groove in the ground around them, forming a complicated magic circle of his own. The lines and glyphs began to glow blue.

"You won't seriously ask me to fight three master mages alone?" Daimen asked incredulously. "I think you have a very inflated view of my capabilities here, brother."

"It's fine," Zorian insisted. "You just have to hold them off for a *little* while. Plus, you will have Mrva here as support."

Zorian pointed at the giant hulking golem standing behind them. Daimen muttered something about Zorian having a stupid naming sense, but the reminder that he had a metal colossus on his side had obviously helped breathe additional confidence in him.

"Plus..." Zorian added, placing his hand on the other, much bigger cube. "I won't be completely helpless."

Keeping his hand on said cube, Zorian copied Quatach-Ichl's gesture and raised his hand up into the air, palm facing upwards. The small angel cube greedily accepted his mana, interfacing itself with Zorian's improvised magic circle. Hundreds of tiny golden glyphs lit up on the surface of the cube, though from a distance Zorian imagined it just looked like he was holding up a miniature

sun in the palm of his hand.

A vortex of multicolored light and soft wind suddenly formed around him as the angel cube suddenly started to madly draw in ambient mana in the area. A massive, mind-boggling torrent of mana was sucked into the cube, more than Zorian could have ever provided out of his own personal mana reserves, even if he sat there and powered it for several months at the time.

This wasn't how summoning rituals usually worked. If Zorian had tried to use ambient mana to help pay for the summoning like this in normal circumstances, he wouldn't just suffer mana poisoning – he would explode into ash and dust before he channeled even a quarter of the mana he was handling now. However, this time he didn't have to channel the ambient mana through himself, as with most spellcasting. The cube was somehow doing that on its own, and Zorian simply had to make sure to guide the mana across proper channels and shape the summoning spell. His mana reserves were still dropping dangerously fast, but the ritual was more taxing on his shaping skills than anything else.

Did the angel make the cube specifically to take advantage of Zorian's high shaping skills? Because this was hard. Insanely hard! Other than maybe Xvim, Zorian didn't think there was any person other than him that could stop all this mana from running out of control and ruining the titanic summoning ritual the cube wanted to execute.

Zorian wasn't entirely sure he could do this himself, actually. The difficulty was still increasing. His hand shook and beads of sweat formed on his forehead as the cube in his palm shone brighter and brighter.

'An angel's trust is a heavy thing to bear,' Zorian lamented in his head.

Focused as he was at his task, he was only partially aware of thing happening around him, and even that was purely because

his mind was fused with so many of his simulacrum. One of the simulacrum took over his body and senses while he focused on shaping the summoning spell, and in his current fused mental state, this allowed him to observe his surroundings in a way he would normally be unable to achieve without being distracted.

Almost immediately after he started his own summoning, Jornak, Quatach-Ichl, and Silverlake stopped their dramatic march and just plain rushed at him, hoping to stop the spell. If he hadn't been distracted by the strain of the summoning, Zorian would have found the scene funny. As it is, he just watched as the enemy trio started hurling spells at him, only for them to be stopped cold by Daimen and Mrva. Quatach-Ichl did his best to hit him with a multitude of his signature red disintegration beams, Jornak was showering the entire area with blindingly bright arcs of lightning that dodged through any static shield and obstacle in the way, and Silverlake was trying to copy Zorian by launching various potion bottles at him with the aid of telekinetic spells.

Nothing worked. Daimen recklessly burned through his mana reserves to erect massive golden shields in front of them, tanking most of the damage, and occasionally dispelled incoming projectiles by hitting them with pale blue beams and invisible waves of disrupting force. Anything that got through him was stopped by Mrva, who was tough and warded enough to simply intercept incoming projectiles with his body.

Mrva also frequently went on the offensive, picking up any rocks and boulders from the craters exposed in the fighting and throwing them with surprisingly good accuracy. He also sometimes suddenly charge at them and tried to stomp them flat – a crude but effective tactic that frequently interrupted their spellcasting and forced them to dodge.

In general, the metal colossus was far faster and more agile than its looks would suggest. It was no slow, lumbering giant. It

was a golem equivalent of a dragon, and Zorian was very pleased it was performing as well as he had hoped. It was just a shame he couldn't figure out how to make Mrva fly as well.

Something to tackle when he started building version two of the colossus.

At some point, Jornak seemed to have gotten enough of the massive golem, and tried to get rid of Mrva the same way his simulacrum had gotten rid of Zorian's bodyguard golem back in the tunnels underneath Cyoria. Jornak threw a bunch of bombs at the charging golem and they erupted into a web of hair-thin spatial cracks that enveloped the area. Mrva was completely submerged in the spatial cracks... but he emerged completely unscathed.

The metal colossus was a lot bigger than his bodyguard golems, and had a lot more time and money invested into him. Zorian had equipped Mrva with the finest wards he could set up, and it would take more than that to take it apart.

Surprised at the fact the golem was still whole and rushing at him, Jornak panicked for a moment and tried to cast a short-range teleport to evade the threat. That was a mistake. One of the wards Zorian placed on Mrva was a teleportation ward that could be amplified to extend a fair distance from his body. The ward was a really malicious sort, too – one that didn't just disrupt the teleportation but also tried to do it in a way that made the spell go haywire and try to kill the caster.

Jornak's body shuddered and lurched as his teleportation spell was violently disrupted. He was good enough to stabilize the failing spell, enough that he didn't get himself torn to pieces by the dimensional stresses, but he wasn't good enough to escape all consequences. Dazed and unable to react in time, he was almost stomped by Mrva's foot before Quatach-Ichl gestured with his hand and pulled him out of the way of the charging golem.

Pity. But no matter. Quatach-Ichl and Silverlake were per-

fectly lined up at the moment, so Mrva thrust both of his hands towards them, causing a huge wave of wind and kinetic force to barrel towards them.

Self-casting items were largely disappointing. They could only really produce crude blasts of force, fire and the like. For some uses, however, that was enough... especially if the blast was big enough.

Quatach-Ichl was too experienced to fall for this, and the blast only caused him to be momentarily distracted as he focused on counteracting it. Silverlake, however, wasn't that much of a fighter. The blast caught her entirely by surprise and she reacted too slowly, causing her to get knocked back into the distance.

She would be back soon, but it didn't matter. In this kind of battle, every second counted. Silverlake was the weakest among the three enemies facing them, but still very dangerous. Having her gone for a while was great.

Sadly, Mrva and Daimen had been unable to take advantage of this opportunity because two giant spheres of black bones suddenly burst out of Iasku Mansion and came barreling down at Mrva. As they got closer, they unrolled into familiar skeletal crocodilians. Zorian had seen one of them in action when he and Zach had gone to rob Eldemar's royal treasury with Quatach-Ichl, and knew exactly how powerful and resilient they were.

Back then, Quatach-Ichl said the crocodilian skeleton beast was his 'pet'. Of course he actually had more than one...

The two skeleton beasts quickly pounced upon Mrva, tying him down.

"What great allies I have," the ancient lich said, bending his skeletal neck sideways as it he was cracking his neck. His voice was amplified, allowing everyone in the vicinity to hear him. It was probably intended primarily for Jornak and Silverlake, though. "Better than nothing, I guess, but only just. You'd think literal time travelers would be better than this."

"What?" Daimen asked, confused. He had been preparing to keep the ancient lich tied down, but Quatach-Ichl's statement made him hesitate.

"Oh, he didn't tell you?" Quatach-Ichl said, sounding surprised. "Aren't you his big brother or something? Looks like family doesn't mean what it used to these days."

Before Daimen could say anything, two more simulacrum of Quatach-Ichl suddenly appeared right next to the original. Or at least Zorian guessed the lich they had been fighting thus far was the original. All three Quatach-Ichl's immediately hastened themselves and turned into a blur. A split second later, each of them cast three spells each.

Nine red stars, each smaller than the tip of Zorian's finger but shining bright, immediately shot towards Zorian with blinding speed.

Daimen scrambled to block them, but it was too little, too late. The first five slammed into Daimen's golden, multi-layered barrier, blocked by it but ripping it to shreds in the process. The sixth one was stopped by Daimen himself, who retrieved a small mirror from his pocket and physically intercepted the projectile with it. His brother's prized divine artifact lived up to its divine nature and stopped the projectile cold. Unlike the time it stopped Princess's attack beam, it didn't break in the process. There was a flash of light and the red star was just gone, Daimen standing unharmed behind it.

The other three stars rushed towards Zorian completely unopposed.

Up in the sky, his three allies realized he was in danger and tried to help him, but Oganj realized what was happening too and suddenly launched an entire swarm of blindingly bright white beams to intercept them and make them unable to render aid.

Although aware of the incoming attack due to his simulacrum,

Zorian did nothing to evade it. He kept stabilizing the summoning spell with all his might.

However, the large metal cube he was resting his hand on wasn't as passive. With a whirring sound of shifting metal plates and internal mechanisms coming to life, it flew in front of him, placing itself in the path of the incoming red stars.

Two of the stars swerved to the side, making sure the cube could only physically intercept one of the stars, but it didn't help. The cube seemingly fell apart at the seams, suddenly separating itself into eight smaller cubes. They positioned themselves into a rough sphere around Zorian, and a faint blue sphere of magical force, almost invisible, encased the entire area around him. The smaller cubes didn't even try to intercept the red stars after that, and the three projectiles slammed into the barrier completely unopposed.

The borderline invisible barrier barely even reacted. Anyone standing close to Zorian would see a handful of gentle ripples emanating from the points of impact for a fraction of a second, but these quickly subsided and left no trace of damage on the shield.

To his credit, the ancient lich wasn't shocked by the sight. He simply launched into one spell barrage after another, burning through gods know how much mana to launch a multitude of spells at Zorian. Zorian was kind of worried for Daimen at this point, since this kind of onslaught could probably kill his older brother very easily if the lich decided it would be good idea to kill the distraction first. Thankfully, Daimen quickly realized the safest place to be right now was next to Zorian, being protected by his shield, and promptly retreated behind him so that Zorian's cube could protect him as well.

And protect them both the cube did. The cube was not a simple spell aid or ward stone like most such tools. It was closer in nature to a golem, and was just as expensive and complicated to

build as Mrva had been. Although no magic item could truly cast a spell, only maintain one indefinitely, Zorian's cube did a pretty good job of mimicking spellcasting. A dizzying amount of protective spells were constantly maintained by the cube. By amplifying some of them and suppressing others, the cube could adjust its protections from moment to moment, creating custom shields to counter specific type of spells. It did that mostly autonomously, because Zorian had animated it in the same manner in which one would a golem. None of its operation required any mana, or even much of attention from Zorian. Thus, none of the Quatach-Ichl's attacks were effective.

Projectiles slammed into the impenetrable, ever-shifting barrier created by the eight small cubes orbiting Zorian, producing no effect. Larger, slower attacks were dealt with more actively, by one of the little cubes firing marbles at them. The marbles all charged with various spell bombs, and each cube had a pocket dimension absolutely packed with them, making it unlikely they would run out of marbles any time soon. Once the marble detonated next to an attack, it would be either dispersed or weakened enough for the barrier to negate it with ease. Attempts to send ectoplasmic constructs or animated earth at them were dealt with by Daimen, who picked them apart from the safety of the cube's defense. The shield was sufficiently sophisticated that it would let Daimen's attacks pass through without obstruction, even though that was not normally possible when attacking behind another mage's shield.

Silverlake and Jornak had recovered by this point and did their best to help Quatach-Ichl, but while Mrva was being distracted by the crocodilian skeletons, he wasn't fully tied down. As such, the two had to keep the colossal golem at bay without Quatach-Ichl's help while trying to help him. It wasn't very effective.

Eventually Quatach-Ichl realized this wasn't working and that attempting to overpower Zorian in this manner was just him burn-

ing through mana for nothing. Zorian wasn't even spending any mana on defending himself, so the lich's attacks weren't even wearing him out.

"Oganj!" Quatach-Ichl suddenly shouted. "Help me crack this turtle's shell!"

"Get these idiots off me, then!" Oganj responded, trying to swat away the milky sphere flying around him out of the sky.

The ancient lich crouched and jumped, and immediately shot up into the sky like a bullet.

Daimen looked torn between pursuing the lich, even though he knew this would take him out of the safety of Zorian's shield, and trying to put more pressure on Jornak and Silverlake. He eventually decided to try and kill Jornak.

It was probably a smart decision and Zorian fully supported it. While countering whatever Quatach-Ichl was doing would probably be more useful, it would probably result in his death. Zorian would rather face more danger than see Daimen die here. Visions of pale and bleeding Daimen, near-death after he had sacrificed his life force to allow Zorian to save himself, momentarily flooded his mind, his control over the summoning spell slipping...

No! No, focus... focus... He pushed these thoughts to the side, just like he had pushed them aside this whole month, and focused on the matter at hand. The angel summoning. It had to work, or else the enemy is going to have a whole bunch of demons on their side, and they would have nothing to counter them with.

The battle in the air intensified. Somehow Zach and Alanic found a moment to do some spell interruption of their own and directed a barrage of projectiles at Quatach-Ichl's simulacrum standing on the roof of Iasku Mansion, trying interrupt his demon summoning. They failed, both because the flying Quatach-Ichl interfered on behalf of his copy and because Iasku Mansion still had reasonably intact defensive wards, despite all the fighting occur-

ring around it.

But then, a disaster struck. Quatach-Ichl managed to distract Zach enough to let Oganj face just Alanic and Xvim for a moment. Rather than try to kill one of them – an action that could work, but would probably fail – the dragon mage decided to instead try to kill Zorian.

Zorian could see the logic of it. Dragon battle magic basically specialized in huge, mana-hungry spells that rivaled human artillery magic in power, but with none of the drawbacks that branch of magic usually had. Quatach-Ichl couldn't overpower Zorian's defenses by sheer number of spells, but a powerful piece of dragon magic could surely crack any kind of shield outside of dedicated building wards like the ones centered around Iasku Mansion.

Time seemed to slow down to Zorian as he watched Oganj finish his spell. The dragon's yellow, slitted eyes seemed to radiate pride and contempt as he thrust his scaly, clawed hand towards him, and a huge ball of incandescent flame came screaming down at Zorian.

Literally screaming. Zorian didn't know if the old dragon mage added that effect purely for the sake of surprise and intimidation, but the massive fireball created a sharp screaming sound as if flew through the air.

Zorian still didn't move to dodge. The eight little cubes stopped orbiting around him, causing the shield around him to collapse, and flew towards the incoming fireball with great speed, quickly arranging themselves into a ring-shaped formation. Jor-nak and Silverlake tried to take advantage of Zorian's momentary defenseless position to kill him before the fireball hit, but Daimen and Mrva stopped that from working. As for the fireball, it flew undaunted towards the ring of cubes flying towards it, even though Zorian was sure Oganj could control its flight and try to

get it to dodge. He supposed that the dragon mage was confident his spell would overpower whatever defensive effect the cube possessed.

He was bound to be disappointed. As the fireball got close to the ring of cubes, it seemed to enter a zone of *literal* slowed time. A temporal dilation bubble that made time pass slower on the inside than on the outside. Oganj's eyes widened as he tried to pull his spell out of the temporal mire, but the cubes would never allow that. The ring of cubes passed around the burning projectile and it simply... disappeared.

Then they immediately turned around and re-established the defensive field around Zorian.

It was as if the cubes pulled an invisible bag over the fireball and carried it off. Which... wasn't that far from the truth, really. Oganj's massive fireball was currently safely stored in the cube's special, time dilated pocket dimension. It wasn't quite frozen in time, but it was close. Very close.

Oganj gave him an angry, hateful look, but was in no position to do anything to him anymore. The moment Quatach-Ichl had given him had passed, and Zach was back in the fight and angrier than ever.

Besides... Zorian was almost done with his summoning. Even though he had started his spell later than Quatach-Ichl's simulacrum, he seemed to be working faster.

Quatach-Ichl realized it too.

"You are to manage this alone with a while. I need to speed things up," Quatach-Ichl yelled, and then flew off in the direction of his simulacrum. He soon took place beside him, causing the demon summoning to speed up immensely.

Gritting his teeth, Zorian sent even more mana into the angel cube in his palm, causing it to suck in even more ambient mana from the environment and increasing the strain on his concentra-

tion and shaping skills to the edge of the breaking point. Even with the help of his simulacrum, his awareness constantly shrunk, until the golden cube above his head became his entire world.

Suddenly, the pressure completely disappeared. The air above him warped and twisted, and there was suddenly a huge shadow looming over him.

It was the same angel he and Zach had spoken to earlier in the month. Or at least it looked the same to Zorian. A mass of black branches with orange eyes instead of leaves, wreathed in fire and light. However, this incarnation of the angel was bigger.

Much, much bigger. The angel in front of him dwarfed virtually everything around it. Even Oganj and Mrva looked like children before it. Other than the sulrothum's flying sandworm, this was the largest creature Zorian had laid his eyes on in his life.

The angel wasn't alone. Flying around him were what Zorian could only describe as animated balls of white wings. There were at least 20 of them, and if there was a body hidden somewhere beneath all the feathers, Zorian couldn't see it. They looked tiny next to the titanic burning tree of eyes, but Zorian estimated they were twice as big as he was.

Another four angels, these ones twice as large as the wing things, silently floated next to the main angel. They looked bestial, reminiscent of lions with a very long, flexible body. They flew through the air without wings, their bodies undulating in a serpentine manner, and they had no head. Instead of a head, they had a ring of white masks, each with a different expression, circling above their neck.

The sudden appearance of the huge angel and its group put an immediate end to all the areal fighting. Oganj immediately vacated the area, retreating towards Iasku Mansion and its defensive wards, while Zach, Alanic, and Xvim landed next to Zorian, grateful for a chance to take a breather and replenish their mana reserves.

When Zorian looked towards Iasku Mansion, however, he realized the angels weren't the only new arrivals. Quatach-Ichl had apparently finished his summoning at the same time he did, because there was an army of demons arrayed in front of them.

The demons were... a diverse bunch. They were hundreds of them huddling around Iasku Mansion, divided among 30 or so different 'species'. One group looked like man-sized black cats with blood red eyes and shark-like grins. Another consisted of large, hunched, pale-skinned humanoids with four arms, no eyes, a long tail, and quills on their back. Yet another looked like brown eggs scuttling around on long, thin, spider-like legs. A multitude of human faces danced on the surface of the 'eggs', most of them looking as if in pain. Isolated and given a wide berth even by the other demons, a large dark red rose towered over most of its demon brethren, supported by a multitude of thorny tentacles that probed all around it as if looking for targets. A regimen of humanoid demons stood at attention in one corner, carrying spears and covered in head to toe in black armor with way too many spikes and blade-like protrusion on it, mimicking some ancient human legion. A flock of disgusting, grub-like creatures floated from place to place, dripping saliva everywhere.

However, this multitude of demons didn't look too impressive in Zorian's eyes. There were a lot of them, but they were pretty small, at least compared to the angels. Zorian was leery about drawing too many conclusions from size difference alone, but the way the demon horde subtly covered every time they looked at the massive burning tree in the sky told Zorian it was not something to completely discount.

No, what really worried Zorian was the giant humanoid torso floating above the demon horse. This demon was big. Not as big as the burning tree above Zorian, but big enough to rival Oganj and Mrva. The torso was headless and armless, but there was a gi-

gantic eye embedded into its torso, purple and glowing. An armor seemingly made out of various bones – some of them human, some from animals, and some from strange entities that Zorian couldn't recognize – covered the torso like armor, leaving little except the eye visible to the world.

The lesser demons beneath it covered before the group of angels, but the eye in the torso looked completely unafraid, studying the scene before it with detached curiosity.

For a moment it glanced at Zorian, and Zorian made the mistake of meeting its gaze. He immediately felt his soul shake and his vision began to blur.

A massive black branch extended from the tree above, stabbing into the earth in front of Zorian and breaking the eye contact between him and the purple eye on the horizon.

Zorian's mind immediately cleared and he quickly reinforced his soul defenses, directing a silent thanks towards the angel above. He didn't think that would have killed him, but he really didn't want to engage a powerful demon in a soul magic fight, no matter how minor it was.

For several seconds, the battlefield was silent, neither side wanting to make the first move.

Eventually, Jornak amplified his voice and spoke out to Zorian and the others.

"If we fight here, the city will get leveled," he said.

"If we don't fight here, you'll release Panaxeth and the city will still get leveled," Zach responded, his voice still amplified. "What's your point?"

"I'm just foolishly hoping you will see reason," Jornak said. "No matter what you do, the city is doomed. *You* are doomed. You were doomed the moment you accepted that poisonous contract with the angels. We both know they probably hoped something like this would happen and that you would end up dying at the

end of the month, even if you achieve your goal. The primordial is stopped and the hero conveniently disappears at the end of the story, unable to use his godlike abilities to upset the status quo or enact any real change. You were never supposed to survive this."

Several seconds ticked by in silence. Zorian glanced at the looming angel above him, trying to see if it would speak up to contradict him. It did not.

He had no idea what that meant. Maybe Jornak was right. Maybe the angel thought his words were not even worth responding to.

"But I... I have a chance to live through this. To chance things... to change *everything* for the better," Jornak continued. "Is the sacrifice of one city, a city that spit on your family's sacrifice and robbed you of your birthright, such a heavy sacrifice?"

"You're wasting your time," Zach told him. He turned his head skyward, towards the angel above them. "What are you waiting for? Every moment they stall for time, the cultists and their sacrifices get closer to the Hole. Let's finish this."

"**Not yet,**" the answer said simply. Its voice rumbled all around them, deep and resonant.

"Fine," Jornak said, sounding a bit angry. Zorian didn't understand why... did he honestly think Zach would suddenly roll over and die if he asked nicely? They'd even summoned a huge angel and everything! "Since you're being like this, let's raise the stake a little."

He snapped his fingers, the sound amplified along with his voice, and three different detonations occurred at different spots of the city. Instead of dust and gravel, however, what erupted out of these detonations was a geyser of smoky black shapes. They were difficult to make out from this distance, but Zorian could easily puzzle out what they were.

Wraiths. Lots and lots of wraiths.

Suddenly, Zorian imitated Jornak's actions and snapped his fingers as well. There was no explosion, but the swarms of wraiths released by the bombs suddenly all converged on several different locations of the city and disappeared. As if a hidden predator had drawn them in and swallowed them without a trace.

Jornak seemed confused at the sudden event.

"Surprised?" Zorian said out loud, amplifying his voice. "Well, you did give us plenty of forewarning about the wraith bombs. It's only natural that we prepared countermeasures."

"How...?" Jornak began, before suddenly stopping when he realized he was asking Zorian to explain how he countered his move. Of course he wasn't going to tell him something like that.

In truth, it was something that Zorian had Sudomir to thank for most of all. After all, the man had already figured out how to attract and trap bodiless souls over a wide area inside his mansion. Zorian couldn't really duplicate his grand feat, but he could make smaller versions of the soul well, adapted to trapping wraiths, and scatter them across the city.

Even then, trapping free-willed wraiths was significantly different from drawing in ordinary souls of the dead. Zorian had to draw upon his knowledge of the soulseizer chrysanthemum and its ability to suck in souls of living beings to make the device work well enough.

Fortunately, Zorian had gotten lots and lots of insight into the inner workings of the soulseizer chrysanthemum during the last six months of the time loop...

Before anyone could say something, everyone noticed a swarm of distant dots approaching the city in the distance.

Eagles. Giant eagles ridden by battlemages.

Apparently Eldemar's military had managed to organize a response and was about to get involved. Zorian couldn't help but feel a jolt of fear at the thought. This was entirely unplanned, and

he had no idea how the soldiers riding on those eagles would react to their presence.

The burning tree floating above them, however, didn't seem surprised.

"Now, we fight," the angel rumbled, before surging towards the demon horde.

The demon horde roared out a challenge and rushed forth to meet them.

WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

As Zorian watched the massive angel tree and demonic Cyclops torso barrel through the air towards one another, his thoughts inevitably took a depressing and fatalistic turn. He wasn't deluded enough to think they could solve this crisis without the city taking massive casualties, but as he watched the impending clash of titans in front of him, he couldn't help but conclude that Jornak was right.

The city was going to get leveled to the ground, one way or the other.

Thus far, the collateral damage from their battle had been fairly modest. They were fighting around Iasku Mansion, and a sizeable portion of the city around it had gotten replaced with a patch of forest. The trees had taken the brunt of the fighting. There was no way this would remain true for long, and it left Zorian feeling powerless and frustrated. His primary goal was admittedly rather straightforward and selfish – he wanted to ensure he and everyone he cared about survived this evening – but he had lived in this city for a literal decade, and had sunk countless hours and resources into making sure it survived this evening. He did not want to see it destroyed like this. What was their angel ally thinking? It seemed

to Zorian that the angel had predicted many of the things that occurred, so why...

Almost as if they could hear his silent laments, the remaining angels sprang into action. The four lion-serpent things that were flanking the burning tree didn't try to join the battle. Instead, they swiftly flew away from the angel tree they had been circling, as if they intended to flee, scattering in all directions. No one was fooled by their maneuver, however, and they soon slowed down and positioned themselves on the edges of the forested area, equidistant from one another. A faint yellow force field immediately enclosed the area in a cubical prison.

Though it looked extremely pale and weak, Zorian didn't believe for a moment that it would be easily pierced.

Moments later, a barrage of spells from Jornak's side hit the walls of the cube, confirming his suspicions. The barrier was extraordinarily tough. Not even Oganj's spell made it weaken, and the dragon mage could basically fling artillery spells on demand.

Zorian relaxed a little, recovering his reserves more as he observed the situation and looked for an opening. Zach and the rest of the people on his side did the same, clustering close to him to take advantage of his powerful defenses. Jornak and Quatach-Ichl launched a few random spells at them to try to put pressure on them, but those were effortlessly stopped by his defense cube.

His precious creation was burning through its stored mana at a terrifying rate to maintain this level of power, but it was also stocked with a terrifying amount of crystalized mana so it would last for at least another four hours.

Long enough, in other words. They would either win or lose by then.

In any case, neither Jornak nor anyone else on the enemy side could devote much time to figure out a way to get through their defenses. The angel tree and the cyclopean demon collided with

terrifying force. A flood of orange flame and lightning-like bursts of purple energy erupted around them, intermingling with one another and sweeping across the entire battlefield, before being stopped by the cubical barrier.

For a while, everything was chaos. Those unfortunate enough to be close to the initial clash were either vaporized by the energies, or thrown away much like dandelion fluff picked up by the wind. Everyone else was frantically doing their best to vacate their area – a task made more complicated by the fact the two titans did not stay static, and instead moved around as they fought.

All of this was good news for Zorian and his allies, of course – there were only a handful of them, but they were all very powerful, and they had a very good defense that none of them had to spend mana to maintain. Unfortunately, the same thing was largely true for Jornak and his allies, too. They had Iasku Mansion, which had its own wards they could hide behind. Sudomir's work was less advanced than Zorian's, but he had an entire building to work with and literal years to slowly assemble his ward scheme. It would take more than this to break down the mansion's defenses.

To Zorian's joy, the stalemate between the two titans didn't last long at all. Although the demon torso never visibly lost its composure and kept fighting fiercely, it soon became obvious it was weaker than the angel tree. It could hold its own against the angel, but it was constantly on the defensive, constantly pushed back and retreating, and utterly unable to stop the angel tree from engaging additional opponents around them.

And the angel tree ruthlessly took advantage of it.

The angel tree's might was awe inspiring. Its branches were seemingly numberless and impossibly flexible, stretching to great distances at will and bending like rubber while losing none of their power and destructiveness. Its many eyes allowed it to take in everything around it, and it had incredible multitasking abilities.

It was constantly engaging multiple targets simultaneously, slashing undead apart with casual swings of its branches, burning the war trolls to ashes with its eerie orange flames, and snatching the more resilient demons and drawing them deeper into its tangle of limbs where their ectoplasmic bodies would be ripped to pieces by attacks from all directions until they disappeared into puffs of smoke. The twenty angel wing balls that followed the angel tree helped with this task, herding enemies towards the celestial titan with powerful gusts of wind.

Even better, every once in a while the angel tree would maneuver the fight to get close to Iasku Mansion and then ruthlessly start pounding on the defensive wards of the building, causing them to visibly strain. The wing balls that followed it contributed to this in their own way, firing intensely bright, lightning-like blasts of energy at the ward scheme. Although the demon torso did everything it could to repulse them from the area, it wasn't doing a good enough job, and eventually Quatach-Ichl and Oganj had to abandon the protection of the mansion in order to help the demon torso suppress the rampaging angels.

This was too good of an opportunity to pass for Zorian and the others, and they decided to join the fray and help the angel tree prevail. After all, they didn't even have to overpower their enemies – if they could simply push Oganj or Quatach-Ichl into the angel's waiting embrace, its lethal branches would take care of the rest for them and they would have one less heavy-hitter on the enemy side to worry about.

Zorian mentally ordered the defensive barrier of his defense cube to become flatter and more tangible at the bottom, and to spread itself out over a larger area, and the cube automatically rearranged itself according to his wishes. Sigils inscribed on its surface glowed, mechanical pieces whirled and moved into alternate positions, and soon enough Zorian was standing on a large, heav-

ily shielded, flying platform. He signaled to others to jump on the platforms, and when they did, the platform shot towards the scene of the battle with great speed.

Sadly, Mrva couldn't fit on the platform, so Zorian could only order his beloved creation to follow after them on foot. Not that it mattered much – Mrva was all but unstoppable. He had so much weight and speed that just about anything that tried to stop him was simply shoved aside without impeding him much. A regimen of black-armored demons made the most credible attempt, using their great numbers and military-like discipline to slow him down for a time, but even they were ultimately thwarted when Mrva jumped into the air to bypass most of them.

As they approached, they had a great view of the titanic battle in front of them. With the support of Oganj and Quatach-Ichl, the demon torso had been given a chance at a comeback. It was pouring a stream of dark purple lightning at the angel tree, forcing the celestial being on the defense for the first time in the fight. Jagged rays of red light rampaged through the angel's branches, temporarily unopposed, actually severing some of them and leaving deep gauges on its trunks. As for Oganj, he appeared to be busy fighting off the wing balls that accompanied the angel tree, which were frantically firing their blue lightning blasts at the dragon mage in an attempt to keep at least one opponent away from their leader.

Zorian would have ordered the platform to go faster if it wasn't already flying as fast as it possibly could.

Then, disaster struck. Some of the lesser demons noticed their advance and decided to stop them. Zorian didn't take them seriously at first, as it was just that flock of disgusting, grub-like creatures that he had noticed floating around the edges of the demon horde when it had first been summoned. He had taken them to be just one more group of minor demons brought in to fill out the numbers, but now that they were attacking him, it quickly became

obvious they were one of the more dangerous demon varieties for him personally.

That stupid glowing saliva they were drooling all over the place was actually insanely damaging to force shields! The little wretches were capable of spitting globs of it over surprisingly great distances, and they were really quite fast and agile when they tried. And there were a lot of them.

As much as he didn't want to, Zorian had to slow down his advance in order to deal with these little pests...

Mrva was still continuing forward, of course, but the demon horde had a solution for him as well, it seemed. The ground in front of the charging Mrva suddenly erupted, and a multitude of thorny, ropy tentacles shot forwards and wrapped themselves around the golem's limbs and torso. Zorian ordered Mrva to simply charge through and use his great weight and momentum to break free, but to his surprise, this didn't work. The thorny tentacles refused to break or lose their grip on the golem, and managed to stop its charge.

Like an ominous figure, a large rose demon rose out of the earth, tall enough to tower even over Mrva. Zorian remembered seeing it near the epicenter of that initial clash between the angel tree and the demon torso, after which it disappeared. He had thought it died back then, but apparently it simply took shelter under the ground and waited for a convenient moment to reveal itself.

Considering it could stop a charging Mrva in his tracks, the demon rose was likely quite powerful.

They had only spent a few moments engaging the grub swarm and the demon rose when Zorian received a telepathic message from a familiar voice.

[What are you doing?] the angel tree thundered in his mind. The voice was calm and collected, but the mental volume of the

communication was painfully high and the tone was accusatory. **[Stop wasting your time here and get out of this place. You need to stop Panaxeth from breaking free of his prison, or else all this will be irrelevant.]**

[What?] Zorian protested, feeling rather wronged at the implication he was willingly wasting time. He glanced at the yellow barrier boxing them in and, sure enough, it was still very much intact. [But the barrier-]

[It's for our enemies only,] the angel tree said. **[It will not stop you.]**

Ugh, and the damn tree only felt like mentioning this *now*? Why not at the very start of this thing, when it was first erected? This had to be deliberate. The angel had some kind of private plan that involved them staying inside this box for a while, the manipulative bastard.

[Fine,] Zorian told the angel. [I just need to get myself and my golem out of this situation and then I'll-]

He hadn't even finished the sentence when the air in front of the platform warped strangely, scaring everyone currently standing on it, and a massive black branch wreathed in orange flames suddenly appeared in front of them, striking down. The grubs harassing them were caught completely off guard by the sudden attack and promptly got speared, bisected, and burned. It was a total wipeout, with the handful of surviving grubs fleeing the scene immediately.

The branch continued downward without pause, aiming at the demon rose tangling with Mrva. The demon shook and swayed, impossibly agile and flexible, and managed to avoid being speared or cut by the twigs and sub-branches even once... but it could not avoid the flames. The strange orange flames separated themselves from the branch at the last moment, forming into ghostly images of snakes, claws, and jaws, and engulfed the hapless demon rose.

It let out an unearthly screech, writhing in pain as it caught on fire, and then retreated underground so fast Zorian thought for a moment it simply disappeared.

Apparently the angel tree could casually warp space to strike at opponents way outside its usual range. Just how powerful was this thing?

[Go,] the angel tree urged him, and then immediately severed its contact.

There was a roar of triumph, and then the dragon mage was holding a rather thick black branch in one of his claws, its fires sputtering and fading. The angel had paid a high price for this timely assistance, it seemed.

Zorian immediately ordered the flying platform they were standing on to change directions and proceed towards the nearest barrier wall at maximum speed.

"Wait, what are you doing?" Zach asked, alarmed. "Have you gone crazy!? You're going to ram us straight into the barrier wall!"

"It's not going to bar our way," Zorian hurriedly explained. "The angel just told me."

"The angel just told you? Why didn't it tell *me*? I'm the one they made a contract with, you'd think I would be their contact," Zach grumbled.

"You're under mind blank," Zorian reminded him. "And besides, I'm the one controlling the platform we're flying on. Contacting me is only common sense."

The others silently observed their whispered bickering, but said nothing, opting to instead stare at the luminous wall of light they were rapidly hurtling towards. Though Zorian noticed that Xvim was watching it with an expression more evocative of awe and appreciation than trepidation.

"It can even selectively let things through? What a miracle of spellcasting," Xvim said in a low voice.

Zorian sniffed disdainfully. What was so amazing about that? His defense cube did the exact same thing!

But no, he wasn't going to be petty and defensive about this. Not right now, anyway...

In any case, there was no time for further conversation, because mere moments later, they collided with the barrier wall. The light parted before them like an airy curtain, caressing their face and skin as it moved out of the way, and then they were out of the box. Everyone except Alanic flinched at the point of impact, unconsciously expecting to get splattered against the magical barrier that had weathered so many titanic impacts from the battle inside. The scarred battle-priest's faith and composure was apparently sufficiently strong that he could weather the impact without so much as a twitch.

Zorian glanced behind him, only to see no trace of opening where they exited the barrier. The wall of light parted before them in an instant and then closed together just as quickly.

It was also not nearly as transparent from the outside as it was from the inside. It was instead completely opaque, effectively shrouding the shielded area from curious outsiders trying to peer in.

Zorian was ecstatic, but also a little worried. With them outside of the angel barrier and their enemies trapped inside, Zach and Zorian could crush the cultists trying to conduct the Panaxeth releasing ritual inside the Hole and essentially win by default. On the other hand, Zorian's secret plan hinged on him hitting everyone all at once with his spell, something that was impossible while Jornak and the others were holed up in Iasku Mansion, and protected by the angel barrier. He would have to get them out of there eventually before he could initiate the plan, and that worried him a little.

Of course, he voiced none of these thoughts. He silently di-

rected their flying platform towards the hole and prepared himself for another fight. The others didn't need any explanation to understand what he was planning – stopping the cultists was the obvious goal.

There was, however, another problem approaching. While they had been distracted by fighting inside the angel barrier, Eldemar's giant eagles had been approaching the city as fast as they could. Now, they were just about to arrive... and Zorian could see they were aiming straight at Zorian and his flying platform. He supposed that the glowing cubical barrier the angels erected was very eye-catching, and the fact they had just flown out of it made them obvious targets.

Zorian had no idea what the eagle mages would do. He had assumed they would recognize the angels, but the angels were busy inside the barrier and couldn't vouch for them. Which meant they would probably do whatever came naturally to them in a situation like this. That... was not encouraging. For the perspective of Eldemar's authorities, it all probably looked like a bunch of rogue mages fighting in the city and wrecking stuff in the process. They may very well decide to just bring the hammer down on everyone and sort things out later. Zorian had heard that was a common reaction to whenever mage disputes escalate in open battles inside a populated settlement – one side may have been entirely in the right, but Eldemar's forces only see two troublemakers endangering innocent civilians and treat everyone as an enemy.

Zorian could only hope that the sheer scope of the fighting would give the eagle riders pause and make them a little more cautious and discerning. The sheer amount of firepower both sides used against each other should hopefully convince the royal forces they need to take a side instead of behaving like the biggest bully.

Unfortunately, Zorian's hopes were in vain. With incredible speed, the eagle riders caught up to them and swooped in front of

them, the giant eagles releasing ear-piercing screeches. It was a clear warning that they would attack if the platform did not stop.

"Halt, in the name of Kingdom of Eldemar!" the lead mage said in a voice amplified and distorted by magic. "Power down your flying platform and land on the ground, now! This is your only warning!"

Zorian clacked his tongue in annoyance. He stopped the platform, but did not move to land. This was such an annoying issue. Although Zorian was sure all of them put together were more than enough to take out the eagle riders, it would take an unacceptable amount of time and mana. More importantly, Zorian wasn't sure his allies would even agree to attack Eldemar's forces who technically did nothing wrong. Zach doubtlessly would, but Zorian was all but certain that Alanic would refuse to help them, and he wasn't confident about Xvim and Daimen either.

If only the makeshift flying platform was faster than the eagles... but his defense cube was ultimately designed for defense and not flight speed, and giant eagles were famously fast flyers.

Thankfully, the eagle riders did not associate Mrva with them, or didn't think they could stop a heavily-warded giant golem, so Zorian simply ordered the massive golem to continue on towards the Hole and they let him go unimpeded. It was going to be difficult to control it effectively under these circumstances, but it was better than nothing.

"Captain," Zorian said, his voice similarly amplified and distorted, "look around the city. It's under attack and we're *helping*. We'll gladly explain things later, but—"

"It wasn't a request!" the man interrupted him impatiently. "I order you to land and explain yourselves or we will attack you immediately!"

The eagle riders circled around them threateningly, giving the appearance of a pack of wolves just waiting for a sign to attack.

Two things happened simultaneously, then. First, there was a commotion back at the angel barrier. Glancing in its direction, Zorian could see Oganj repeatedly impacting the barrier of light, front claws glowing with red light. Each time he slashed at the barrier he created large gashes in the wall that healed almost instantly.

Secondly, Zorian realized the eagle riders didn't have any serious mental defenses on them. They only had a basic mental shield that couldn't even provide a speed bump against his psychic powers. As for the eagles, they were even worse. Completely defenseless.

"This is your last—" started the eagle mage commander, but was interrupted by a draconic roar. Oganj had finally managed to tear a hole in the barrier large enough to squeeze himself through and immediately tore himself out of the containment barrier the angels erected around Iasku Mansion. The barrier quickly mended itself, but it was too late – the dragon mage was out of the box.

And riding on his back were Quatach-Ichl, Silverlake, and Jornak.

Well. So much for his worries about having to eventually lure their enemies out of the barrier.

In any case, the eagle riders were clearly surprised at the appearance of an adult dragon so close to them, and unsure what to do for a moment. In that moment, Zorian struck. He reached out into the minds of giant eagles, every single one of them, and ordered them to attack Oganj while amplifying their anger until they were completely berserk. The let out frenzied screeches and made a beeline for the approaching dragon mage, ignoring their rider's panicked attempts to regain control.

He then reached towards the mind of the eagle rider commander, and forced him to make a loud proclamation in that amplified voice of his. The man had no choice but to obey.

"Oganj! It's the dragon mage!" the man shouted against his will.

"Forget those small fries, we need to take him down!"

"Kill the dragon!" another eagle rider agreed, also forced to do so by Zorian.

Oganj reacted exactly as Zorian hoped he would. The dragon mage was proud and aggressive, and had clashed against Eldemar's forces numerous times in the past. He saw nothing suspicious about a bunch of Eldemar mages making him their priority target, and he had every intention of teaching them a lesson. He gave a roar of challenge and shifted his focus to killing the eagle riders, ignoring Jornak's loud complaints that he shouldn't get distracted.

Zorian quietly withdrew his telepathic influence from the minds of eagle riders and ordered his platform to continue flying towards the Hole at maximum speed. Even if they wanted to continue bothering him, they had a more pressing problem on their hands now.

After a few seconds, he noticed that everyone except Zach was staring at him strangely.

"What?" he asked, frowning.

"You did that, didn't you?" Alanic asked.

"Hmm? Oh yeah, definitely," Zorian said, only understanding after a few seconds why they reacted that way to his casual display of mind control. Sometimes he forgot that these weren't the same people he had worked with for over a year to figure out how to leave the time loop. Those people had died forever, even their souls erased and denied afterlife.

"Are they going to be alright?" Alanic asked, frowning. He clearly didn't like the idea that Zorian might have sent the eagle riders to fight and die against their enemies with no support.

Funnily enough, it didn't even occur to Zorian to care for their wellbeing. He thought of them as an annoyance, and saw his actions as a form of poetic justice for impeding their mission and

trying to push them around. They came looking for trouble, and they found it.

His original self, whom Zorian killed in order to be able to stand here today, would definitely be horrified at what he had become.

"They won't all die," Zorian eventually answered. "I fought with them a few times over the various interactions of this month. They eventually retreat if the enemy inflicts enough losses on them."

"They came here to fight for Eldemar," Zach helpfully added. "They're doing exactly that right now. If they knew what we know, they would have chosen to engage Oganj anyway, even if most of them died doing that."

"Explaining my involvement in this is going to be hell, I can already see," Alanic lamented.

"We did take basic precautions," Zach said. "We're all wearing disguises, and the battle will destroy most of the clues and prevent normal divinations from working. Plus, we have a master mind mage that can delete memories of people who get too close to the truth."

"It doesn't matter in my case," Alanic said. "Do you know how hard it was to mobilize all these people I recruited to fight on our side? I had to use my name and connections to make all this happen. There is no hiding this, even if you start mind-wiping people."

Well, if Zach was going to survive this evening, Zorian was definitely going to have to start mind-wiping people, and sooner than anyone in this group suspected. Thankfully, nobody was in the mood to continue this topic, both because they were now very close to the Hole, and because they were facing yet another threat.

Jornak, Silverlake, and Quatach-Ichl were rapidly approaching, using some kind of high-speed flight spell in an effort to catch up to them. They knew that everything was over if Zorian and the

rest of the group could face-off against the cultists alone, and they weren't going to let it happen.

Before Zorian and the others could really start disrupting the ritual, the battle against Jornak, Silverlake, and Quatach-Ichl began anew.

- break -

While his original body had been busy dealing with angels, demons, and eagle riders, his simulacrum bodies had not been idle. They roamed the city and processed information that Zorian constantly received from the multitude of remote sensors and recruited subordinates working with the group to repel the invasion. The primary (albeit secret) task they had was to make sure the network of glyphs he had scattered all across Cyoria remained reasonably intact. The unplanned substitution of an entire city section with Iasku Mansion and the surrounding forest had already blown a sizeable hole in his network, so he had to be extra vigilant, or parts of his remaining network would become disconnected from the network as a whole, making his entire plan useless.

While doing that, however, his simulacrums also involved themselves in the fighting here and there. These interventions were by necessity minor, since he couldn't afford to waste too much of his mana in peripheral areas of the city. The original body had a much more critical role to play, so the majority of their mana reserves were reserved for his use. Fortunately, he had a perfect tool for the situation. His mind magic, if used thoughtfully and strategically, was perfect for making large impacts in return for minimal mana expenditures.

All around the city, strange incidents began to occur. Many of them were so subtle they could be chalked up as coincidences. A panicked group of scattered defenders suddenly surged with new-found confidence and 'remembered' where they were all supposed

to converge and regroup in event of emergency. A fleeing family received a strong hunch that the route they wanted to traverse wasn't safe and that they should pick another way. A large, muscular man wielding an antique sword, clearly just a normal city worker without a hint of magic or military training, fended off an entire pack of winter wolves all on his lonesome, allowing a nearby military group to save both him and the people he was protecting; for some reason the winter wolves kept missing him, as if they couldn't see him correctly. A local dog suddenly went berserk and began barking and biting at thin air, alerting a nearby mage at the presence of an invisible Ibasan battle group waiting in ambush.

Others were less mundane. All around the city, some people received sudden, supernatural visions that gave them critical information about the enemy. Enemies sometimes went crazy and started attacking their own allies for no reason, sowing chaos and discord in enemy ranks. Small animals like bats and bugs were inordinately fond of ramming themselves straight into enemy caster's faces when they were in the middle of sensitive spellcasting. A young soldier suddenly fell into an obvious trance and started describing the enemy distribution of forces to his commander, hopefully allowing much better coordination of defending efforts in that city sector.

Meanwhile, up in the sky, iron beaks ceaselessly patrolled the city in both large and small groups. They were Zorian's roving eyes and blades, the small groups checking out disturbances to see if anything interesting was happening, and the big ones converging on critical areas to give aerial support to whatever defenders were located in the area. Each flock carried one or more telepathic relays, allowing Zorian to both easily access their senses and occasionally take control of them to direct them to specific spots. They were smart birds, with already existing group discipline, so he only had to take control over the leaders in order to control the whole

group... which was good, because there was no way he would have been able to control the iron beaks otherwise.

Convenient. No wonder Sudomir had decided to use these particular birds for the invasion.

The iron beaks were bloodthirsty and their feather volleys were extremely deadly. They were fast and agile flyers too, which allowed the flocks to simply swoop in and let loose a feather volley at the surprised enemies, before simply flying away to engage someone else. With Zorian managing their attacks, their strikes were far more strategic and selective than the iron beaks themselves would have ever done on their own – they now almost exclusively targeted mages, instead of wasting their feathers on tough targets like war trolls and other dominated monsters, usually striking when the target was exhausted or busy dealing with something else.

Despite all of this, the scale of the invasion was vast, and Jornak had brought a large number of fresh troops into the city when he had brought Iasku Mansion into the city. Zorian's actions were just a drop in the bucket, and it was hard to judge how much difference his actions made in the grand scheme of things.

A lot of time he could do nothing but watch as the invaders killed and torched their way through the city. He could do a lot with relatively little when he spotted an opening, but not every situation had one. Or at least, not one that he could spot. Maybe someone smarter than him could have seen some obvious solution that he had missed, but he was still only human, and a lot of the time he saw no way to help without burning through his mana at an unacceptable rate.

So instead, he did nothing. He watched people fight and die over and over, across the entire city, withholding his help because it would cost too much.

He wanted to say the experience made him sick... but the truth

was that he was already somewhat numb to it. He had seen things like this happen many times over the restarts, and had even experienced some of these things from the invader's perspective due to his memory reading. Maybe later, when the situation was over and he had time to internalize that all of this was final and irreversible and not at all like the time loop, he would be horrified by the things he had seen and his own lack of reaction to it, but now wasn't the time for it.

It just wasn't the time.

He eventually turned his attention to the Hole, where a fierce fight was happening. While Zorian and Jornak's groups were trapped underneath the angel barrier, the cultists had been free to proceed towards the Hole... for a time.

There was an element that neither Zorian nor Jornak had expected. Before the cultists could even begin setting up the ritual and start sacrificing the children, they were ambushed by a large number of... small animals. Pigeons and cats, to be more precise. Instead of simply clawing or pecking at the cultists, however, these cats and pigeons employed magic spells and weapons.

As the cultists were escorting their wagon of sacrificial children near one of the bigger buildings, a handful of cats simply dropped from the roof and onto their heads. Their claws glowing white from the effects of some unknown spell, they swung towards their target's necks and faces, slicing open arteries and permanently blinding others. One of the cultists noticed the incoming attack, but he made a mistake of meeting the eyes of a cat sitting on a nearby windowsill and was suddenly hit by a powerful bout of vertigo that sent him reeling. He never had a chance to recover, as another cat ripped his throat out a mere moment later.

Before the cultists could respond to this attack, a flock of pigeons swooped in, carrying a multitude of alchemical grenades in their claws, and all hell broke loose.

Shifters, Zorian quickly realized. Cat and pigeon shifters – the two varieties that were probably most proficient in classical spell-casting in addition to their natural shifting capabilities. And... yes, there was the police force joining the attack now.

Hmm. Apparently Raynie and Haslush had done more in this past month than Zorian thought they would. A surprise, but a welcome one.

Of course, while the cultists often seemed like the weakest part of the invasion from Zorian's perspective, they were really not so easy to dismiss for regular people. After the initial shock, the cultists began to fight back, and they did so extremely well. After all, the leaders of the Cult of the Dragon Below were actually very powerful and capable mages. Usually they were too busy enacting Panaxeth's ritual to help their underlings, but at the moment this wasn't the case, so they quickly made their presence known. After some initial successes, the combined shifter-police forces began to die in droves and lose their courage.

There was no way Zorian could allow this, though, so he instructed his iron beaks to help out and started subtly and not-so-subtly directing city defenders to rush over towards the Hole and join the battle.

Interestingly, the pigeon shifters adapted really well to the iron beaks' assistance. Many of them appeared to be capable of casting certain spells purely reflexively, which meant that any of the seemingly innocuous pigeons could drop a fireball on an enemy group or summon a force barrier to defend both themselves and the iron beaks from enemy spells. Even though Zorian didn't attempt to communicate with any of them, the pigeon shifters soon naturally fell into the role of support, following iron beaks flocks and shielding them against enemy fire so they could operate relatively unmolested in the sky.

As for the cat shifters, their animal forms were mostly useful

for surprise purposes and not terribly impressive for these kind of battles, so Zorian feared they would be useless after that initial ambush... but he was wrong. The cat shifters simply switched back into their human forms and started contributing by casting spells normally. Amusingly, they were kind of similar to Zorian, in that their biggest talent seemed to lay in mind magic. Zorian supposed that, since so many of them already operated on the criminal side of things, they were less hesitant to practice mind magic than a regular mage.

Then Mrva barged into the scene, tanking enemy spell fire like it was inconsequential and crashing into the cultist ranks like a cannonball. The original may have been too busy elsewhere and couldn't come, but there was no stopping Mrva. His presence slowly but surely started to turn the tide in the favor of Cyorian forces. The leaders of the cult were powerful, but so was Mrva.

Idly, Zorian wondered if it wouldn't have been better for the original and his allies to simply teleport to the Hole the moment they escaped the angel barrier, and then kill the cultists as quickly as possible... but considering that the cultists still hadn't even begun the ritual as of yet, maybe it was for the best that they hadn't done that. Who knows how Jornak would have reacted if he knew for certain that releasing Panaxeth was impossible and that he was going to die soon. Although it may have seemed like Zorian had neatly eliminated the threat of wraith bombs with his counter-traps, the truth was he only had enough time and funds to make those for Cyoria. There were wraith bombs scattered all over Eldemar and possibly beyond, and Zorian could only thank the gods that Jornak didn't see it fit to activate them as well out of sheer spite.

And that was just the wraith bombs. Although Zorian was sure that some of Jornak's threats were pure bluffs, he had no doubt that the man had plenty of contingencies that would make them all suf-

fer if he lost. Even Zach and Zorian had made a few contingencies that would go off if they didn't survive this battle, so there was no way Jornak hadn't done the same.

It still wasn't the right time. All Zorian could do was wait and look for an opening.

- break -

Zorian stared at the three creatures in front of him. One was some kind of tiger-sized reptilian creature that Zorian did not recognize, the other was a floating orb surrounded by long whip-like tentacles, and the third one was a gigantic green ooze the size of a small building. His defense cube spun around him, sigils on it brightening and fading like the beat of his own heart and mechanical parts softly shifting into various combinations. For a second, everything was still, before both sprung into motion and the battle began anew.

The tentacle orb was the first, being the fastest. It hurled itself at Zorian with incredible speed, its milky white body crackling with powerful electrical magic. Zorian didn't panic, simply jumping to the side while telekinetically enhancing his jump a little. He easily dodged out of the way of the living cannonball, and another sidestep dodged the electrified whip the creature tried to hit him with next.

The other two creatures weren't that far behind, though. The blue tiger-lizard thing used the distraction created by the whip-orb to charge at him, preparing for a jump. Zorian flicked a spell marble at the thing, creating a large detonation right in its face and blowing in back with ease. The creature slammed into the already damaged road and promptly burst into liquid.

A mere moment later, the blue puddle of slime started to come together again, and a few seconds later the tiger-lizard thing was intact and once again gunning for him.

As for Zorian himself, he was too busy trying to avoid being

engulfed by the house-sized blob of acid to worry about finishing the tiger-lizard thing off for good. The giant ooze was completely unlike most oozes, and moved with speed and dexterity that no natural ooze should possess, let alone one that size. It constantly sprouted pseudopods that lashed out at Zorian, leaving corroded cobblestones whenever it hit, and its great weight and power allowed it to simply smash apart buildings if they were in its way or it thought the rubble might inconvenience Zorian.

All three were working seamlessly together with one another, and showed both signs of human-level intelligence and detailed knowledge of human spellcasting. Though one might mistake them for some kind of exotic magical creature at first, Zorian knew he wasn't looking at a natural creation. If Zorian had to guess, he would say these beings were something akin to living potions – an alchemical liquid animated by either captured souls or elemental spirits. Possibly both – a multitude of captured souls for providing abundant mana, and water elementals for actually controlling the liquid.

A grating, cackling laugh rose into the air behind the giant ooze. Silverlake seemed to be mighty pleased at how her minions were faring against Zorian.

"You shouldn't have sent your metal toy away," she crowed. "Maybe you'd actually have a chance against me and my lovelies if you had this 'Mrva' at your side."

Zorian said nothing, simply scanning his surroundings for a way he could bypass the potion elementals and strike at Silverlake. It didn't look like he did, but that was because he was primarily looking through the eyes of a small flock of iron beaks circling the skies above the battlefield rather than trying to use divinations in the middle of a battle.

The whip-orb tried to rush at him again, but Zorian fired a thin line of force at it that speared it right through. It immediately

burst into a cloud of electrified potion droplets, causing Zorian to wince. This wasn't a good way to hold the orb at bay, it seemed.

'This is so frustrating,' Zorian lamented in his head. 'I spent a decade inside a time loop. You'd think I would have encountered every type of enemy there is!'

"I hope you realize we found out where you stashed your little sister and her cat shifter friend to keep them safe. Our forces are attacking them even as we speak," Silverlake said, punctuating her threat with her usual annoying cackle.

Zorian narrowed his eyes at her, but did not let her distract him. This was a blatant attempt to demoralize him, and he wouldn't fall for it.

Not that he thought she was lying. He had known for a while now that Kirielle and Nochka were being besieged in their hide-outs, but there was little he could do. He could only hope that the Taramatula guards and mercenaries Daimen hired would be able to protect them, or that the miniature bodyguard golems he made for them would step up if they couldn't.

"I hope you realize the Cult of the Dragon Below hasn't even *begun* their ritual," Zorian fired back. He knew he shouldn't talk in the middle of the battle, but her mentioning the attack on Kirielle how he was essentially forced to ignore it struck a nerve and he couldn't help it. "Look around us. You clearly can't deal with me and neither can your allies deal with my allies. You won't win anything by keeping us busy."

As if by some cosmic joke, his statement was punctuated by a loud detonation as an ominous purple sun exploded in the sky nearby, casting the entire city in a deep purple glow for a moment. An aftershock of Quatach-Ichl's battle against Daimen, Xvim, and Alanic.

Jornak and Zach were also having their own fight nearby, though Zorian could not see it. Jornak had used some kind of

strange ability granted to him by Panaxeth to shroud an entire section of the city in thick white mist that no spell could penetrate into. Offensive spells simply sank into the mist and disappeared without a trace, and divination spells went awry when directed at the area.

Zorian wasn't terribly worried about Zach, though. Zach had shown himself to be noticeably stronger than Jornak in their past clashes, so he doubted this move was enough to tip the scales. More likely than not, this was just Jornak stalling until Quatach-Ichl and Oganj could finish off their opponents so they can gang up on them three-on-one.

"You are such a fool, Zorian," Silverlake said. A bunch of fire spells on parabolic trajectories came flying over the giant ooze and straight at Zorian, but he dispelled them with ease. "We could have both profited off this if you had agreed to work with me. We could have opened a small crack in Panaxeth's prison and then immediately mended it. My oath to the primordial would have been technically fulfilled, and the city would be left standing. Hell, we could have sabotaged the whole invasion from within. Imagine how many lives *that* would save. Instead you insist on staying with a dead man compromised beyond all belief. Are you gay? Is this what's going on?"

"There is no way to fix Panaxeth's prison once it cracks," Zorian told her, not rising to her bait. He telekinetically seized a large piece of a nearby ruined wall and hurled it at the giant ooze. It failed to punch through and instead got stuck inside the green slime that made up its body. "You're just comforting yourself with nonsense. You took Panaxeth's offer because you thought it was a sure thing, as opposed to our own escape plan, which would have required you to trust another human being for once in your life. Now that this 'sure thing' is screwing you over, you're grasping at straws."

"It's still a sure thing! You think we need those shifter children for the ritual?" Silverlake cackled. "Have you forgotten these bodies me and Red Robe have are made by Panaxeth? Both of us contain enough of Panaxeth's essence to form a link to him and crack this prison open. We kept the child sacrifice just to distract you."

Zorian scowled. That... made a disturbing amount of sense. The shifter children collectively had only a tiny amount of primordial essence in them, so a mass sacrifice was needed to get enough material to form a key, but Jornak and Silverlake were specifically incarnated into the real world by Panaxeth to help his release. He probably had no shortage of his own essence and it was of no use to him in his prison.

Any response he might have given was postponed as a veritable rain of alchemical bombs rained down from the sky around him, forcing him to dodge and shield himself from their effects. Worse, some of the alchemical mixture reformed themselves into tiny liquid animals soon after detonation and started attacking him. Smaller version of the three creatures he was already dealing with, obviously. So annoying.

"You're the one controlling the birds above us, right?" Silverlake continued. "You can see through their eyes, so I'm sure you can tell how Oganj's battle is progressing."

Zorian 'glanced' at the battle in question and sighed internally. The performance of Eldemar's eagle mages was praiseworthy. Any compulsion Zorian might have placed on them had long since worn off, but they kept fighting Oganj regardless and they held their own admirably.

But Oganj was still a dragon mage, and one famous even among his own kind. Even as Zorian watched, Oganj pointed his claw at one of the eagle riders and an expanding ball of razor-sharp threads exploded around him. If this was the start of the battle,

the eagle rider in question would have evaded or shielded himself against the attack, but by now he was too exhausted and wounded to resist effectively. The tangled mass of severing threads instantly turned both him and his giant eagle into a bloody mess. Blood and chunks of flesh began to slowly fall to the ground.

The eagle riders weren't going to last much longer, and when they decided to cut their losses and flee, Oganj was going to come here to turn the tides of battle.

He glanced further into the distance, where the angel cube was located, but the cube was opaque from the outside and he couldn't see anything. He had no idea what was happening inside.

"What's your point?" Zorian asked, a spark of light entering his eyes as he finally spotted an opportunity. "You aren't still trying to turn me to your side, are you?"

"Heavens, no," Silverlake said. "Tell you what, though... if you give me the imperial orb, I'll let you flee the city and pretend I couldn't stop you."

The old witch really had a talent for getting under people's skin, Zorian had to give her that.

He made his move. The whip-orb and the tiger-lizard had just tried to attack him together and landed very close to each other. He exploited this ruthlessly by casting a rather obscure spell on the section of the road they were standing on, ripping it straight out of the ground and catapulting it straight into the sky and away from his current position.

Before Silverlake could react to this, he mentally activated the explosives he snuck into the chunk of the ruined wall he had flung at the giant ooze. The wall section, still floating inside the ooze, blew up in a spectacular explosion that burst the gigantic potion elemental like an overripe melon.

It didn't actually kill it, but it didn't have to. It was temporarily incapacitated until it could reform, and that was all that mattered.

The path was open.

He teleported in front of the surprised Silverlake. She had hurriedly shielded herself to protect herself from the chunks of her own potion elemental flying everywhere, and was currently ill suited to protect herself.

The moment Zorian blinked into existence in front of her she sneered at him with an expression of smug triumph and he detected the trap ward she placed on the area activate. She knew he was coming.

Zorian's mind went into overdrive. Time seem to slow down. Elsewhere, his simulacrams stopped what they were doing as the information about the ward as dissected and analyzed by multiple minds bouncing ideas and theories between each other. Before the ward had time to fully activate, Zorian had figured out what it did and where its flaws are.

Wordlessly, he stomped his foot and sent streams of non-structured magic all around him, poking and disrupting the rapidly-forming structure of the ward. Simultaneously, he fired off a simply magic missile spell at a seemingly innocuous glyph faintly carved into the nearby cobblestones, destroying it utterly.

The entire ward suddenly imploded upon itself, carved sigils burning out in a flash of blue light. Silverlake stumbled back, her mind hit by the backlash of the ward control function suddenly sending a bunch of gibberish at her. Before she could recover, Zorian was already casting spell after spell at her. Force projectiles powerful enough to turn stone to powder, fire spells hot enough to melt steel, potent disintegration beams... the attack kept coming and coming, giving Silverlake no chance to take a breath and center herself. She tried to activate some kind of recall object to teleport away but Zorian blocked it from working. Finally, her inexperience with these kind of battles began to show, and her shields broke.

A force projectile hit her straight in the head, and half of her face instantly became a blood mist. Instead of stopping, Zorian blew up the rest of her head as well, and blew a bunch of holes in her torso for good measure as well.

For a second, the scene was quiet.

But something was wrong. Her headless, mutilated body staggered back but didn't fall. Instead, flesh grew out of her wounds at a terrifying rate, quickly reforming her head and healing the rest of her wounds.

Zorian couldn't help but be disturbed. Even if she had drunk a portion of troll regeneration or something, a destroyed head was still a killing strike. He tried to incinerate her just in case, engulfing her rapidly regenerating form in an intense cone of flame. Unfortunately, by now the giant ooze had managed to reform itself and launched another attack at Zorian, forcing him to break off the attack before he could fully reduce her to ash.

The moment he stopped, he charred, skeletal corpse of Silverlake again started to regenerate at a terrifying rate, regrowing muscles and skin at a speed that even trolls and hydras would find amazing. Especially considering the damage was inflicted by fire.

The half-healed body of Silverlake started to shake and gurgle, before breaking into painful coughing and spewing out blood everywhere. After a few seconds, Zorian realized this was Silverlake trying to cackle.

"See? You can't kill me," Silverlake said, almost completely recovered now. "It *was* a sure thing, and you are the fool here. This was so very worth it."

"No one is unkillable," Zorian said, launching a few more attack spells at her. She started defending herself again, though, so none of them actually landed on her this time. Hmm. She wouldn't be defending herself if being hurt was inconsequential. She had a limit, somewhere. "I bet if I keep hurting you, you will eventually

die for good.”

”Eventually,” she agreed, firing some spells back at him half-heartedly. The giant ooze tried to interpose itself between him and Silverlake again, but Zorian refused to let her out of his line of fire again. ”But I bet it will take longer to exhaust my regeneration than it will to exhaust your mana reserves. Even with that cube acting as free defense, you still have to burn through your reserves to hurt me. And besides, Oganj will soon-”

A sound reminiscent of a ceramic plate breaking into pieces resonated somewhere in the distance. The angel cube, long silent, shattered and faded away, revealing the result of the angel-demon battle.

The angel tree was triumphant. Neither the massive demon torso nor its accompanying demon horde could be seen anywhere.

The angel had paid a heavy price for its victory. One of its main trunks was merely a stump now, and two of the others had the majority of its branches ripped and slicked off. Many of its eyes were missing, and the strange orange fires were no longer covering the whole tree, but were instead thin and faded. All but three of its accompanying wing balls were gone, and one of the surviving wing balls was clearly missing a lot of its wings and zigzagging across the sky as if drunk. Of the sinuous lion-serpent things that created the barrier, there was no trace. Maybe they used up all of their power to maintain that thing?

Regardless, the angel tree did not rest or waste time. It shook itself slightly, flexing its branches like a fighter warming himself up before the fight, and then immediately accelerated like a cannonball toward Oganj.

The dragon mage let loose a roar of frustration at all these distractions, but made no attempt to flee. He clearly had every intention of fighting the wounded angel.

Although she did not have flocks of iron beaks acting as her

eyes all over the city, Silverlake must have seen the event in some way, because she immediately scowled in response.

"Don't think you-" she began.

But Zorian wasn't listening. Now that he knew Oganj was taken care of, there was no reason to keep this in reserve anymore. He reached into his pocket and threw a palm-sized metal ball on the ground in front of himself and Silverlake.

He then immediately withdrew to a safe distance. The contents of the pocket dimension prison inside that ball were less a controlled weapon, and more a bloodthirsty maniac you pointed at the enemy and hoped for the best.

Silverlake's eyes widened in fear and shock when the grey hunter materialized in front of her, and all confidence seem to drain out of her posture. She started screaming a long string of curses as she desperately fought to keep the killer spider away from her.

Zorian kept himself well back from the two combatants, somewhat unsure if he wanted to involve himself. Although he had managed to capture the grey hunter and stuff it into a pocket dimension, he did not actually control it by any measure. It was a feral magical beast released off its chain, and if he wasn't careful, it could easily shift its attention to him instead. Thus, he mostly stayed on the sidelines and watched the battle.

Eventually, though, Silverlake started to use the giant ooze she had at her disposal to take control the grey hunter's movements and Zorian decided he had to intervene. As amazing the grey spider was, the giant ooze was huge and could keep the spider away from Silverlake through sheer mass alone.

He never got the chance to involve himself, though. Before he made his move, the giant ooze suddenly froze, shuddered slightly, and then collapsed into an inert puddle of acidic slime. Well, more like a small lake, but still. It was dead.

"What!? Who are you? How do you know how to do this?" Silverlake said, looking left and right for the perpetrator while running from the grey hunter, who now had an open path towards and wasted no time in going after her again.

The other person did not answer at first. Instead, a crude but effective warding circle suddenly sprung around the area where Silverlake and the grey hunter were fighting, trapping her with the murder-spider.

Zorian suddenly realized what was happening. He could recognize this ward easily enough, and there was only one person he ever saw using it. He had to say, he didn't expect this...

Soon, Zorian's unlikely ally stepped out from the shadow of a nearby building, dropping her stealth spell in the process.

It was Silverlake. *Old* Silverlake. The same annoying witch that Zorian remembered from the time loop, her body slightly hunched and raved by old age and her face was covered in wrinkles.

"You!? What the hell do you think you're doing!?" Young Silverlake yelled, outraged.

The old Silverlake did not answer her. She slowly began to walk around the warding circle in which she trapped her copy, tapping the borders with her staff and methodically reinforcing the ward so it was harder to break. Her expression was grave and serious. There was no cackling this time, no stupid jokes or attempt to throw her opponent out of balance with words. It was actually kind of eerie to see Silverlake behaving like this.

"Don't you know who I am?" Young Silverlake protested. "I'm you! I'm you from the future! I know that brat over there already told you this, so why-"

"If you're really my copy, then you know what happened the last time we made a copy of ourselves, and let it do as it pleased," old Silverlake said calmly, not stopping her work or even glancing

at her younger self.

The young Silverlake seemed to be momentarily at loss for words and remained silent.

"Exactly," old Silverlake concluded. "It's only a matter of time before you come for me. My home, my connections, my *life*... you want it all, and you clearly outstrip me in power. This is my best opportunity to remove you as a threat. I must take it."

"You ungrateful withered bitch!" young Silverlake screamed angrily. The grey hunter took advantage of her emotional instability and managed to sink its fangs into her forearm, pumping it full of shaping-disrupting poison... unfortunately, Silverlake reacted quickly and immediately sliced her own arm off at the shoulder with a severing spell. Her regeneration immediately started growing it back. "I should have killed you immediately after coming here!"

"Probably," old Silverlake said, shrugging her shoulders.

Zorian took one more look at the situation, thought about it for a moment, and then decided to let the two Silverlakes deal with each other and move on to other targets. He could see that Jornak's mist was starting to thin out and evaporate, which probably meant his battle with Zach was close to ending.

It was time.

He jumped into the air, his defense cube dutifully following after him, and used a fast flying spell to quickly reach the Hole. The cultists were still holding their own against the combined forces assaulting them, but they were exhausted and unprepared for Zorian's arrival. He immediately started scything them down, butchering the whole group of them with a severing whip while trusting his cube to protect him from retaliation.

Simultaneously, he took closer control over Mrva again, and the golem's attacks suddenly became a lot more accurate and strategic.

After only handful of seconds, most of the cultists realized they stood absolutely no chance against Zorian and his golem, and their discipline fell apart. They started to panic and run, ignoring the threats their leaders spouted at them.

As Zorian suspected, his actions provoked an immediate reaction. In the distance, Oganj shouted a bunch of expletives and then separated himself from the angel he was fighting in order to rush towards the Hole. He received a deep gash in his flank for turning his back to his opponent like that, but he bore it with barely a grimace. Then, not far from where Zorian was cutting down the hapless cultists, a huge blast of magical force leveled an entire section of the city and a pitch-black skeleton suddenly flew out of it, flying at Zorian at maximum speed. Zorian quickly scanned the area Quatach-Ichl left and breathed a sigh of relief. Xvim, Alanic, and Daimen were in extremely poor shape, but they were still alive. Xvim was unconscious and Daimen was severely wounded and bleeding, but Alanic was quick to administer aid so they should both survive.

They should...

But no, he couldn't get distracted. Oganj and Quatach-Ichl were both coming here, but the lich was closer and would be here sooner.

Although he was just a mindless golem, he couldn't help but glance at Mrva looming above him a little sadly.

'It was nice knowing you, Mrva...'

Being a mindless construct, Mrva did not answer him. He simply turned towards rapidly approaching Quatach-Ichl and spread his giant arms as if offering the incoming lich a hug.

To his credit, Quatach-Ichl immediately understood that something was wrong and tried to swerve out of the way. It didn't help him. There was no dodging this. Mrva's chest opened up like a metal flower, exposing a complicated magical device with a glass

tank acting as a centerpiece. Trapped within the glass tank was a large soulseizer chrysanthemum, which immediately woke up from its stupor and focused on the only target his current prison allowed him to perceive – Quatach-Ichl.

Normally, the flower wouldn't have been powerful enough to threaten the ancient lich, especially from this distance, but its current housing wasn't just a prison. It was an amplifier and a focus device, vastly increasing the flower's range and power.

Without reservations, Mrva immediately started burning through his entire internal supplies of mana, amplifying the flower's attack more and more. It still wasn't enough to actually seize Quatach-Ichl's soul and draw it into the flower, but that was okay – Zorian did not actually expect it to be able to do that. All he needed it to do was incapacitate Quatach-Ichl for a little while, just like the chrysanthemum had done to Zach and Zorian the first time they had encountered it.

The amplified soulseizer chrysanthemum did just that. Hit by the flower's attack, Quatach-Ichl lost control over his flight spell and plowed straight into the building in front of him before unceremoniously dropping to the ground. Being an undying lich made out of magically-reinforced bones, this high-speed impact and subsequent fall did not really hurt him much. But it did make him stationary.

The defense cube behind Zorian suddenly restructured itself into a ring-shaped construct. The time-frozen spell Zorian had previously captured from Oganj was suddenly released and immediately continued its attack, this time targeting Quatach-Ichl.

The lich shakily picked himself up from the ground, fighting-off the still ongoing effects of the soulseizer chrysanthemum through sheer willpower, and lifted his head just in time to see the giant incandescent projectile, equivalent in power to an artillery magic spell, hurling towards him. If he'd had only a few more

seconds, he would have shrugged off the attack and dodged, shielded, or teleported away... but he didn't have a few more seconds.

Before the projectile even reached him, the light suddenly died in his dead eye sockets and his bones started to fall back to the ground. He chose to retreat back to his phylactery on his own rather than be beaten.

Moments later, the dragon magic spell hit his remains dead-center, and the entire area was consumed by a blinding fireball that vaporized everything around it.

As for Mrva, his role in this was finished. His chest folded up again to prevent the chrysanthemum from targeting anyone else, and then he simply went limp. His internal mana reserves were gone and he could no longer move or fight.

"Contemptible thief!" Oganj shouted in outrage, getting increasingly close. The angel tree was hot on his tail. "Is your kind capable of doing anything on your own!?"

What was he talking about? Dragons were infamous for bullying everything and everyone around them for things they wanted. Besides, you would never see a dragon build a gun or a train, so there was at least a couple of things humans invented on their own.

He didn't bother saying any of this, though. He simply teleported close to the blasted site and fired a gust of wind at it, getting rid of the smoke and dust. He was met with the site of molten ground, still visibly burning hot, with a small crater in the middle. Only one thing survived the magical conflagration – the imperial crown that once stood on Quatach-Ichl's head, still completely untouched.

Divine artifacts were not easy to destroy, especially ones of this caliber.

Zorian quickly produced a force whip and used it to yank the crown towards him. He was careful not to touch it at first, but it

turned out to be completely cool to the touch.

He glanced to the side, where Zach and Jornak were facing off against each other. He got a little distracted while fighting Quatach-Ichl, but at some point the mist Jornak had created completely disappeared, and the two combatants reappeared. Thankfully, Zach managed to keep Jornak from interfering, so their fellow time traveler was unable to save the lich.

They both looked pretty terrible. Zach was bleeding from his forehead and limping. Whatever Jornak had done with that mist apparently did much to even the odds between them, since Zorian did not think Jornak could hurt Zach that much in a fair fight. As for Jornak, his fancy red robe was almost entirely shredded and he was gasping for breath as if he had been running for hours, but his skin was suspiciously free of any scrapes and bruises. Zorian suspected he was similar to Silverlake, and that any wound inflicted on him would heal quickly. Maybe not on the level of Silverlake, since her powers seemed to focus entirely on indestructibility, while Jornak had this weird mist thing in his arsenal, but still.

Zorian twirled Quatach-Ichl's crown with his finger, giving Jornak a cheeky smile.

"Like that means anything," Jornak spat angrily. He hadn't taken his eyes off Zach for even a moment, but he had clearly seen Zorian's gesture. Despite what he said, the emotion in his voice told Zorian that he was very much bothered by the way things were going. "This isn't over! The crown is useless to you in the short term, anyway!"

Before Zorian could answer, he was forced to dodge a spell from Oganj, who had finally arrived to the scene. Thankfully, the shifters and police forces had already rescued the shifter children by this point, and hurriedly left the area, so he didn't have to worry about them becoming collateral damage.

"Out of everyone here, I like you the least!" Oganj said, slicing a nearby building in half with a blue beam of force and nearly taking Zorian's head off. "You're a sleazy weakling who fights with tricks and schemes!"

"You're allied with Silverlake," Zorian countered. "You have no room to talk!"

His response was a palm thrust that flattened the entire area he was standing on. Thankfully, by that point he had already teleported away to a nearby rooftop.

He clacked his tongue. Though he could keep the dragon mage at bay for a while, he had to say this wasn't a good position to be in. He wasn't a heavy hitter. He couldn't tangle with Oganj for long.

He mentally calculated things in his head. Should he do it now? Having Oganj around was very suboptimal, but if he *had* to do it now... he might be able to pull it off. The dragon was busy fighting off the angel tree at the same time as fighting Zorian, so maybe...

[Angel,] Zorian told the celestial telepathically, [what are the chances of you winning against the dragon and driving him off.]

[On my own?] the angel guessed, correctly. **[A coin toss.]**

[How about keeping him completely busy for an hour?] Zorian tried.

[A coin toss,] the angel replied.

"Okay," Zorian mumbled quietly.

He didn't like those odds. He glanced at the imperial crown in his hand and suddenly remembered his conversation with Silverlake.

Why was Oganj fighting them, anyway? The Kingdom of Eldemar was his sworn enemy, yes, and he would no doubt love to see Cyoria burned to the ground, but there was no way he just teamed up with Jornak just to see the city burn. He was promised something, and it had to be big in order to move a dragon mage of his caliber to do this.

Was it bigger than a divine artifact?

Let's find out.

[Angel, catch,] Zorian sent the celestial telepathically, before throwing the crown in the sky towards the angel and accelerating it telekinetically so it could reach the celestial high in the sky.

[This is useless to me,] the angel pointed out disapprovingly, but it humored him anyway, and quickly snatched the crown with one of its branches.

[I have an idea. Please play along,] Zorian told it, before turning towards the dragon mage that was currently busy defending himself against the angel tree.

"Dragon!" he shouted, "I have given the angel the imperial crown!"

"Why the hell would I care?" Oganj shouted back. "It can't use it!"

"But you can!" Zorian shouted back. "If you agree to stop fighting us and leave the city, the angel will promise to give you the imperial crown at the end of the day! A genuine divine artifact that can increase your mana reserves! There is no other like this anywhere in the world!"

Oganj suddenly stopped and put some distance between himself and the angel, eying it speculatively. The angel hovered in place, not pursuing hostilities for the moment.

"Oganj, don't you dare!" Jornak shouted angrily. There was a trace of panic in his voice. "You know what's going to happen if you do this! Quatach-Ichl is going to come after you! I will come after you! And you will not receive a single god damned thing I promised you!"

But Oganj wasn't listening. There was a shine of greed in his eyes now, and he studied Zorian with increased focus now.

"You are the one who has the imperial orb, right? The one with the portable palace inside?" Oganj suddenly asked. He didn't

wait for Zorian's answer. "Throw that in as well and I'll leave the city and trouble you no more."

"Oganj, you son of a bitch!" Jornak raged.

"Done," Zorian said. He didn't even think twice about giving up the imperial orb. Losing it was painful, but his need of making the dragon mage go away was greater.

He could always try to recover it later.

He withdrew the imperial orb out of his pocket and threw it at the angel, accelerating it telekinetically like he did the crown. The angel caught it easily, sequestering it safely with its branches.

"I hereby make a promise, backed by the high heavens, that if you leave the city now and stay away from it for 24 hours, I will give you these two artifacts that have been entrusted to me just now," the angel told the dragon mage. **"May the high heavens strip me of my rank and strike me down should I break it."**

"Hmm," Oganj hummed appreciatively. "I wouldn't trust most creatures, but an angel wouldn't lie. I accept."

And then Oganj turned towards the northern forest in the distance and simply flew away from the city. The angel seemed to hesitate for a moment, as if it wanted to tell Zorian something, before it simply followed after the dragon mage.

Jornak was clearly fuming with anger right now, but he still wasn't willing to quit. If anything, his attacks on Zach started getting more frenzied and reckless, his breathing harder and harder.

Zorian took a deep breath. It was time. There would never be any better time than this.

His mind blended with that of his simulacrum. The network of sigils he had scattered across the city sprung into life, giving him reach across the entire city. The multitude of aranea he had brought into the city, mostly quiet until now, established contact with his mind.

He used a short-range teleportation spell to transport himself as close as possible to the two fighters.

And then he lunged at both of them.

Chapter One Hundred and Four

I WIN (I)

He was Zach Noveda, the last surviving member of Noble House Noveda, the chosen of the angels...

...and he had won.

He honestly never thought he would win. He *wanted* to win, of course. He wanted to know what kind of wonders the world beyond this month had in store for him. He wanted to rebuild his house and make his caretaker pay for what he had done to him. He wanted to have friends and lovers that would never forget him. But this wish... it was merely a wistful dream, flickering in the back of his mind and refusing to die. He didn't seriously consider it, and not *just* because of the stupid angel contract and its impossible conditions. The truth was, he'd kind of given up a long time ago.

He had tried to beat the invasion so many times, attempt after attempt, idea after idea, until eventually, he became convinced this was his fate. To stay there forever, in an endlessly looping world. All this power and knowledge, all the revelations about his past life, all the insights into people around him... the time loop dangled these things over his head, but it was all meaningless because he couldn't get out.

Stopping the invasion of Cyoria was the key. He knew this. Somehow, deep down in his soul, he knew this. But he couldn't

do it, no matter how many times he tried. It was fine while he was still learning things, becoming a better mage, and brimming with ideas... but slowly, he started to slow down. He had learned everything he possibly could about the invaders themselves. Advancing his magic became harder and harder, each new spell or training method giving ever smaller improvements. His inspiration began to dry out.

And yet he still couldn't get out. He was as good as he realistically would ever be, and yet it wasn't enough to stop the invasion. His best wasn't enough. That's when he realized he wouldn't be getting out.

He wouldn't ever be getting out.

And then he met Zorian. His friend was... alright. He scared him with his behavior from time to time, and he wished he was easier to talk to and more fun to hang out with, but hey. You can't have everything. More importantly, he was *driven*. He had that spark to keep going that had mostly died in Zach a long time ago. He had ideas that would have never even occurred to Zach, and methods that were alien to Zach's way of thinking. It was new and refreshing, and it reignited that spark of hope in him that refused to fully die.

A long time ago, when Zach had only begun figuring out the time loop and his skills were still growing, his pride would have bristled at the idea of just letting his new friend take the lead in how they should proceed with their escape plan or go about honing their skills. Alas, that was a long time ago. By the time Zach met Zorian, the time loop had already grounded him, and he was entirely content to simply act as support. He stepped aside and let Zorian plan their escape and set their short-term goals, trusting his new friend to get them out of their looping nightmare and simply steering him away from his more... dubious choices.

In the end, that path had led him here: locked in a deadly bat-

tle against his other time travelling companion – Red Robe. Or Jornak. Whatever. He would always be Red Robe to Zach, in all honesty. Even now he was wearing that stupid red robe of his to hide his appearance.

He had trapped Zach in some kind of strange dimensional labyrinth, at first – a mirror image of the city covered in thick mist that severely limited Zach's vision while allowing Red Robe to move around in some strange manner that Zach found hard to understand at first. Red Robe clearly thought of him as some kind of dumb brute that wouldn't be able to deal with this kind of environment, but Zach hadn't spent all those years in the time loop for nothing, and his knowledge of dimensionalism had reached incredible heights while he had been working with Zorian and others to create a viable escape route into the real world.

Red Robe bragged a lot about this misty labyrinth world while he and Zach fought. An attempt to demoralize him, maybe? Maybe he couldn't see all that well in there either, and wanted Zach to verbally respond so he could lock onto his position more securely? In any case, Red Robe said this misty world was primordial magic granted to him by Panaxeth. A place isolated from the real world, impossible to escape.

Place largely removed from the real world... impossible to escape... ha. Wasn't that almost exactly the description of the time loop? Hadn't Zach helped Zorian learn how to punch a hole through it so he could escape?

Red Robe thought Zach was a dumb brute, but Zach had figured his little trick out within a minute of arriving there. Just like the time loop was centered on Panaxeth, this world of mists was centered around Red Robe. There was no point looking for an exit in the environment around them. The exit was Red Robe.

The fight between them lasted a while, but eventually Zach

managed to maneuver things in the right direction. He had to let one of Red Robe's kinetic spells clip him in the leg, leaving him limping, but it was of no importance. It was a relatively light wound, and he had drunk a potion of regeneration before the battle. His leg would be fine soon enough. What was important was that he used the opportunity to hit Red Robe with a dimensional spell designed specifically to punch holes in these kind of prisons. It was literally one-of-a-kind, a product of their intense research near the end of the time loop, and Red Robe clearly had no idea how to deal with it.

Zach had expected to punch a literal hole in the misty world, but it turned out that Red Robe's little creation was incomparable to that of Panaxeth, even if they had the same origin. The moment it was forcibly punctured, the mist started to thin and fade, until the entire world quietly disappeared at some point, shunting them back to the real world.

They came back just in time to see Zorian take out Quatach-Ichl. It filled Zach with complex feelings to see Zorian best his oldest enemy so seemingly easily. He knew that a lot of work and preparation went into this victory, and that it was not nearly as easy as it looked, but... it still made him a little jealous. Just a little bit.

Red Robe, on the other hand, was just mad. He attacked Zach with increased ferocity to vent his frustration, and Zach matched it without any reservations. Black swords made out of dimensional forces slashed at Jornak, cutting deep gouges as he dodged out of the way. Tiny incandescent suns zipped around with the speed and agility of a swallow, the ground exploded into stone spears that then exploded into thousands of needle-like shards, rays of electrified light surged forward while evading obstacles like immaterial snakes, and the air itself was whipped into a miniature tornado centered on Zach. He may have failed in a lot of areas of his life, but if

there was one thing Zach Noveda felt supremely confident in, that was his combat skills. He was good at fighting, and he loved doing it. It rejuvenated him to fight worthy opponents, made him feel alive.

He looked at his opponent, his red robe long since tattered, and met the man's eyes, trying to jog his memory. To remember the time they apparently met and became friends. Alas, nothing came to his mind. There was no memory, no instinctive knowledge, not even a feeling of déjà vu. The man was a complete stranger.

Red Robe. Jornak. The man who apparently betrayed him and tampered with his mind, leaving him even more lost inside the time loop than he already was. Zach was angry at the man for what he had done... but if he was honest with himself, not *that* angry. He didn't actually remember the betrayal, and he was always a relatively easygoing guy. Even so, tracking the man down and making him pay for what he had done had been the driving force of his life for a while now. He didn't think it was the effect of any magical compulsion or anything... he just found hating the man to be convenient. Invigorating. Focusing on Red Robe and how he messed him up gave Zach a goal in life that he had lacked for so long, so how he could not go after him?

Plus, the man was clearly a total nutcase. He wasn't an empath like Zorian, but he didn't need to be one to get a read on the guy. Even more than Zach himself, he was dead inside. The next round of continental wars was going to be bad enough without a guy like this throwing oil into the fire. He had to go.

Then Zorian made Oganj go away. He did it in such a hilarious way, too! Except for the part where he gave up the imperial orb to make it happen, that part was honestly awful. Hadn't they agreed the orb would go to him after the month was over, since he got Princess? The asshole had no right to give it away! Hell, he didn't even try to negotiate with the stupid lizard...

Oh well. Truthfully, the idea he would get to enjoy the imperial orb, or anything else for that matter, was just... a wistful dream. The angel contract hung like a sword above his head, ready to strike. Its terms were impossible to fulfill. No matter what happened, Zach only had a little time left.

Or so he thought at the time, anyway.

Without warning, Zorian teleported near the site of Zach's battle with Red Robe. Zach remembered feeling a flash of anger in response, even if he stayed quiet. It made sense for Zorian to help bring down Red Robe as quickly as possible, but this was the final stretch of the battle and Zach was enjoying himself. This was the last fun thing he was ever going to do in his life, did Zorian really have to take it away from him?

What happened next shocked him completely. Without saying anyway, Zorian simply lunged at Red Robe, rapidly entering melee range with the man while charging some kind of spell Zach didn't recognize.

Though angry, exhausted, and focused on Zach, Red Robe reacted quickly. He instantly spun to the side to face this new opponent, drawing a knife from his belt in a smooth, practiced motion.

No, it was not just a knife, Zach realized. It was the imperial dagger. Red Robe must have quietly stolen it from the Royal Vaults at some point. It wasn't that surprising – the man must have gotten quite proficient at it over the restarts – but he thought the dagger wasn't that useful?

Red Robe's expression alone told Zach that he had thought wrong. An expression of pure glee and hate shone on the man's face, as if he hoped this very thing would happen and couldn't believe Zorian was stupid enough to grant him this opportunity.

Zach hastily launched a fast-moving spell at the two, trying to blast them apart from each other, but he wasn't fast enough. The dagger shone with a faint purple light as Red Robe thrust it

forward towards Zorian's face. Zorian did nothing to dodge or shield himself with magic, but that protective cube he made quietly interposed itself in the path of the knife.

Zorian's faith in his grand creation proved to be severely misplaced, however. As great as his skills at artifice were, the dagger was a genuine divine artifact. It sliced straight through the cube like it was made of paper and stabbed forward, impaling Zorian straight through the neck.

Simultaneously, Zorian's glowing hand slammed straight into Red Robe's chest, blowing a massive hole straight through his chest and causing some kind of faint blue waves to resonate across the man's entire body.

And then Zorian's damaged defense cube detonated in a massive explosion that not only blew Zorian and Red Robe away from each other like rag dolls, but also flung Zach back into the nearby building.

Zach wasn't really hurt. It wasn't the first time he was flung back into a wall. He cushioned his impact with the wall with a quick magic, expertly landing on his feet. He quickly scanned the area and found Zorian lying on his back some distance away.

He rushed towards the boy to provide aid but stopped when he got close enough to really see him.

He wasn't moving. His eyes, blank and glassy, remained open. His chest didn't move. And the imperial dagger was still stuck up to the hilt in his neck, and his whole body was full of serrated metal bits sticking out his skin – the remains of his defense device driven deep into his flesh by the force of the explosion.

He stared at his friend for a few seconds, overcome in disbelief, before walking forwards. He cast a quick diagnostic spell and slowly, hesitantly placed his hand on him. He wasn't that great with healing magic, but this was one of the simplest spells in that field and he had an excellent grasp on it. The spell told him what

he already knew, but didn't want to accept.

Zorian was dead.

"No," he whispered despondently. "No! Zorian you stupid, stupid, stupid- Why!? Why would you do something so-"

'Because this was deliberate. What don't you understand? He chose to die so you could live.'

The thought bubbled up to his mind suddenly, unpleasant and uninvited. It hit him like a punch in the face.

"H-He wouldn't..." Zach mumbled to himself. "He's too selfish... he said so himself! He has friends, a family, a little sister that needs him, a whole bunch of girls that want to get in his pants. I..."

He took a deep breath and forcefully calmed himself. He... had to check something.

He got up to his feet and ran up to where Red Robe was also laying on the ground, motionless. The man was also dead, unsurprisingly. Not only did Zorian's last attack completely destroy his heart and chest, the blue wave that accompanied the attack also did something. Ripped his soul out of his body, maybe? His medical magic was too rudimentary to figure it out, but the man was definitely dead.

He swallowed heavily and then got up again. He started to search for other people.

Everyone seemed to be unconscious, Zach soon realized. They were lying all over the place – on the streets, in public buildings, in alleyways, everywhere.

It wasn't that they got knocked out during a fight, either. His diagnostic spells confirmed most of them were completely healthy, barring some minor scrapes and bruises that were normal for the current conditions of the city. They seemed to have just suddenly dropped unconscious all of a sudden.

He eventually found Alanic, Xvim, and... Zorian's brother Daimen. Gods above, how was he going to explain to the man

that he just let his little brother...

He shook his head and carefully approached. They were still unconscious, just like everyone he encountered so far. After a second of hesitation, he cast a memory reading spell and placed his hand on Xvim's head.

The spell encountered no resistance. He was sure that Xvim had placed a mind blank spell on him during the battle, but there was no trace of it now. He immediately dove into the man's memories, searching for any information regarding the time loop.

His hand soon began to tremble. The man had no idea about any time loop. More than that, however, he didn't possess any memories of this entire month. Someone had quite literally memory wiped his entire recollection of said time period.

He repeated his check on nearby Alanic and Daimen, with the same results. They were free of any knowledge of the time loop... because they had no memory of anything that had transpired during this whole month.

He breathed out heavily.

"Zorian, you scary bastard... how did you even do this?" he said out loud.

Wait. If he could do that to others... could he do it to him as well?

Was any of this real?

The moment the thought bubbled up to his mind, it refused to leave. He could feel something inside his soul wake up and *demand* a check. He had to know. He had to know as badly as a starving man needed food, a compulsion so strong it was essentially irresistible.

He started casting a plethora of diagnostic divinations on himself, his surroundings, and the three unconscious people in front of him. He performed a multitude of little experiments he

learned over the years to detect when illusionists messed with his surroundings.

Nothing. His mind blank was still working. His mind was not being tampered with. The environment was behaving as it should and the people in front of him were as complex as real people should be.

He started to wander the city, casting memory spells on random people he found lying in the streets. By this time some people had started to wake up, but Zach simply walked past them, ignoring them as he went about his task.

He wasn't really searching for any specific information. He was reading people's memories in order to find out trivial things like their favorite meals, what their mother looked like, or what the last story they'd heard was about. In other words, he was checking if they were real people.

A mind mage, no matter how good, couldn't create a mind from scratch. Not a convincing one, in any case. A fake man would be a paper thin disguise, capable of tricking only the most inexperienced of mind mages. However, Zach had gotten to know Zorian long enough that he couldn't discount anything. He could totally accept that Zorian could produce a convincing fake mind. The guy was just that scary.

Maybe even a pair of fake minds. Maybe a *dozen*.

By now he had read the memories of more than a hundred people, though. All of them felt real. All of them were complex individuals with lots of little details about their lives and tangled histories that Zach could easily lose himself in for weeks at a time if he really wanted to figure them out. He refused to believe that anyone could create so many lives out of thin air. Even someone like Zorian.

He lost track of time. He wandered around the city, checking on people. Anyone that was even slightly familiar with the

time loop had lost their memories of the whole month. No exceptions. Even the aranea beneath Cyoria were missing any memory of this month. An entire colony of skilled telepaths, but Zorian had somehow managed to convince them to willingly delete their own memories.

Eventually, he accepted the truth. It was real. It was all real. Jornak was dead. Silverlake too – she was done in by her old, real world self, who lost her memories of the past month, but was otherwise unharmed.

Nobody knew anything about the time loop except for him.

He left the city. He couldn't look at it any longer. He found a small hill just outside the city walls that he and Zorian used to sit on sometimes, discussing their plans or just wasting time, and watched the fields around him in silence.

He had no idea how long he stood there. He thought someone approached him at one point and asked him if he was alright, but he ignored them and they eventually went away. All he knew was that at some point he realized that someone was shooting fireworks into the sky.

It was the night of the summer festival. The city may have just suffered a brutal invasion, but that was no reason to halt the celebrations. Hell, if anything this just made the importance of a celebration that much greater!

And Zach... felt happy. He felt disgust with himself for it, but he really did. Panaxeth was still sealed and the conditions of his contract had been fulfilled. He was going to live past this month.

He... had won.

He was Zach Noveda, the last surviving member of Noble House Noveda and the last surviving time looper...

...and he had won.

He fell to his knees and began to cry. Somewhere deep inside his soul, he could feel the angel contract harmlessly dissolve, finally

fulfilled.

He was free, and all it cost him was the life of his best friend.

I WIN (II)

He was Jornak Dokochin, a humble lawyer from Cyoria, the *true* heir of House Denen, and the last surviving time looper...

...and he had won.

The path had been long and difficult. He still remembered that fateful day he had realized Zach was a time traveler. The boy had been making scene after scene around the city, making 'nonsensical' statements to the newspapers and everyone else who would listen, never once outright stating what he was, but very much hinting at it. Very few people had taken him seriously. Jornak hadn't either, in all honesty – not until the boy had come to him one day and asked him to help him figure out some legal documents he 'found lying around the living room'.

The documents blew Jornak's mind away. Not because the contents were so shocking, but because of what they implied. The people they implicated in crimes were so influential and highly placed, and the evidence so damning, that Jornak simply knew that Zach must have stolen them from the very people mentioned in the documents.

Jornak knew *exactly* how hard that feat was. After the corrupt Eldemarian courts had taken the inheritance of House Denen away from him, he had come to understand that truth and the letter of

the law were almost entirely inconsequential in the face of money, connections, and social status. He became a covert member of the Cult of the Dragon Below and rubbed shoulders with many powerful people. He came to know the darker undercurrents of Eldemar society, and knew what it would take to acquire this kind of dirt on someone.

No amount of money could buy something like this, so how could Zach have possibly acquired these documents? Jornak had agonized over this question for days, dissecting every statement Zach had made, no matter how minor or nonsensical, and eventually came up with a crazy idea. The craziest idea, possibly. He confronted Zach with it, and... the boy just laughed and admitted to it easily.

Yes, he was a time traveler. In fact, he had lived through this month many, many times, and they had talked before.

Jornak believed him. He *wanted* to believe him. His life had been rather dreary and frustrating for several years by that point. His career wasn't going anywhere, despite his attempts to build connections and increase his social standing. He had no success in love. His family was long dead. The inheritance of House Denen, his best chance at achieving greatness, was stolen from him. His youth was all but spent, and he felt he wasn't going anywhere. This looping time travel thing may have been completely insane, but Jornak was willing to take a chance on it.

The two became fast friends. Zach explained that he had originally found Jornak because he'd befriended Veyers in one of the restarts, and the boy had introduced him to his lawyer friend. Zach's story about his caretaker selling Noveda property for pocket change to his friends and then siphoning most of the money into his pockets fascinated Jornak almost as much as the time travel story itself.

He wasn't that unique in his realization that Zach was a time

traveler. Zach had been making a lot of noise during that particular restart, handing out clues to various people he was fond of, and a number of them had reached the same conclusion he had. Zach was also dating no less than two women at the time – both of them aware of the other and fine with it – and he'd outright told them the truth long before Jornak had met him. It was... a fascinating group. He'd made a lot of new friends that month.

There was a looming shadow over the whole thing, however, and it grew colder and more obvious with every passing day. Zach Noveda wasn't a mage who invented time travel, merely a leaf caught in the storm. The mechanics of the time loop were merciless, and they would soon strike.

As the end of the month approached, some people in the group got increasingly concerned. Jornak was one of them. During one evening when they were alone, and Zach had a little too much to drink, he admitted to Jornak that he would eventually stop interacting with him altogether. It had happened repeatedly in the past: Zach would get to know someone, interact with them over and over again, get emotionally attached to them, and then decide it was too painful to be around them in the future.

The admission shook Jornak to his core. He wasn't sure why. He wouldn't really remember anything soon, so why did it matter that Zach would replace him with someone else in one of the future restarts? It shouldn't have mattered, but it did. He grew increasingly desperate, constantly probing Zach for any ideas about how he can keep existing after the month was over. He recruited the other members of Zach's group into his efforts, and eventually they managed to force an admission out of him.

There was a way. A divine artifact, held by a lich, that could confer the status of a temporary looper upon a person. It would only be for six restarts, and Zach explained again and again why he didn't want to do it, why it was a bad idea, and so forth. It didn't

matter – not to Jornak, and not to the other people. Six months was better than nothing.

It was probably the two lovers that did most of the job of convincing Zach to play along with their request, Jornak suspected. Still, he was the one who organized the whole effort and he was very proud of it. The next six months were a great time, possibly the happiest in Jornak's life. He did not intend to betray Zach at that time, not at all – the boy was his best friend, and Jornak had every intention of helping him out in any way he could.

But alas... six restarts had eventually passed. The second deadline started to approach. Tempers ran high. People started asking Zach for a way to prolong their time looping status, horrified that they were about to lose everything they had achieved during these past six months. Zach's mood continually worsened, both from him being heartbroken that the people he spent the past six months with were about to become lost to him, and the fact they were constantly badgering him about a solution that didn't exist. That he couldn't provide.

Jornak's friendship with Zach also started to gradually deteriorate as the end approached. Jornak was far more interested in politics of the state and in what was happening behind closed doors of their nation's elite. He had come to know much, and he grew more disgusted with them than he ever had been. He talked to Zach often about these issues, but the boy was just a teenager at heart, and his perspective was narrow and naïve. He simply wanted to get back at his caretaker, start rebuilding his House, and have fun. He did not appreciate the knowledge Jornak had painstakingly gathered, and found his methods to be immoral and disturbing. As the end of their temporary looper status approached, they clashed more and more frequently, and Jornak made the mistake of telling Zach exactly what he would do if he were in his place. The look Zach had given him when he stopped talking... Jornak would al-

ways remember that...

Eventually Zach called for a group meeting. He swore again and again that he wasn't hiding any methods of prolonging their looping, and that there was nothing he could do. He promised them he would make them all temporary loopers again as soon as he could.

He also privately promised Jornak he would supply his future looper with all the work he had done in those six restarts, but Jornak didn't believe him. The boy hadn't even read the last two reports Jornak gave him, much less memorized them. Even if he *wanted* to hand future Jornak the fruits of his work, how would he do it? Not to mention that he probably didn't even want to do it. He doubted Zach would even make him a temporary looper in the future. He remembered Zach's admission that he eventually dropped people from his social circle after interacting with them for a few restarts. He remembered the look Zach had given him not too long ago. And he decided he had to do something.

He had never planned to betray Zach. He'd wanted to work with him. To *help* him. When one really thought about it, Zach was the one who betrayed him.

Jornak himself was not a powerful man. His magical aptitude was entirely average, and not even the time loop could change that. But some of the people in the looper group were magically powerful, and their skills had only gotten better due to Zach's willingness to help them grow. Getting them to side with him was tricky, but not too difficult. Desperation made people do previously unthinkable things. Contacting Quatach-Ichl and arranging a meeting with him without being immediately killed had been harder, but not nearly as hard as he had feared it would be. From that point on, everything kind of slid into place.

In the end, that path had led him here: locked in a deadly battle against his one-time best friend and fellow time travelling compan-

ion – Zach.

He had to admit, he had been pretty worried for a while. The ability he'd gotten from Panaxeth was not nearly as effective as he thought it would be. Weren't primordials supposed to be on the level of gods? He expected more out of primordial magic, to be honest. That prison should have taken some kind of advanced, specialized magic to get out of, but Zach had an appropriate spell for breaking it already in his arsenal.

Then, when they were pulled back into Cyoria proper, it was just in time to see Zorian banish Quatach-Ichl back to his phylactery with the help of a... flower? He dimly recognized it as a soul-seizer chrysanthemum. What an obscure magical creature. In any case, he was of two minds about this. On one hand, he needed the ancient lich to win this. On the other hand, it was satisfying to see the black-hearted bastard finally get knocked down a peg or two. And besides, he still had the dragon m-

Oganj left. He took the crown and the orb, and he just *left!* Unbelievable. Jornak had given him so much for his assistance as forward payment – materials, maps, records of draconic magic that humans had taken from other dragon mages, everything – but Oganj still chose to switch sides in exchange for two thrice-damned divine artifacts.

A familiar bitterness welled up from the back of his mind. Everyone always betrayed him. He was so fed up with everything.

He still didn't think the situation was hopeless. He started the invasion a day before the actual deadline for releasing Panaxeth, so he had some time for another attempt. He would activate all of his contingencies and plunge the country into chaos. He would activate all of the remaining wraith bombs in other cities – he refused to believe his enemies had enough countermeasures to disable them all, or that they had even managed to track down every single one of them. He would assassinate people and mind control

critical individuals into starting hostilities with every nearby country. He would sic the police and Eldemar's military on them, their allies, friends, and family. He would descend straight into the Hole and lure the monsters lurking in the deepest layer of the dungeon back to the surface to wreak havoc on it until the city was nothing but ruins...

It was suboptimal. He wanted to rule this country, and make it better, not bring it to its knees. However, he had to be alive in order to improve things, and his opponents had forced his hand. If this was the only path they had left for him, he would not hesitate. He was-

Suddenly, that other looper, Zorian Kazinski, teleported next to them and immediately rushed towards them.

Zorian...Jornak had so many regrets in regards to the boy. He shouldn't have panicked and fled the time loop when he realized there were other time loopers aside from him and Zach, but it made perfect sense at the time. The information he had gotten from the aranea said there was a small legion of them, which... was entirely possible. If Zach wanted to and had the crown, he could have made the entire city into temporary loopers. What if Panaxeth decided some of them would make for a better champion than him? And if Zach was creating so many loopers, he probably knew about the Sovereign Gate and how to leave the time loop. He couldn't play around and risk things. The safest thing to do was to leave as soon as possible.

As it turned out, there was just one additional looper, and he hadn't gotten in through Zach's actions. He got in through some weird mistake in the time loop system. Jornak couldn't even begin to describe how jealous he was of the boy when he heard that. *He* had to go through so much trouble to keep existing, and then this boy got all of that and more through a simple stroke of luck? The world was sometimes so unfair.

But no matter, this was perfect. He didn't know what had possessed the boy to get this close to him all of a sudden, but he wasn't going waste a golden opportunity like this. He drew the imperial dagger out of his belt with a smooth, practiced motion, its weight and shape familiar and comforting in his hand. The dagger had long been his oldest and most reliable companion, and if he could, he always recovered it from the royal vaults, where it was just uselessly gathering dust. He had spent many years tinkering with it and learning everything it could do.

The dagger lit up with a faint purple glow as he thrust it towards Zorian. The imperial dagger was mostly known for its ability to hurt spirits easily, but it had several alternate modes, and this was one of them. The third looper arrogantly refused to dodge his strike, instead placing his defense device in front of him to ward off the blow. Jornak would be first to admit that the cube was an incredible achievement that left him in awe of Zorian's ingenuity and skill, but it was ultimately just a mortal item. The dagger pierced through the complex, multi-layer shield projected by the cube like it didn't exist and then stabbed right through the alchemically-reinforced metal like it was paper.

To his credit, this wasn't enough to take the boy down. Zorian reacted quickly, telekinetically moving his body out of the way of the knife while simultaneously hurling the ruined cube into the sky. Having suffered catastrophic damage, the cube exploded above their heads moments later, showering the area with serrated metal fragments and exotic magical energies.

Jornak locked eyes with Zorian, unsurprised by the boy's quick reactions. Though he was standing here partially due to luck, Zorian Kazinski was someone that had repeatedly shown himself to be a shrewd and decisive person. When Jornak was about to capture and interrogate him back in the time loop, he killed himself without hesitation to deny him useful information.

What's more, the action was clearly a pre-planned contingency and he had enough presence of mind as he ran to make sure Jornak would be unable to recover his body. He did not expect him to die so easily.

Still, with his best defensive tool destroyed, and with him momentarily unbalanced, Jornak decided to bet it all on one last push. This was extremely dangerous and may very well end with him killed, but it wasn't the first time he risked his life for a chance to live, and it probably wouldn't be the last. He wrapped his hand around a small black bottle hanging from his neck and squeezed, shattering it with ease with his supernatural strength.

Hundreds of black shapes suddenly slipped from between his fingers, expanding in size as they filled the skies above them. Vaguely humanoid, the entities looked like legless incorporeal humans in tattered pitch black cloaks.

Wraiths. The whole area immediately began to feel uncomfortably chilly as the mere presence of so many of them began to leech minute amounts of life force from the three combatants, and resonant whispers filled the air as wraiths began to babble in that usual incomprehensible nonsense they constantly spouted.

Wraiths were mysterious creatures, with unclear origins and very few methods of effectively fighting them. In many ways, they almost resembled spirits, but they were usually classified as undead due to their ability to convert human souls into more of themselves. They were difficult to control. Jornak did not actually have any ability to direct the wraith horde he had just released from his miniature wraith bomb, and he had no doubt the wraiths would see him as just as big of a target as the other two people present. However, Jornak was betting he would have a definite advantage anyway, because he had something he didn't think either of the other two had: sophisticated, well-honed soul magic skills.

Soul magic was a sinister branch of magic, requiring a lot of

cruel and unpleasant experimentation and willingness to deal and negotiate with some very loathsome people. Jornak had long accepted this, and he did not let it bother him. He had tortured entire villages of people, over and over again, to see how different soul magic methods affected the same soul over various restarts. He sold kidnapped babies and small orphans to some of the more unscrupulous witches that were willing to teach him their skills in exchange for 'suitable material'. He spoke with demon summoners, participating in their disgusting rituals in order to prove his 'sincerity'. His magical talents may be average, but he was confident that there were few people who could boast about having a similar level of skill when it came to soul magic. Zach certainly wasn't one of them, and Silverlake was adamant that Zorian wasn't that much better.

His opponents knew it too. When they saw the wraiths flood the area, the two of them tried to retreat and regroup elsewhere, but how could Jornak allow that? He stopped them. He foiled their teleportation, he wrenched them back when they tried to fly away, and when the two attacked him together and he was forced to choose between being wounded and letting them flee, he chose to get wounded. His regeneration ability was not nearly as potent as that of Silverlake, but his body was far more resilient than that of a regular person, and healed quickly. So long as he didn't black out and could cast magic, it was fine. He would bear it. He would outlast them, outlast everyone, and win.

He had to win. All of the sacrifices, all the things he'd done... it couldn't have been all in vain. He was close, so very close to the end...

In the end, he triumphed. His soul defenses were honed to perfection, yet even he strained to deal with so many wraiths relentlessly assaulting him. Zach and Zorian? They couldn't compare. Maybe if they hadn't expended so many of their resources

before they decided to tackle him, they could have got themselves out of this situation, but alas. For all their power and skill, in the end, all it took was one mistake for them to fall and be devoured by wraiths. Jornak quietly thanked Zorian for deciding to join the battle when he had – if Jornak had been unable to catch both of his enemies at once in his wraith trap, this wouldn't have worked.

The moment the two loopers fell, Jornak fled the site and waited for the wraiths to scatter before returning to check up on them. Always check the bodies to make sure your enemies were really dead, after all. This was especially true when dealing with enemies on the level of Zach and Zorian.

A minute later, he breathed a sigh of release. They were really dead. It was over.

He started to laugh. Yes. Yes! He... he knew he could do it!

Now was not the time for gloating, however. That would come later. For now, he started searching the city for his 'partner', Silverlake.

He eventually found her not far from where he fought Zach and Zorian. Or what was left of her, anyway. She was really just an empty bag of skin now. After cautiously kneeling down and inspecting the skin, he found two large puncture wounds in her chest and no other notable damage. Something, probably some kind of magical creature, had liquefied her insides and slurped it all out, leaving this preserved husk behind.

Jornak frowned. Silverlake was probably the weakest one from among the four of them that had managed to escape from the time loop, but she shouldn't have been this easy to kill. In fact, despite being the weakest, Jornak suspected she was the hardest of them to kill, both because her primordial abilities were all defensive in nature and because she herself was a cowardly wretch that would no doubt flee at the first hint of actual danger. The creature that had killed her... some kind of spider, maybe? In any

case, it had to be very powerful. On the level of a dragon, really. How did a creature like that get here, and where was it now? And why hadn't Silverlake simply retreated if she had encountered something like that? Magical creatures generally had little ability to stop high-level mages from fleeing if outmatched, unless they were sapient spellcasters in their own right.

Concerning.

Still. Maybe it was better this way. Jornak hadn't actually liked Silverlake that much. She had brought him some very useful knowledge, and for that, he would always be grateful to her, but she was also clearly playing her own game and knew too much about Jornak's true nature for him to be comfortable with it. This way there was one less person potentially messing up his plans.

With Silverlake dead, it fell to him to fulfill their bargain with Panaxeth and set him loose upon the world. He threw himself into the task without hesitation, rallying the invader forces under his banner and gathering the surviving cultists that had scattered around the city after their defeat near the Hole. While most of the cultists had perished, their leaders and high-level members were powerful and resourceful enough to survive for the most part, and they were the most important part anyway. Jornak had them set up the ritual while the Ibasan army protected them, and used his own primordial essence in place of the shifter children that the defenders had managed to rescue and evacuate out of the city. He had thought about trying to recover them, but eventually decided that would take too long. Eldemar was already mobilizing their whole army to crush this invasion, and he had no time to lose. Using his own primordial essence was going to weaken him for a long time, and disable most of his primordial magic, but he would rather pay this price than risk dying at the end of the month because he had wasted too much time.

Imagine if that happened – he, the ultimate victor of the time

loop war, ended up dying because he had failed to release Panaxeth before the Eldemar army rolled into the city and killed all his underlings. He would die wallowing in shame and embarrassment! No, he would pay the price with his own flesh and blood and do things properly. No gains without sacrifice.

The ritual went off without issue. Space cracked, the prison broke, and then Panaxeth burst into existence above the city, his fleshy limbs reaching out of his prison and burying themselves into the roads and buildings. Then, he slowly started to drag his entire bulk out of the pocket dimension that had contained him all these millennia...

Jornak immediately fled. He may have been Panaxeth's champion, but he did not trust the primordial at all. His part of the contract was finished, in any case. Funny, he thought he would be able to *feel* it when the restriction lifted, but there was nothing. The death pact Panaxeth placed on him simply disappeared from his perception – one moment it was there, the next it was gone. Well... it was primordial magic, after all. Who knows how that worked. He was finally free, that was all that mattered.

The cultists, arrogant idiots that they were, stayed behind. Jornak knew that they had some kind of crazy plan that involved binding the primordial to their will and becoming gods in the process, but it was lunacy. They were like ants trying to enslave a tiger. Even weakened, Panaxeth was not something they could handle. Even a fragment of him could probably annihilate them.

The primordial let loose a deep, resonant rumble that made the whole city visibly vibrate. Some of the weaker buildings, weakened by the fires and the fighting, immediately collapsed from it. Then the rampage began. Ibasan forces were retreating now as fast as they could, but Jornak knew most of them would never make it.

He took one last look at the unraveling city and then teleported away. He wanted to be as far as possible from the area.

- break -

Eventually, Jornak made his way to Iasku Mansion. The place was thoroughly trashed, its wards broken and most of the souls that powered it set free when their prison cracked and crumbled, but the structure itself was still standing when the angel was done venting its ire on it. Probably because Sudomir placed and set smaller, but far stronger defensive wards around the ward core that housed his wife's soul, and the angel didn't want to spend time breaking it down when there were more important battles happening elsewhere.

The angel then dropped the barrier that had kept Iasku Mansion contained, and Sudomir enacted another long-distance teleport ritual to translocate the mansion out of the city, and then all the way to Ulquaan Ibasu. This was something that Sudomir had long since arranged with Quatach-Ichl in case things went wrong with their plan.

Sitting in one of the few intact rooms inside the mansion, Jornak had been feeling quite pleased with himself, basking in the glow of his own success, when another person entered the room.

Quatach-Ichl. The lich was in his human guise now (though Quatach-Ichl insisted this form was just as true as his 'battle form'), and he looked as relaxed and confident as ever. Jornak wanted to make some snide comments about him getting taken out by a flower, but he refrained. More than Zach, Zorian, or anyone else, the ancient lich was the one that really terrified Jornak. He didn't think even his fellow loopers really understood the force they were dealing with when they tangled with him.

Without Quatach-Ichl, Jornak would never have been able to make himself a permanent looper. Oh sure, Panaxeth was the one who supplied him with a method of transforming his temporary marker into a permanent one, but never in a million years would Jornak have been able to actually use the method himself. No, he

had to beg Quatach-Ichl for assistance to help him perform the task. And the price for the lich's help... even now Jornak couldn't help but feel uneasy about it.

He had heard from Silverlake that the other looper already suspected that Quatach-Ichl had been integral in turning his temporary marker into a permanent one, but they couldn't figure out why the lich hadn't also made himself into a looper as well, then. The answer was simple: the method required one to make a deal with Panaxeth in order to work, and the lich wasn't willing to make a death pact with a primordial under *any* circumstances. However, that didn't mean he was willing to help Jornak without any assurances. He forced Jornak to accept something called a 'soul seed' – a small fragment of Quatach-Ichl's soul, somehow processed to prevent degradation and imbued with some measure of self-awareness and memory – and bound said soul fragment to Jornak's soul, with instructions to return to the original Quatach-Ichl when Jornak successfully came back to the real world.

The soul fragment had been with Jornak for the entire duration of his stay in the time loop, and even Jornak wasn't sure what it was up to during that time. Was it merely patiently waiting to return to its master, containing only the memories of that one Quatach-Ichl Jornak made the deal with? Or was it watching and learning the whole time, riding him like a spying parasite? He didn't know. All he knew was that once he left the time loop and was incarnated in the real world, the soul fragment immediately left him and rejoined Quatach-Ichl.

Jornak had no need to convince the lich he was a time traveler. Quatach-Ichl already knew, and was waiting for him when Jornak came knocking.

He had no idea how much the ancient lich knew about what happened in the time loop, and it scared him.

"So," Quatach-Ichl said, sitting down in one of the nearby chairs. "I think we can safely describe this operation as a success, yes?"

"Yes, absolutely," Jornak agreed. "Though, if I may make an observation... the damage made by the primordial seemed to be somewhat underwhelming. Cyoria will be no more after today, that is true, but the country as a whole will survive. Aren't you worried they will launch a punitive expedition against your homeland for this? Your involvement in this will be impossible to hide."

"Oh no, I fully expect them to retaliate in some manner," Quatach-Ichl said. "I welcome it. Our leaders have been very foolish lately, trying to set up trade treaties with the mainland and other such nonsense. A nice war or two will be good for us."

Jornak nodded. This kind of attitude meshed pretty well with the lich's attitude in their past conversations.

"What about you?" the lich asked. "Aren't you worried?"

"Why would I be?" Jornak asked curiously. "I won."

"It was a close thing," Quatach-Ichl remarked.

"A win is a win," Jornak insisted. He glared slightly at the lich. "Besides, it wouldn't have been that close if you hadn't stupidly got yourself killed. And by a flower, no less."

"Soulseizers are curious creatures," Quatach-Ichl said lightly, clearly not bothered by the swipe. Or at least not giving any visible indication that he was. The ancient lich's poker face was too good. "I'll have to look into them when I find the time. Alas, I suspect the next few years are going to be very busy for me indeed."

Well, he was certainly right about *that*. For one thing, Jornak fully intended to start executing his plans the moment he left from here. He and the lich had completely incompatible plans for the future, and were pretty much guaranteed to start sabotaging each other's efforts soon.

Really, Jornak wouldn't be surprised if Quatach-Ichl tried to kill him here today. Unfortunately for him, Jornak was well aware of this possibility and had taken every possible precaution before coming here. He won't die here. He won't die ever.

He was only just starting, really.

"What would you have done if the invasion failed?" Quatach-Ichl asked, sounding genuinely curious.

A multitude of contingencies floated in Jornak's mind in response to the lich's question – explosive traps in numerous cities and buildings meant to cause mass casualties, assassination contracts that would be executed unless he called them off, documents unmasking Zach and Zorian just waiting to be discovered by the authorities... he had many ways to make his enemies regret their victory if he ever lost. Still he told none of them to Quatach-Ichl. Although he planned to dismantle all of them now, there was no reason to reveal his methods and reasoning to someone who would soon become his bitter enemy.

He quickly checked his mental defenses and found that his mind blank was still on and in perfect condition. Good. For a moment he was afraid Quatach-Ichl was trying to pick up answers straight from his surface thoughts.

Still, he felt an urge to brag a little. He started to ramble about one of his less important contingencies – a bundle of documents implicating Zorian in the events of the invasion, deliberately placed in one of the cabinets of the police building in Korsa. The cabinet was rarely used, but its owner was very dutiful and meticulous. It would take weeks for the documents to be discovered, and by that time Zach and Zorian will have likely stopped being on high alert for such things and should hopefully be caught completely by surprise. Then there was that letter he sent straight to the royal residence. It should be arriving-

He suddenly stopped talking. Why... why was he telling the

lich this? Didn't he *just* conclude they were going to become enemies soon and that it would be best to stay quiet? And the expression on Quatach-Ichl's face... he was leaning forward and listening with bated breath, like this was the most interesting thing ever. What...?

"Who... who are you!?" Jornak suddenly snapped, jumping from his chair and going on full combat alert. He had spent enough time around the lich to learn some of his mannerisms and this didn't look like him. In fact, when he really thought about it, his entire demeanor this whole time was slightly off. "You're not Quatach-Ichl?"

"Why do you say that?" the imposter asked, feigning calm curiosity.

Jornak fired a blistering beam of red light at the imposter, who didn't even try to dodge.

The beam went straight through his forehead without any resistance.

The man wearing Quatach-Ichl's face sighed.

"So impersonating the lich is a lost cause," he lamented to himself. "No matter how many times I try, I just can't seem to portray him convincingly. It's a shame, since he's the one you're most likely to really talk with about all the details. Maybe I should try Silverlake?"

W-What?

Wait...

No.

No!

"You can't be! You can't be him!" Jornak protested, his voice getting more and more panicked. "I killed you! I know I did! Your soul got devoured by wraiths! I... I have a mind blank on, that spell is total protection against-

He checked his mind. He checked it again, and then a third time. Always the same result. His mind blank was still on. His mind was protected.

Except it wasn't.

'None of this is real...' Jornak realized.

"Well then," the imposter in the guise of Quatach-Ichl said. "Let's try this again, shall we?"

Jornak's heart went cold. How many times had he done this? How many times had he lived through this day, enjoying his triumph, making grand plans about what would come next, only to forget all about it again and again? All the while some sinister force keeps talking to him, pumping him for information, varying their approach in this or that way, to get what they wanted out of him.

His mind couldn't help but harken back to his time in the time loop, back when he was just a humble lawyer wishing there was more to his life. Back to when he realized his life was literally an endless loop meant to exploit him. It was just like that now, but worse. Infinitely worse.

His vision began to darken. He wanted to do something, wanted to send a signal to his various contingencies in one final act of spite, but his mind was fading, fading, fading... He forgot Zorian's words, forgot what led him to this place, forgot any of this ever happened. He found himself back in Cyoria, surrounded by corpses of Zach and Zorian, knowing only one thing:

He was Jornak Dokochin, a humble lawyer from Cyoria, the *true* heir of House Denen, and the last surviving time looper...

...and he had won.

Again, and again, and again.

I WIN (III)

He was Zorian Kazinski, the third son of a minor merchant family from Cirin, accidental time traveler, and quite possibly the most powerful human mind mage in all of Altazia...

...and he had won.

It was not an easy task to arrange all of this. Sure, he could have beaten Jornak and Silverlake, stopped the ritual, and left it at that... but that would be a very bittersweet outcome. Zach would have died at the end of the month and Zorian would have spent the rest of his future running away from Eldemarian assassins and whatnot.

Zorian did not spend all those years in the time loop just to settle for a... suboptimal outcome.

The first task, of course, was figuring out how to get past the mind blank spell. Even before he had known about Zach's angelic contract, he'd known the boy was hiding something of critical importance that he would have to wrench out of his head. Thus, he worked with Xvim, aranea, and many others to find the solution. A way to beat the ultimate mental defense – a spell that had been providing total protection against mind magic, no exceptions, for literal centuries now.

A lot of people Zorian had worked with thought it was a fool's task to begin with. What did Zorian have that so many other mind mages that tried to invent a workaround hadn't? But Zorian didn't embark upon this idea blindly. He already had an idea before he threw himself into the project.

The soulseizer chrysanthemum was a very rare and obscure magical creature. It was so dangerous and frightening to people that they had long since eradicated it in more civilized areas, not even bothering to study it properly before doing so. Who was brave enough to research a flower that would *eat your soul* if you made a mistake in restraining it? Not many people. It didn't help that the plant was a very valuable component for many potions, meaning it was worth more dead than alive to begin with.

In modern times, of course, some mage or organization would have probably become interested in the soulseizer and organized a hunt so its abilities could be studied... except that the plant only lived in monster infested wilderness these days, was surprisingly good at hiding, and smart enough to pick its fights carefully. Plus, its abilities were not well known, and old descriptions found in ancient tomes did not do the creature justice. They made the chrysanthemum look like a simple plant-shaped soul eater. It just wasn't that impressive sounding.

Zorian had experienced the flower's attack first-hand, however. Zach hadn't thought much about their experience, seeing it only as an embarrassing instance where they had nearly been beaten by a flower, and soon forgot about it. But Zorian had never forgotten. The way the plant's initial stunning attack had simply bypassed all of their defenses left a deep impression on him.

If the chrysanthemum could bypass their defenses by targeting their body, mind, and soul simultaneously... could the same method be used to target someone's mind even when it was protected by the mind blank?

Mind blank protected the mind by separating it from what the aranea called 'the Great Web'. The mind closed in on itself, rejecting all contact. But it was still connected to the brain, and to the soul. It should be possible to target the mind by going through those two, somehow. This wasn't a new idea, by any means, but most people who tried to make such a method work before hadn't had the soulseizer chrysanthemum on hand to provide a working example of how such a thing would work in practice.

Zorian did. And he had a whole host of experts in both soul magic and mind magic to help him figure it out.

The process of studying the chrysanthemum's abilities had some unintended benefits. He probably would not have found a way to negate the wraith bombs in a reasonable amount of time if he hadn't spent so much time studying the flower and its abilities, and he wouldn't have been able to make the weapon that Mrva had used to disable Quatach-Ichl for a few moments. These were all just side benefits, however, paling in importance to the real end goal of the research: the manifold resonance spell.

The spell was not ideal by any means. First of all, the magic Zorian and his team designed could only be used through touch. Skin-to-skin contact was required to successfully cast the spell. It was also incredibly complicated and hard to control. Three whole minds were needed to execute the spell. Not an impossible requirement for someone who could make simulacrum like Zorian could, but still an issue. Finally, targets eventually acquired a resistance to it. Experiments showed that targeting the same person repeatedly with the spell made them instinctively resist it after only a handful of attempts. In the case of people with highly trained defenses like Xvim and Alanic, that meant they became resistant after only two or three attempts.

But it worked. It was complicated and inconvenient, but it did the impossible and that was all that mattered. With the spell

to bypass mind blank in his arsenal, victory – *actual* victory – was finally possible.

In the end, that path had led him here: locked in a deadly battle against his fellow time travelers – Zach and Jornak.

When Zorian teleported next to the two combatants and lunged at them, hands glowing, he knew neither would take it lying down. Zach looked shocked at his sudden betrayal, but he was an experienced fighter and reacted immediately, firing a pair of blindingly bright white rays that nearly took Zorian's head off. Only his defense cube saved him, by warping space around him slightly to make the beams miss. As for Jornak, he drew the imperial dagger out of his belt with a smooth, practiced motion and thrust it straight at Zorian's face.

Zorian didn't know much about the imperial dagger. Its main ability out of the time loop was supposed to be its ability to hurt spirits, but... why take that chance? He doubted Jornak would try to use it on him if it wasn't uniquely useful in this situation. He jumped back a little, evading the stab at the cost of losing some momentum and giving up some of his advantage of surprise.

"Zorian, what-" Zach started saying, outrage evident in his voice.

He never got to finish it. A marble Zorian 'accidentally' dropped out of his pocket before he jumped back suddenly activated and instantly sucked in all the air around them, creating a sizeable area of total vacuum between them.

The surrounding air quickly rushed in to fill the void, forcefully dragging all three of them into the center of the area. Jornak and Zach were unharmed, but caught off guard. But Zorian was ready.

The moment they collided with each other he clamped down on Zach and Jornak's hands and cast the spell.

A faint blue wave quickly rippled through them, expanding

from the point of contact to envelop their whole bodies. They still had their mind blank spells on, but it didn't matter. Their bodies went limp, insensate to the world around them.

A moment later, they were plunged into a constructed dream world over which Zorian had total control.

It was an incredible achievement creating this thing, and this wasn't just Zorian praising himself. The aranea were also in awe of the scale of what he created. That said, he wasn't doing this alone. Aside from him and his simulacrum, many, many aranea were helping him control the illusionary world. On top of that, he wasn't really conjuring people's surroundings out of nothing. He was accessing eyes of people around the city and his iron beaks in the sky to give Zach and Jornak as convincing of an experience as he possibly could.

He had to mess with their memories slightly. Mostly to make it look like they won in a convincing manner – a process that took some trial and error, since Zorian didn't have a perfect understanding of their capabilities and habits. Thankfully, any mistake could be covered up by simply wiping away their short-term memories and letting them relive the battle again and again until he got it right. He also had to adjust Zach's perception of what happened to Quatach-Ichl, since his contract couldn't be fulfilled unless the lich was seemingly dead. He made it look like his chrysanthemum weapon actually managed to suck out Quatach-Ichl soul and kill him for good, which Zach thankfully accepted as actually possible. Zorian took it as a compliment that Zach had that much faith in his artifice.

Then there was the matter of Zach going around reading people's minds. Zorian had known that Zach would try that. After all, how else was he going to confirm that people did not know anything about the time loop? Unfortunately, the boy was right that Zorian couldn't really create convincing fake minds. Even the

dumbest, most boring person in existence had a mind more complex and intricate than anything Zorian could conjure purely from his own imagination. So he didn't even try. Through his network of sigils around the city, Zorian was potentially connected to every person who was still alive there. He could act as a mental bridge, allowing Zach to connect to any person in the city through him. The minds he was reading were very much real.

Sadly, that also meant that when Zach checked people's minds and saw they didn't remember anything that had happened during this past month, this was in no way faked. They really didn't remember anything. Zorian was forced to strip them of their mind blanks through dispelling, and wipe away their memories of the month. He had thought about being more selective about it, but he wanted things to be absolutely convincing to whatever evaluation mechanics Zach's angel contract employed.

He had gifted people like Xvim, Alanic, and Daimen memory crystals containing their deleted memories for later perusal, but he knew that wasn't nearly the same as having their real memories. They weren't trained psychics like he was, so digesting their memories from such a source would be a struggle.

As for the aranea, deleting their memories of the whole month was kind of tricky, since they were helping Zorian run this whole illusion, and he needed their help right now. Obviously, them not having any memories of all this would be a bit of a problem. Thus, only the aranea that Zach actually deigned to talk to deleted their memories, and Zach was never overly fond of the giant spiders. Thus, the damage to the integrity of the illusion was minimal in the end. Even better, Zorian didn't have to provide the aranea with anything to make them recover after this. They had their own well-developed system of storing their memories and had lots of practice of integrating stored memories into their minds later, so it shouldn't be a big chore for them to recover quickly.

Zorian was never as thankful for Zach's disinterest in learning about aranean society as he was at this moment. If Zach had known anything about them, he would have known that the only reliable way to make sure they forgot something was to murder them all. Which, admittedly, wouldn't have been that hard to fake, but still. Zorian suspected the aranea would have forever borne a grudge against the boy if they had all collectively been butchered by the guy they were trying to save, even if it was understandable in their current circumstances, and done entirely in pretend fashion.

As for Jornak, the main reason he was trapped in his own private illusion was because Zorian wanted to find all the dead-man switches the guy had scattered all over the place. He knew Jornak would make them suffer from beyond the grave if they just let him die. He needed to find out what he had in store for them and how to disarm his traps and contingencies.

He tried to simply get their fellow time traveler to simply talk about his plans. It was a good thing he did. He had done a basic search of his memories, of course, but searching someone's memories for information depended on knowing what to look for, and Zorian knew that Jornak was a lot more devious and experienced in this kind of cloak-and-dagger bullshit than he was. It only took a few conversations with Jornak, in various guises, to understand that he would have missed many, many things if he simply tried lifting things out of his mind. However, even this wasn't enough. Jornak had no real friends. His closest emotional attachment was to the damn imperial dagger, of all things. Thus, he was understandably cagey around other people, even when Zorian prodded him with subtle suggestions and emotional manipulation to make him more talkative. Eventually Zorian resorted to messing with Jornak's perception of time, making him believe days or weeks had passed in order to learn what he would have done, and what he expected to happen.

Meanwhile, the invasion of the city was being beaten back all over the city. All of the invasion leaders except the upper echelons of the Cult of the Dragon Below were gone now, and they were unable to rally the disparate forces around their leadership. Eventually the higher echelons of the Ibasan forces found out that Quatach-Ichl was no longer present on the battlefield, and sounded a retreat. Iasku Mansion was mostly demolished, but Sudomir had somehow managed to survive the angel's wrath by protecting the core of the mansion through particularly powerful wards. The surviving Ibasans hurriedly gathered around the ruin, after which Sudomir translocated it out of the city.

Annoyingly, Zorian had no option but to let it go. He was too busy to chase after them, his most powerful allies were incapacitated, and the other city defenders couldn't get through the gathered Ibasan forces fast enough. He would later find out that Sudomir translocated his mansion two more times after that, eventually landing on Ulqaan Ibas, where he was granted refuge by the natives.

Great. If Eldemar had any doubts as to who to blame for the attack, they were unambiguously sure now. Not that Quatach-Ichl, the instigator of the attack, cared about that. If Zorian had learned anything from Jornak's mind, it was that Quatach-Ichl was likely quite happy with this outcome.

Kirielle and Kana were alive and well, despite the attack on them. Zorian breathed a big sigh of relief when he found that out. Sadly, Kosjenka joined Mrva in the hall of heroic golems by sacrificing herself to save his little sister. An event that caused many tears on Kirielle's part and prompted Zorian to consider if he should perhaps delete her memories of the whole incident and quietly replace Kosjenka's remains with an unharmed copy...

...but no, that was a bad idea. He shouldn't be that casual with memory wipes. And besides, Kirielle didn't know anything about

golem theory, so she shouldn't see anything wrong with Zorian 'fixing' Kosjenka into pristine condition.

Overall, things had turned out great. He had to give away the imperial orb to get rid of Oganj, Quatach-Ichl and Sudomir were still alive and would probably make moves against them in the future, and there was a high chance of another continental war brewing in the near future, but it could have been worse. His friends and family were all alive, Zach was alive, and he was alive. The only thing that kind of worried him was that he found Silverlake's empty skin back where he left her fighting with her original self. It was clear that the spider not just killed her, but *ate* her as well.

Which was strange. Grey hunters primarily ate powerful magical creatures. To his knowledge, they thought humans tasted *vile*. The flesh wasn't magical enough for their tastes. Why was Silverlake eaten, then? Was it because of all the primordial essence Silverlake's body contained?

There was no trace of the grey hunter anywhere in the city, and Zorian had pretty much total coverage of everything on the surface at the moment. He had a sinking feeling the spider had fled into the local underground.

Which meant he had just let an immensely powerful magical predator – one that had recently gorged upon a great amount of primordial essence, no less – escape into the one place where there was absolutely no hope of tracking it down.

He sighed. There was no use in worrying about this now. The deadline had come and passed. Zach's contract with the angels had harmlessly dissolved, and Jornak's death pact claimed his life in a gruesome fashion, his own flesh turning against itself like a country in the throes of a civil war. Observing with his more magical senses, Zorian noticed that even the man's mind and soul were seemingly tearing themselves apart. After a few seconds of disgusting writhing and convulsing, Jornak simply collapsed in a pile

of unsightly goo.

Zorian opened his eyes, letting the spell finally collapse. He breathed a sigh of relief. He was beyond exhausted. He and his simulacrum had maintained a... fake illusionary world... two of them, actually... and had done that for more than a day, without rest or sleep.

He was no longer alone, however. He had moved to a secluded, secure space with Zach and Jornak in tow, but it wasn't really secret to Daimen, Xvim, and Alanic. All three were currently watching him with grave, vaguely unfriendly expressions. Xvim was sitting on a nearby chair, a small book in his hand. Alanic was standing in the center of the room, his hands folded over his chest. And Daimen was leaning against the nearby doorway, blocking the exit and juggling the imperial dagger that Zorian had removed from Jornak's possessions.

All three were also clutching memory crystals in one of their hands. Zorian doubted they had absorbed more than a small fraction of the memories stored in them, but they probably knew enough to understand the general situation.

"We need to talk," Alanic said blandly.

Rather than answering, Zorian ripped out a paper from a nearby notebook and started furiously writing on it while explaining the situation to all three of them. A whole bunch of Jornak's contingencies were about to activate relatively soon, and they had to be dealt with as soon as possible. His rushed scribbles were meant to be a reminder if they forgot some of the details he was telling them.

The three people in front of him seemed to be part annoyed and part curious about his rushed explanation, but they were polite enough to stay silent and listen while he was talking. It didn't take long, anyway – only a handful of Jornak's plans were so very time critical. His list of instructions done, Zorian stumbled to his feet,

his limbs not working properly due to the long period of disuse, and thrust the written list straight into Alanic's confused hands before falling to the floor, unconscious.

He was Zorian Kazinski, third son of a minor merchant family from Cirin, accidental time traveler, and quite possibly the most powerful human mind mage in all of Altazia...

...and he had won.

And now it was time to finally get some rest.

EPILOGUE

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

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

Panic. Zorian's awakened mind felt nothing but pure, all-consuming terror. After all of his efforts, all the sacrifices he and people around him had made, it was all for naught. He was back where it all began, in his room in Cirin, about to start his third year at the academy...

...then the moment passed, and the nightmare dissolved.

The room around him was wrong. This wasn't his room back in Cirin. He was in Cyoria, in the room he shared with Kirielle, at Imaya's place.

And the little devil was currently still sprawled across his stomach, kicking her legs up in the air and giving him a mischievous, expectant look. His panicked reaction didn't seem to worry her. If anything, she seemed quite pleased with herself for managing to scare him so thoroughly.

"Kirielle... why?" Zorian asked, resisting the urge to sigh.

"What do you mean?" she asked innocently. "I always wake you up like this?"

"Not with those exact words you don't," Zorian groused. "He put you up to this, didn't he?"

"Zach said it was going to be funnier this way," Kirielle admitted, propping her chin with her hands. She gave him a toothy smile.

Zorian flipped her over the edge of the bed in response, causing her to fall to the floor with a silent thud.

The little imp had expected the reaction, and made no sound in response, simply scrambling to her feet immediately afterwards.

"It's been a month already," Zorian grumbled. "Just when is he planning to stop with this petty revenge crap?"

It wasn't like Zorian had *wanted* to deceive him like that. He'd done that to save Zach's life, for heaven's sake!

Well. At least he hadn't gotten another punch in the face for that...

He chased Kirielle out of the room and got dressed, idly listening to the sounds of the house and its tenants as he did. Imaya's place was very busy these days, nothing like the quiet household Zorian had gotten used to during the time loop. The academy dorms had suffered heavy damage during the invasion, both in the initial artillery bombardment and the fighting that had followed afterwards, which meant that a lot of students were suddenly homeless and in dire need of alternate accommodations. Since Imaya's house had survived the invasion mostly intact, it was soon filled to capacity and even slightly beyond. Zorian didn't really like it, but the situation was what it was, and there was nothing he could do to change it.

At least Kirielle had plenty of people to talk to these days.

After composing himself a little, he left the room and entered the kitchen, where a dozen or so people had already gathered, some

of them still eating breakfast, and some of them pondering a stack of textbooks and papers arranged around them.

Most of the people gathered here were his classmates. Akoja, Raynie, Kiana, Kopriva, Kael, Naim, Edwin, and Estin were all gathered around the small table that was far too small to really accommodate them all. They immediately stopped what they were doing and turned to look at him as he entered, calling out greetings. Ilsa, who was sitting at a relatively prominent place at the table, was flipping through a stack of papers on her clipboard, and simply gave him a curt nod, before returning to her task. Nochka, Kirielle, and Kana were on the floor, playing with dolls and getting into everyone's way from time to time. Zorian had no idea why they felt the need to play their games here, instead of somewhere more private, but nobody else was shooing them away, so he wouldn't do it either.

As for Imaya, the landlord of this place, she was working around the kitchen while humming a happy tune to herself, looking like she was having the time of her life, despite the current overcrowded state of her home. Zorian knew she was getting paid for this, but he still couldn't quite understand her good mood. Some people were just weird.

After a few seconds of looking around, Zorian suddenly realized there were no free chairs left anymore.

"This is what happens when you wake up late," Kopriva helpfully explained to him.

"There should be some free chairs in the next room," Imaya added, stirring the contents of some giant pot, not even bothering to turn around and look at him.

"You should probably grab a night stand or a wooden board or something, just so you have a surface to write on," Edwin told him. "The table is a little crowded right now."

Resisting a sigh, Zorian went about securing himself a chair

and then carving out a place for himself at the table. This took a considerable amount of pushing and arguing, but eventually he managed to squeeze himself between Kael and Naim. Imaya immediately plopped down a plate of food in front of him and immediately walked away, not giving Zorian a chance to tell her he wasn't hungry.

"You really need to learn how to be more assertive in life," Naim advised from his left.

Zorian raised his eyebrow at him.

"Weren't you the one who just tried to chase me away from your side of the table?" Zorian asked.

"Well yeah, you need to be more assertive towards others, not me," Naim responded, laughing slightly.

"Whatever. Where is Zach?" Zorian asked.

"Your friend already left," Ilsa said, glancing up from her clipboard for a moment. "He said he had a court meeting scheduled soon, and couldn't wait for you to wake up."

"He said you already know how to contact him," Kael added.

Zorian nodded slowly, giving the food in front of him a tentative bite. After their victory over Jornak and the invasion, Zach had wasted no time in filing a lawsuit against his caretaker. Zorian had advised him back then to wait a little for the circumstances to calm down a little, but Zach would have none of it. This decision had both positive and negative consequences. On one hand, the spotlight was still firmly focused on the failed invasion of the city, meaning Tesen was free to try and shut the whole thing down without too much outcry from the public. On the other hand, this was probably the worst time for Tesen to be accused of something like this, considering the royals were looking for someone to publicly make an example out of, due to the debacle that had happened and all.

Zorian mostly stayed out of the whole thing. He trusted Zach

to know what he was doing. He claimed he didn't need any help with this, and he had clearly been prepared for this a long time.

"Aren't you worried, at least a little?" Akoja said, frowning. "I mean, Tesen is a powerful man, and he surely knows you and Zach are friends. What if he decides to get back at him by going after *you*?"

Zorian smiled slightly. He found it interesting how pretty much none of their classmates thought Zach was lying about his accusations. He had expected that at least some of them would have thought Zach was making things up, but even Akoja, who definitely wasn't a fan of Zach, absolutely believed him when he publically stated Tesen had robbed him of his family legacy.

"I'm not worried," Zorian said. "This is the worst time to try and attack people in Cyoria. The whole city is crawling with soldiers and investigators. Tesen would have to be mad to go after me right now."

This was not entirely true, of course. Tesen had already tried to send people to scout Imaya's house and see if they could ambush him when he left the place, but these people had simply vanished into thin air before their mission was done.

After that, Zach's caretaker hadn't bothered sending anyone else.

"Indeed," Ilsa said. "Plus, I had the academy secure this house with additional wards, since we are effectively using it as a makeshift classroom. Anyone trying to infiltrate the place is in for an unpleasant surprise. And with that, I propose we start our usual lesson now. As you can imagine, an alteration expert like me is in high demand during this time of reconstruction, so I can only spare so much time here."

Everyone immediately gave their assent for the idea, some more enthusiastically than others, after which Ilsa started giving short demonstrations to the gathered students. Even Kirielle,

Nochka, and Kana paid close attention when Ilsa was casting spells, not having many opportunities to witness magic spells like this in their daily lives.

The academy was temporarily closed. It had been closed for a month now, ever since the failed invasion. Not only had many sections of the academy been damaged in the attack, but most of the teachers had been recruited by the city to help deal with the aftermath as well. The place was scheduled to reopen in a week or so, if only to stop angry parents from demanding the money they had paid for attendance fees back, but for now, the student body was told to simply wait.

A large number of students did just that, treating the whole thing as a sort of vacation, but not everyone was willing to simply waste a whole month or more when they had already paid to learn how to do magic. These students self-organized into study groups and continued their education on their own.

Zorian was one of the people leading the charge on such things, at least when it came to his own class. He knew there were at least a handful of people in there that were serious about becoming a proper mage, and finding a study group that was not just an excuse to play cards every other night or some egoist's attempt to gather underlings was bound to be hard. This sort of initiative was admittedly not something Zorian was used to, and he had been absent from classes for most of the previous month, so his announcement that he was starting a study group had definitely raised some eyebrows. However, the fact that he had managed to talk Ilsa and some of the other teachers into occasionally giving demonstrations and lectures – something few others could boast about – made others more willing to trust him.

The fact Akoja had decided to give up on her own study group in favor of choosing his own probably helped too. Akoja was well known for her serious attitude and work ethic – if she was willing

to join Zorian's group, he probably wasn't just messing around.

He even got quite a few requests from older students and students from other classes about joining the group, though Zorian had to refuse most of them due to time constraints. He didn't want to spend most of his time teaching people and managing groups. It just wasn't something he was seriously interested in.

"I don't understand what I'm doing wrong with this spell," Kael complained.

Zorian glanced at the morlock and at the open book where the spell was detailed.

"You're not doing anything wrong," Zorian told him. "You're casting the spell perfectly. Your shaping skills simply aren't good enough to pull it off. I can show you some more shaping exercises if you want."

"Great," Kael mumbled. "More shaping exercises. You really remind me of that Xvim guy you occasionally bring here to teach us."

"That guy is his mentor, so it kind of makes sense," Kopriva said. "Based on what I heard about the guy, you kind of have to go all the way with your shaping skills if you're assigned to him."

"As if Zorian is suffering here," Edwin grumbled. He was, like Zorian, one of the people who had been assigned to Xvim against his will, and still hadn't gotten over it. Probably because he really only cared about magic if it could help him with golem making, and shaping skills weren't high on the list of requisites for that. "He's probably the only guy in the history of our academy that likes the guy and what he's teaching."

"You'd be surprised to know how many people speak highly of Mr. Chao's teaching skills," Ilsa remarked with a teasing smile. "Though most people don't appreciate his genius, there are always one or two students that have what it takes to thrive under his tutelage. He didn't keep his job at the academy all these years for

nothing, you know?"

"We understand he's good at what he does, but does he really have to be so mean about it?" Kiana said, pouting. "The last time he was here he said my shaping skills are 'completely inadequate'. I'm pretty sure my shaping skills are average at worst."

"Actually, they're very much above average now, and it's almost entirely due to Xvim pushing you further and further every time he comes here," Zorian pointed out.

"Teacher's pet," Kiana accused him with a huff.

He was pretty sure Kiana was coming here only because Raynie was too, not because she was honestly so dedicated to improving her magic skills... but to her credit, she really did try to keep up with the rest of the group, unwilling to be left behind. Thus, whenever Xvim criticized her and pushed her to try for more, she reluctantly did her best to rise to the challenge.

She didn't appreciate it right now, but Zorian was sure she would eventually understand that Xvim was doing her a huge favor. Most people had to pay a fortune to get personal instructions from an archmage.

After a while, Ilsa excused herself and left. The group continued interacting and helping each other for a while after that, but eventually people started leaving and the group was becoming smaller. The table, so crowded and busy earlier in the morning, started to clear up and fall silent.

In the end, the only ones left sitting there were Zorian and Raynie. Zorian had originally wanted to leave as well, but he could see from the glances Raynie was sending him and the emotions radiating off of her that she wanted to talk to him, so he remained patient and stayed in his seat.

The invasion had been thwarted. Panaxeth remained sealed. There was no more urgent danger constantly occupying his attention. He could finally waste an hour or two of his life and not feel

bad about it in the back of his head.

"I just realized it's been a whole month, and I never thanked you for helping me find my little brother," Raynie eventually said, her tone hesitant.

Zorian didn't know what to say to that. Since she hadn't mentioned any of this in all this time, he kind of figured she wanted to pretend the whole thing never happened.

"Sorry," she said, fiddling with her hands awkwardly. "I know this is very late and—"

"I didn't hold it against you," Zorian assured her. "I didn't do much, really. I just put you in contact with the right people. You did the rest, by organizing the other shifters into a rescue mission."

"You already heard about that?" she asked, surprised. Then she shook her head. "Wait, of course you heard about that, what am I even saying? After what I've seen that evening, it would be a bigger surprise if you didn't know anything about what happened."

"I hear you rescued your brother successfully," Zorian remarked.

"The cat shifters and pigeon shifters rescued my brother successfully," she corrected him. "I just helped the police contact them and talk them into helping me. Then I just stood by the side and waited to see if they would succeed. Though yes, the newspapers have been crediting me for the whole thing. The city police insisted I should be the public face of the whole operation. I don't really understand it."

What was there to understand? She was a beautiful teenage girl with an emotional story of trying to save her little brother. The police probably didn't want to release details about what was really going on before Eldemar's forces finished their investigation, and this was a nice way of distracting the public. Plus, it was a story with a happy ending, and Eldemar really loved pushing those to the forefront right now.

He didn't say that out loud, of course.

"I'm pretty sure talking those two groups of shifters into co-operating wasn't easy at all, so don't put yourself down so much," Zorian told her. "That aside, I get the feeling you're not really mentioning this because you're bothered by the newspaper exposure. What's got you so depressed?"

"I'm not depressed, it's just... my family has invited me to come back home," she admitted with a sigh.

"Ah," Zorian nodded. He paused for a second, considering. "Is this a problem? You were instrumental in saving your younger brother, no? They should give you a hero's welcome."

"They might," she admitted. "Or maybe they'll accuse me of overstepping my boundaries when I promised our tribe's help in exchange for help in the rescue mission. I really don't know what's going to happen when I get there, and it scares me."

Zorian was silent.

"I don't know why I'm telling you this," she admitted after a while. "It's not like I expect you to help. You've done more than enough already. I guess I just wanted to complain to someone other than Kiana for a change. She's getting a little annoyed with me lately, I think. She thinks being praised in the newspapers is great, and that I'm being a baby."

"The newspapers are using you as a distraction and would turn on you in a second if it suited their purposes, so it's good you're not letting it get to your head," Zorian remarked. "Still, I don't think you need to worry. I bet your family also doesn't know what's going to happen when you get there. They probably just want to see where they stand with you, since you surprised them so badly."

Further conversation was interrupted by a large buzzing sound from a stone disk tied around Zorian's waist. Zorian glanced at it, somewhat annoyed. It was a communication device House Aoep had given him so they could contact him, though

Zorian hardly thought it deserved to be called a device. It was just a stone that vibrated when told to by a second stone the Aoep were in possession of, and did nothing else. Rather than convey useful information, the stone disk merely told him that House Aoep representatives wanted to see him as soon as possible. He badly wanted to make *real* communication stones for this kind of use – something small and discreet and capable of facilitating actual two-way telepathy between holders – but doing that would be extremely suspicious and attention grabbing.

"I'm going to have to cut this meeting short," he told Raynie.

"The aranea?" Raynie guessed.

Zorian nodded.

"I still can't believe that's what you've been doing this past month you've been absent from classes," Raynie said. "Learning mind magic from giant underground spiders..."

"There was no other way," Zorian said. "My empathy was running out of control and they were the first ones to realize what was happening, and stepped up to help me. I'm really grateful for their help."

Sadly, although Zach and Zorian had been successful in keeping their involvement in the invasion itself a secret, there was no way to keep Zorian's involvement with the aranea a secret. This was because the Cyorian web had no way of hiding itself from Eldemar's authorities in the wake of the invasion, and asked Zorian to help them broker some kind of agreement with the city authorities. A hard task, and one that had given Zorian many headaches during this past month, but thankfully they had the support of Noble House Aoep in this endeavor. It would have probably been an impossible task, otherwise. Zorian might be a master mind mage, but there was no way he could compel the entire royal bureaucracy to acknowledge a group of scary telepathic spiders as an ally against their will. Nor would he want to be that forceful, even if it were

within his power.

Sadly, this also meant that knowledge of Zorian's innate mind magic was gradually becoming more common. People thought he was a complete beginner at mind magic, yes, but he had already noticed mages starting to raise their mental shields when he was around, and his empathy told him some people were scared of him on sight.

He dreaded to think what would happen if the full extent of his abilities became known.

"Well," said Raynie. "Don't let me keep you from your duties. I should really get going as well."

"I guess I won't be seeing you in our group meetings, then?" Zorian guessed.

"Yes, that was the other thing I wanted to tell you. I knew I was forgetting something," Raynie said. "I'll be travelling home tomorrow, and I will probably stay there until the academy reopens."

"We'll see each other in class, then," Zorian said.

"Hopefully," she agreed.

The two of them then each left their own way, and the kitchen was once again empty and quiet.

But not for long. Things were always lively at Imaya's place these days.

- break -

Though it was awful to even think so, Akoja had to say that this invasion business was the best thing that had happened to her in quite a while.

She always felt guilty whenever the thought occurred to her. So many people had died, lost their homes, or lost their jobs when their workshops got destroyed, she should really feel sorry for them. And she did! She really did! But it was also an undeniable fact that the immediate aftermath had breathed new purpose into her life, giving her both the clarity about what she wanted

in life and opportunities for advancements that she would have otherwise missed.

In the month leading up to the attack of the city, she was lost, and more than a little bitter. She was putting so much work into her studies, into being a class representative and a model student, yet she felt it was all for naught. Two years of hard work had not given her any special position or advanced opportunities, it only made other students resent her and look down on her. Sometimes, when she sat alone in her dorm room, she couldn't help but wonder if she was just wasting her time...

Then the attack happened, and it was terrifying. She had only seen a fraction of the fighting, but what she had seen made her feel like a powerless ant, completely at the mercy of greater forces that could sweep her up without really trying. When the dust had settled and Akoja looked at the shattered remains of her old dorm, all of her belongings destroyed, she did not feel anger or despair at the money she had lost or the time and effort she would have to spend to replace it all. Instead, she felt a fire ignite within her, urging her to throw herself into her studies and make sure this kind of thing couldn't happen ever again. When war came for her again, she wanted to be ready.

And war was definitely coming. Everyone knew it. Akoja wasn't the most avid follower of news, but she had read enough newspaper articles and listened to enough rumors to know that Eldemar was definitely going to launch a punitive expedition at Ulquaan Ibasia in the coming months. Even though it risked leaving Eldemar vulnerable to opportunistic attacks by Falkrinea and Sulamnon, pride wouldn't allow Eldemar to swallow its anger and let this go. The only thing people were unsure of was how big the retaliation would really be, and how far Eldemar was willing to go to avenge Cyoria.

In any case, if Akoja had been on her own, perhaps her

newfound drive would have eventually petered out in the coming weeks, and she would have once again begun questioning herself. A lot of people were fleeing the city these days, especially students like her and workers who otherwise lived elsewhere and only came to Cyoria to make money. A couple of other girls from Korsa she occasionally talked to had already transferred themselves to other academies elsewhere in the kingdom, their parents having been spooked by the attack and fearful another one would follow in the wake of the first. It was, after all, still unclear how Ulquaan Ibasia had been able to strike so deep into Eldemar territory, so who was to say it couldn't happen again?

Akoja's parents had also wanted to transfer her elsewhere, but she had refused. Cyoria may be dangerous, but she had to stay.

Because Zorian was here.

It wasn't *just* because she had a crush on him, either. She talked to people, and it was obvious that the study group he had organized was the best one currently out there. He had teachers and even outside mages occasionally coming to provide lessons, which only one other study group had managed to do, and he himself was clearly very skilled for his age. He had an uncanny ability to notice the problems people were having, and how to fix them. Akoja had compared her progress during this past month with two other girls that had paid considerable money in order to be allowed in one of the 'better' study groups, and was shocked to realize she was handily beating them. The comparison wasn't even close.

She didn't know what to think about that. One of the things she really liked about Zorian was that he was like her – a regular guy from a commoner family that tried really hard and was serious about his studies. She had always been jealous of big name students who came from noble families, or had secret magic and bloodlines that gave them an edge over the competition, so it was refreshing to see someone she could empathize with. Even though he could

be a little unfriendly and tactless, she understood. She herself was often described as bitchy and joyless, so they had common ground there.

But this new Zorian made her question if she really knew the guy. He was more skilled and well-connected than she imagined him to be, and apparently even had innate mind magic ability to draw upon. So unfair. Why didn't she have a famous older brother and a secret bloodline? How was a normal girl like her even supposed to compete with that?

But, she eventually decided, it didn't matter. Maybe her reasons for liking him were kind of misguided, but she still liked him regardless. And he was helping her get better. So she had to stay in the city.

It would have been better if she hadn't stated it quite like *that* in the letter she had sent to her parents, though, because now they wanted to meet him. She knew her father – he was definitely going to come over to Cyoria and confront Zorian on his own if she didn't manage to defuse the situation. Hopefully her last letter had reached them in time...

Still, that was thankfully a concern for another day. Today, she was simply going shopping around the city with Kopriva and Kael. All of her possessions had gotten destroyed in the invasion, after all, and she still hadn't had the chance to fully replenish them. Kopriva was in a similar position to her, while Kael had apparently never had much stuff to begin with, as he had previously tended to constantly move around with Kana before coming to Cyoria, meaning until recently he owned very few things.

Neither Kopriva nor Kael was someone that Akoja would have wanted to associate with before the attack. Kopriva came from a family of criminals, and Kael was a morlock. Neither were people that a lady in good standing such as her would want to be seen with. However, strange times made for strange bedfellows. She

had gotten to know these two over the past month, and they were alright, she supposed.

"Wait, so Zach bought you an entire lab?" Kopriva asked incredulously, looking at Kael.

"Well, a damaged, recently abandoned building that can be repurposed into a lab. But yes," Kael nodded happily. "Now I can finally stop scaring Miss Kuroshka with the experiments I do in her basement."

"Honestly, you were scaring me and the other tenants as well," Kopriva told him. "Alchemy experiments shouldn't be done right below where other people are sleeping, even if the place is warded. Still, I'm surprised Zach was willing to shell out that kind of money for you. Even if it's been damaged in the attack, a building in Cyoria is still bound to be expensive as hell."

"A lot of people are selling property in Cyoria these days," Kael noted. "Prices have dropped considerably."

"I'm pretty sure it was Zorian who talked Zach into spending money on this," Akoja said, sighing internally.

She didn't like Zach. His recent reveal that his caretaker was stealing from him made Akoja feel sorry for him a little... but only a little. He was the embodiment of everything she was jealous of when it came to Eldemar's mage elite, except he didn't even try to make something of himself, content to live the life of a clown and a wastrel. She hoped Zorian, as his new friend, helped him clean up his act, but she wasn't holding her breath.

"Probably," Kael agreed. "I was surprised when people told me they only became friends over the summer holidays. They seem like they have been friends their whole lives."

"Yeah, I first thought Zorian was just taking advantage of Zach to get at his money, but these days I kind of doubt it," Kopriva said. "He has a serious source of cash of his own, I can tell."

"From what?" Akoja asked curiously. How could a teenager like Zorian have 'serious money' unless someone gifted it to him?

"Sales," Kopriva said. "I don't know what he's selling, but it must be pretty rare and profitable because people have been asking about him a lot, trying to get in contact with him."

"You mean... in your circles?" Akoja asked worriedly.

"Yes, in 'my circles'," Kopriva laughed at her. "I'm sorry, but your crush isn't as clean as you imagine him to be."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Akoja told her quickly. "We're just colleagues."

"Yeah, sure," Kopriva rolled her eyes at her.

"So, I hate to interrupt your conversation," Kael suddenly said, "but have any of you recently found a book... or a collection of notes, maybe... in your room?"

"What kind of book?" Akoja asked curiously. What was the boy even talking about?

"A book you've definitely never bought, and notebooks you've definitely never written," Kael said. "Just... sitting there on your night stand, full of magical secrets that seem almost as if they were specifically tailored to you, and you alone..."

There was a second of silence as the two girls processed this statement.

"That seriously happened?" Kopriva asked incredulously. "You found a book and some notebooks in your room?"

"My locked room," Kael clarified. "My locked and *warded* room that Ilsa later confirmed hadn't been broken into."

"-and they contained a gift of magic specifically tailored for you?" Kopriva finished. "You damn morlock bastard, first you have a rich guy buy you your very own alchemy lab, and now this? How are you so damn lucky!?"

"The most disturbing thing," Kael said hesitantly, ignoring Kopriva's outburst, "is that some of the passages use the exact same

wording, codes, and symbols that I do. This happens over and over again, to the point I don't think anyone can reasonably fake it."

"What are you saying?" Akoja asked, not really understanding.

"It's my writing style," Kael said. "I have several years' worth of alchemical and medical research, seemingly made by my hand, but no memory of writing any of it. And I don't know what to think about that."

The two girls stayed silent. Their first instinct was to deny the idea as completely absurd.

But these were mad times they were living in, and nothing was too absurd to fully dismiss. So they just stayed silent and filed the topic in the back of their heads, put aside but not forgotten, and went about their shopping in peace.

- break -

Elayer Inid was the special investigator sent by the crown of Eldemar to find out what exactly had happened in Cyoria on the day of the attack, and he was not happy. Not happy at all.

It wasn't just about a foreign power having the ability to strike deep into Eldemar's territory at their leisure. It wasn't just about the rampant betrayal among Eldemar's highest ranks that had allowed this attack to progress as far as it had.

It was about the fact that *someone* had stopped the invasion and saved the city, and it wasn't anyone that Elayer recognized.

Regular people often talked about mysterious organizations and enigmatic hermits moving about in the shadows of polite society, but the truth was that organizations that held real power and powerful individuals didn't spring out of nowhere. It took a lot of resources and connections to raise a top tier mage, and even more to build an organization around one. By the time these rising powers were able and willing to exert their will and influence on the world around them, people like Elayer will have already noticed them and learned who they were. When mysterious events

like the one that had happened a month ago in Cyoria occurred, investigators were often unsure who exactly was behind them, especially if the perpetrators had been thorough and erased all the evidence. However, they always had an idea who *could have* done it, even if they had no proof or couldn't narrow down all the possibilities to one actor.

At the moment, though, Elayer had plenty of evidence. He had witness testimonials, magical recordings, field reports from soldiers and mages that had been present when the attack took place, and even material evidence.

And all of it was telling him that this couldn't have been done by anyone he knew about. Even more disturbingly, even after he had consulted with some of his foreign sources, he was no closer to finding a likely candidate. No one had any idea who could have done this. It was as if these 'saviors' had materialized straight out of thin air, and vanished just as suddenly afterwards.

Elayer stood in front of the wreckage of a large golem, hands folded behind his back. To his left, two researchers shuffled uncomfortably in place, hesitating to speak.

"Well?" he asked them impatiently. "Have you identified the maker of this thing?"

"None of the known golem makers produced this, Mister Inid," one of the researcher said after fumbling with his clothes a little and clearing his throat. "Although the animation core has been shattered beyond recovery, enough of it survived that we have been able to make some startling discoveries. We are very sure the established golem makers would never make such a thing."

"Hmm? Why is that?" Elayer asked, suddenly curious. Honestly, he thought the golem wreckage would bring him no answers, so this was a pleasant surprise.

"The spell formula inscribed on the animation core are completely unprotected," the other researcher said. "No codes, no mis-

direction, no attempts to shroud the method of creation at all. Usually artificers spend almost as much time trying to hide how they made something as they do making designs for it. Golem makers especially so. But there is no evidence of that here - whoever made this thing cared only about pure efficiency."

"Are you saying we could potentially replicate this thing?" Elayer asked.

Now wouldn't that be something... he had heard reports about how good these golems were, and it was apparently something on a whole different level from your typical combat golem. If they could duplicate one of these, then this would be a huge gain.

When Elayer saw the two researchers share a knowing look with each other, however, he knew it wouldn't be that simple.

"The issue is that the animation core has been totally shattered, and some parts of the spell formula inscribed on it are missing. Even after we compared it with the remains of other golem wrecks we have recovered from the city, we are still missing about 10% of the design."

Just 10%?

"And you can't fill in the blanks?" Elayer asked curiously.

"Heavens no," the first researcher said, bursting into laughter. "The design for this thing is one of the most complex things I've ever seen in my life. Everything slots together perfectly, and even the slightest mistake would make everything collapse on itself. And considering how expensive the materials for the construction of this kind of core are, experimentation would be hellishly expensive. Never mind 10%, even a 1% gap would make this design completely unviable. Unless we managed to find an intact golem, the only thing this is useful for is for serving as inspiration."

"Alright," Elayer said, turning away from the wreckage and walking off. The two researchers quickly followed after him.

"What is this about some mysterious books that I'm hearing about?"

"Ah, you mean the mysterious gifts some people have been getting?" The second researcher asked. Elayer nodded. "We have only managed to recover a handful of them from the people they were given to. Rumors of us confiscating them have spread among people fast, as has the fact they are of no danger to the recipient, so people no longer report them to us. But from the few we have in our hands, they seem to be full of novel magic specifically tailored for the recipient."

"If I may make a suggestion, it might be prudent to return the books we've confiscated to the people they were given to," the first researcher said. "We've already copied the contents, and it might motivate people to let us take a look at the stuff they're currently hiding if they see they're eventually going to get it back."

"I'll think about it," Elayer said, not thinking much of it. He didn't like the idea of someone handing over magical secrets to people like that, not at all. Plus, he had suspicions their mysterious 'saviors' were behind this as well. Those 'gifts' were evidence and he was keeping them, at least so long as his investigation lasted.

Infuriatingly, said investigation was encountering a lot of unexpected obstacles. The Triumvirate Church had clearly been heavily involved in the battle – there was a giant angel battling a dragon mage in the skies of Cyoria, for heaven's sake! – but they refused to let him interrogate the priesthood involved, and the crown was reluctant to offend them. The church had been spectacularly successful recently, providing valuable help and information on necromancer hideouts, demon summoner bases, and some of the more awful criminal groups. Elayer had no idea how they had gotten so much critical information about Eldemar's criminal underbelly, but they had, and this unfortunately meant they currently had an upper hand over him and his investigation.

At the same time, Elayer was having trouble keeping the funds and manpower for the investigation going. Eldemar's attention had been stretched very thin lately. They had an invasion of Ulquaan Ibasas to organize, complicated heavily by the fact the Ibasans had somehow managed to take over Fort Oroklo without Eldemar realizing it. They were throwing a lot of money and manpower at Cyoria in order to get the city up and running again in order to make a show of strength and lift up morale, and these efforts often clashed greatly with Elayer's own investigation into what had transpired there. Sulamnon, Falkrinea, and even many smaller countries were stirring, trying to see just how badly the kingdom had been hurt and whether they could fish in troubled waters while Eldemar's forces were distracted elsewhere. And finally, there was that permanent gate that linked Eldemar with the jungles of Koth, which had everyone and their mother excited about the incredible opportunities this presented. The gate was clearly related to the Ibasan invasion somehow, but Elayer and his men were not allowed to examine it closely for fear that they would destroy the precious, irreplaceable, intercontinental gate with their tampering.

Bah. And then his superiors complain he has no results. Of course he had no results! Just what did they expect when they constantly keep taking his money and resources, and don't let him touch things or question people?

But Elayer was patient. His foes may have won this round, but he knew what to look for now, and everyone slipped up sooner or later. It may take a year, or even a decade, but they were bound to make a mistake.

And when they did, Elayer would be there, and he would be ready.

- break -

Daimen Kazinski was having a stressful, but very exciting

month. From the day he had woken up in an unknown room in Cyoria with an entire month of his life missing from his memory, it had been a non-stop wild ride of crazy reveals and maddening complications. It was annoying, but truth be told, he kind of enjoyed it. A safe, boring life had never been something he coveted. He somewhat resented his little brother for wiping away a month of his life to save his friend, but he understood. He would have done the same in his place, probably.

At the very least, Daimen could safely say he had profited handsomely from this whole time loop business. Not only had Zorian gifted him a veritable treasure of research and notes he had apparently made for himself during this 'time loop', but he also indirectly allowed the Taramatula to seize the permanent gate linking Koth to Eldemar.

A permanent intercontinental gate... the sheer possibilities of that thing were breathtaking to consider. Eldemar's forces quickly moved to secure their side of the gate, but they didn't try to push through it to monopolize the whole thing. It would be too easy for the Taramatula to simply destroy their side of gate back in Koth, and thus ruin this whole thing for everyone. Thus, the Kingdom of Eldemar and the Taramatula now found themselves in possession of a permanent dimensional link between continents. Both sides were positively salivating at the potential profits and other benefits involved, and since Daimen was closely connected to both of said parties, it was often up to him to act as a bridge and negotiator between these two sides.

And then there was Zorian... his little brother, the time traveler. Well, it wasn't *real* time travel, but it may as well be, from Daimen's point of view. He had beheld a doomed future, and then he had traveled back to their own world to stop it, and save as many people as possible in the process.

And in order to pull it off, he'd had to kill the original Zorian,

and steal his body for his own uses.

Daimen would have liked to say he was conflicted about this information. Zorian was right: in a very real sense, his little brother had been murdered and replaced by an imposter. He should have been outraged. He should have been deeply disturbed by the implications, just like Zorian himself clearly was.

But he wasn't. Maybe it was because the whole situation was so utterly ridiculous and it was hard to really know what to feel. Maybe it was because, by Zorian's own admission, the original Zorian hated him something fierce. Or perhaps it was because he damn well knew that if he had been in Zorian's position, he would have murdered his own original without a shred of hesitation and thought nothing of it. All he knew was that he'd simply told Zorian that everything would be fine, and that he shouldn't worry about it. He had only done what he had to.

Maybe it was just Daimen imagining things, but he thought he'd seen a small flash of gratitude in his brother's eyes when he said that. He hadn't expected the big bad time traveler to actually care about his opinion that much. Interesting.

Now, here they were – every Kazinski sibling gathered together. Daimen, Zorian, Kirielle, and Fortov were all standing next to one another at Cyoria's train station, waiting for the next train to arrive.

Their parents were coming to Cyoria.

It was kind of funny, actually. If his parents had arrived to Koth as planned, they could have been here way earlier. Daimen would have arranged for them to step through the brand new interdimensional gate linking Koth to Eldemar, and they would have been home before you knew it. Alas, they'd actually heard about the attack on Cyoria when they had almost reached their destination, and decided to immediately switch ships and turn back. As a consequence, they had spent almost an entire month in transit

before they were able to return to Eldemar.

Sighing inwardly, Daimen noticed that no one except him looked actually excited about that fact. Zorian looked bored and disinterested, clearly intending to just get this over with as quickly and painlessly as possible. Fortov seemed nervous and unsure how to behave. His *other* younger brother had been acting strangely ever since Daimen had evacuated him from Cyoria along with Kirielle, and Daimen had no idea what was going on in his head at the moment, but he clearly wasn't looking forward to this meeting. As for Kirielle, she was playing around with the fancy snow globe Zorian had bought for her while they had been waiting for the train to arrive, but Daimen could see she was extremely nervous under this disinterested facade.

He should have brought Orissa with him, he lamented. He had originally left her behind because he didn't want to provoke his parents in this particular meeting, since they were bound to be extremely distraught already, but now he wondered if her presence would have been a positive thing instead.

It was too late for such regrets, however. The train soon entered the station and began to disembark; it wasn't long before Daimen spotted their parents.

They weren't carrying much in the way of luggage. Daimen winced internally. It made sense, since they must have dropped off most of their stuff when they had stopped by in Cirin. Still, the fact they were carrying practically nothing meant they expected this to be a very short visit. This... was probably going to get unpleasant.

Not long after Daimen had spotted their parents, they also spotted him. The two groups quickly made their way towards one another.

"For heaven's sake, what are you children still doing in this city?" Mother complained the moment they were within earshot.

"Mother-" Daimen tried futilely.

"The whole city was under siege until recently. The academy is *closed*. Why aren't you all back in Cirin already?" she continued. Father was totally silent, simply studying each of them in turn. Once he saw that all of them were unharmed, he seemed to relax a little. Most wouldn't be able to tell, but Daimen was the closest to Father out of all the Kazinski siblings, and could read his little tics pretty well by this point. "Never mind, I'll help you pack your bags and we'll be home by tomorrow."

"What? No we won't," Zorian simply told her in a bored tone of voice.

"Zorian, please let me handle this," Daimen urged in a low tone of voice.

Father gave Zorian a penetrating look for his statement, a gesture that would usually instantly put Zorian on the defensive, but of course, this time traveler Zorian was not bothered by it in the slightest. Zorian didn't talk about family all that much, but Daimen got the notion that Zorian had barely interacted with Mother and Father during the time loop. The two were practically strangers to him, and it showed in his attitude towards them.

That, more than the fact he'd had to kill his original self to be here, greatly disturbed Daimen.

"You seem to have grown some spine in the short time you've been here," Father remarked, still staring intently at Zorian. He didn't say whether this was good or bad, but Daimen knew he thought it was both. He liked when his sons had a firm, decisive attitude, but he also didn't tolerate disrespect towards himself and Mother.

"Zorian is just dedicated to his studies," Daimen hurriedly explained, shooting Zorian a quick look to shut him up. "Just because the academy is closed doesn't mean we're all doing nothing. Zorian is organizing a study group for his class so they can continue studying on their own in private. He even got some of the teachers to

help him out.”

”But Kirielle-” Mother tried.

”I like it here!” Kirielle immediately exclaimed. ”I have friends here and everything!”

”It’s dangerous here,” Mother said firmly. She glanced around the group for a second. ”I really regret not taking her with us this time, but what’s done is done. What I don’t understand is how you could all let her stay here under the circumstances. She must be terrified after what happened here!”

”But I’m not!” Kirielle protested.

”Quiet,” Mother barked at her.

Kirielle immediately shrank back.

Out of the corner of his eye, Daimen could see Zorian’s mood immediately worsen. Out of all of them here, Kirielle was the one Zorian cared about the most. Daimen was pretty sure his little brother would be willing to make an enemy out of his whole family for Kirielle’s sake, which was more than a little disturbing. Kirielle was a cute kid, but she could be a massive brat sometimes.

”Anyway, if Zorian is as busy as you say, what about Fortov?” Mother continued. ”He could have taken Kirielle back to Cirin just fine, yes?”

”Yes, he’s already a failed student wasting his time and our money here,” Father agreed. ”Why not have him be useful for a change?”

”You!” Fortov protested, visibly outraged.

”Am I wrong?” Father challenged.

”Why even send me back here if that’s what you think about me!” Fortov protested.

”Please, Father,” Daimen urged. ”Look, I know Fortov had some issues with his studies lately...”

Father scoffed. Mother sighed. Fortov looked furious, and very bitter.

"...but I have been giving him some help lately, and I'm sure he'll turn the situation around," Daimen said.

He had promised to take care of Fortov back in the time loop, apparently. Although Daimen didn't remember it, he had to admit Fortov needed his help. Certainly Zorian made it clear he didn't want to do anything with the guy. Apparently, despite having lived in the same city for years, Zorian had never bothered to interact with his brother and figure out how to help him.

For all his newfound maturity, this new Zorian still had clear traces of his old self.

He sure could nurse a grudge, for instance.

"And for how long will that last?" Father challenged. "You'll be back in Koth soon, I imagine, and then he'll be back on his own. I doubt one month will make that much difference."

"Actually, I'm going to be around much more often than I usually am," Daimen said. "Haven't you wondered how I got here before you?"

Father and Mother looked at each other.

"Well... I thought maybe you used the teleport network..." tried Mother.

Daimen shook his head with a slight smile.

"Mother, Father... I want to show you something. We can go and meet my fiancée and her family now, if you're willing. It's what you were travelling to Koth for, after all."

"What? They came here with you?" Mother asked incredulously. Daimen understood her disbelief. A single individual like him could conceivably cross large distances on a whim, but a small group of people was a much bigger challenge.

"You'll see," Daimen said with a grin. "Things are going to change a lot in the future, I think. Who knows, maybe even your family business might profit out of this."

Thankfully, this was sufficiently interesting that it distracted Mother and Father from further questioning. He knew that sooner or later, Mother would realize that Zorian had already started teaching Kirielle magic behind her back and that her beloved daughter had been literally attacked by assassins during the invasion – if nothing else because Kirielle was sure to blurt it out at some point – and that once she did, there would be hell to pay. For now, though, the crisis had been aver-

"Zorian! Hey! Zorian!"

Daimen looked at the person calling out to his brother and saw a chubby boy with a happy smile on his face hurrying over. An older, well-dressed man with a mustache followed behind him at a more sedate pace. Probably the boy's father.

The funny thing about this was that the boy clearly acted like he was Zorian's friend, but Daimen himself had never seen Zorian interact with him at all. That was interesting to say the least.

"Hey Zorian! I see you already got back, too!" the boy said once he got closer.

"I never left, Ben," Zorian said politely.

Oh, so they did know each other. By this point the boy's father also arrived, though he stayed silent behind the boy. He simply gave a small nod and quiet greeting to the gathered Kazinskis before waiting for his son to calm down.

"You never left? Man, you work too hard," the chubby boy said. "I heard you got roped into being an ambassador for some giant spiders. You got to introduce me to them someday, man. Sounds like one hell of an experience."

There was a long silence as all the Kazinski siblings looked incredibly uncomfortable.

"What?" the boy said, realizing he made some kind of mistake. "What did I say?"

"Giant... spiders?" Mother repeated.

Daimen couldn't help it. He sighed audibly this time.

So much for averting disaster.

- break -

As he walked through the streets of the city and observed the reconstruction efforts around him, Zorian couldn't help but feel satisfied with how things had been going lately. There were a few complications here and there, but the city was slowly beginning to recover, and neither Zach nor Zorian had been implicated in what had happened. The thanks for that partially went to Alanic, due to him running interference on their behalf in exchange for helping him clean up Eldemar of various threats, as well as Eldemar having its hands full with all kinds of problems these days, but mostly it was because they were currently complete unknowns to most people, so nobody even suspected they could have been involved. Zorian sincerely hoped that by the time they were forced to reveal some of their real skills, too much time will have passed, and people would not connect the dots linking them to the events that had taken place during the invasion.

Sadly, his quiet enjoyment of the city was marred by the fact people kept giving him curious and occasionally fearful glances as he passed them, the crowds parting in front of him like he was diseased.

Well, they probably weren't doing that because of him, specifically. Rather, it was because of the giant telepathic spider strutting around the city beside him. Spear of Resolve seemed completely unperturbed by the reception, however, and gave no indication this sort of behavior bothered her. If anything, she seemed immensely pleased with herself that she could walk through the city of Cyoria in broad daylight without being immediately attacked, or met with screams and calls for help. This was already a victory for her and her web.

The aranea hadn't been entirely accepted by the city authori-

ties yet. Legally, they were still considered monsters that had no rights, and there was a portion of Eldemarian leadership that really wanted to just wipe them out or drive them out of the city. However, the aranea had quietly gathered a considerable amount of support in the city over the years, so there was also no shortage of people willing to argue on their behalf. More importantly, even the critics that considered them dangerous telepathic parasites had to admit they were instrumental in preventing the various threats from the lower reaches of the dungeon from menacing the city. Considering the amount of destruction and suffering Cyoria had suffered recently, the last thing it needed was to go through a monster invasion too because some general couldn't tolerate the aranea living beneath the city.

The opinion of regular citizens was, from what Zorian could understand, somewhat mixed. The aranea were said to have helped fight the invaders, which won them some good will, but they were also monsters, spiders, and mind mages. None of those three sounded good to the average citizen. Accordingly, when people saw Spear of Resolve walking down the street like she always belonged there, their reactions were... mixed, to say the least.

Thankfully both Zorian and Tinami were accompanying her on this stroll to make sure no incident occurred. Zorian was certain that Spear of Resolve was resourceful enough to evade any real conflict with frightened citizens, but it was best not to risk things.

"So how are the negotiations going?" Zorian asked Spear of Resolve, not bothering to use telepathy for Tinami's sake. The Aope had managed to secure a magic exchange with the aranea, and Tinami was a part of that, but she wasn't psychic, and her advancement was slow. She wasn't good enough for casual telepathy yet.

"Somewhat disappointingly," Spear of Resolve admitted, using

sound magic to speak out loud as well. "We have managed to block any initiative to have us driven out of our homes, but it's unlikely we will get legal recognition any time soon."

"That was always a little naïve of you to expect," Tinami told her. The Aoep usually preferred to employ older and more experienced people for these kinds of meetings, but Tinami was the designated heir of the House, and she was throwing her weight around to get personally involved in something that very much interested her. "You're still too much of an unknown for people to trust you, regardless of your help with the invasion."

"Oh, I know that," Spear of Resolve assured her. "I didn't expect a better outcome, so much as hope for it. I have already made the necessary preparations. The colony can retreat from Cyoria on a moment's notice, if it becomes necessary."

"Where would you go, though?" Tinami asked. "I can't imagine there are that many places suitable for your kind."

"We would simply assault one of the smaller webs around the area and steal their home for ourselves," Spear of Resolve said blandly. "The aranean world is a rather brutal place, I'm afraid."

"Oh," Tinami lamely responded.

"I heard your academy is about to reopen soon," Spear of Resolve said, turning slightly towards Zorian before resuming her walk.

"So I'm told," Zorian said. He spotted Taiven and her team in the distance, trailing after a large group of other mages, and gave her a small wave. She waved back, but didn't linger or try to talk to him, simply following after her group so she wouldn't slow them down. She looked happy, though. In the wake of the invasion, there was an urgent demand for combat mages, so she had plenty of job offers and opportunities to prove herself. "If it doesn't start again soon, the parents that didn't get frightened by the attack will start pulling their children out of the academy out

of concern they're not getting taught anything."

He looked at Tinami, somewhat curious as to how she was handling that. She had never expressed any desire to join their study group, or any study group for that matter. Was she so focused on this aranean business that she had no problems putting her education on hold for a month, or did she have some kind of alternate arrangements?

"My family has arranged private instruction for me," Tinami admitted, somehow guessing his thoughts. "I mean no offense to your study group and your efforts, but this seemed a better idea."

She was probably right. As good as he was, he wasn't really a teacher and he had a whole group to deal with anyway. Tinami probably would get far better results out of private instructors. It kind of made him wonder why her family had even sent her to the academy in the first place, if they could just hire a bunch of private instructors for her. Was it too expensive? Did they just want her to socialize with people? Hmm...

"I have a favor to ask of you, then," Spear of Resolve told Zorian. "I've made some arrangements with the academy to let Novelty attend a few of your classes as an observer. I'd like you to keep an eye on her and stop her from getting herself into more trouble than she can handle."

"Hmm? Why would you do that?" Zorian frowned. "I know she wants to learn human magic, but do you have any idea how mundane and repetitive our classes are? She'll be bored out of her skull in three days, maximum. It would be better to just have her come to me for instruction. I did promise I would teach her, after all."

"No offense Zorian, but you're just a beginner mage still," Tinami said frowning. "You're not really qualified to teach a member of a completely different species how to do magic. That kind of thing is best left for actual experts."

"Uh, yeah, I meant I would teach her later," Zorian fumbled slightly. "Years later, when I mature into a mage who is qualified to help her. That's what I meant."

Tinami gave him a really strange look.

"It's a good thing for Novelty to receive a much-needed reality-check from time to time, so I'm not really concerned about her being bored out of her mind there," Spear of Resolve said, ignoring their interaction. "Besides, I didn't mean for this to become a regular thing. I just want to have the students see an aranea walking around and interact with them a bit. It's a publicity stunt more than anything."

"Oh, so this is kind of like what we're doing right now," Tinami said. After all, it wasn't like they had to have this conversation in the middle of a street where random people could see them. They could have just as easily met in a private room inside the Noveda Estate, or even inside one of the many Aoep properties, but Spear of Resolve insisted they had to do this this way.

"Yes, exactly," Spear of Resolve said.

"I have to ask... why Novelty?" Tinami asked suddenly. "Not that I dislike her or anything, but I get the notion that you're pushing her pretty hard, and I can't figure out why. She is not exactly someone I would pick for an ambassador if I had to choose. Surely you have aranea that are more... solemn than her."

"Enthusiastic Seeker of Novelty is more suited for the role than you might think," Spear of Resolve said after a short pause. "You have to understand that the number of aranea living beneath Cyoria is... not that great. We must hunt to survive, so we can't support large populations. Of the people I do have, many have no interest in learning how to interact with humans, or even downright look down on them."

"Ah. The flickermind thing," Tinami said, sniffing disdainfully.

"Yes, that. The point is that I really don't have all that much to work with, and Novelty is one of the few aranea who is downright enthusiastic about going out into the city and meeting humans face-to-face. Besides, while her antics might not be exactly professional, I've noticed they put many humans at ease better than a solemn, respectful approach. They often perceive her as a harmless clown, or an innocent little girl, which never fails to amuse me. She's an adult aranea specializing in interactions with humans. She's far more dangerous to a human than your average, less excitable aranea."

"Oh. I didn't think of it like that," Tinami admitted.

What Spear of Resolve didn't say, but what Zorian strongly suspected, was that she was pushing Novelty partly because she knew Zorian liked her. It was clear to him that the Cyorian web was determined to build a closer relationship with him and keep him as close to them as possible, so it made sense to have Novelty talk to him.

After a few more circles around the center of the city, the three of them separated and went about their own business. Zorian never went home, however, instead choosing to continue wandering the city, lost in his own thoughts.

He picked up a couple of newspapers as he walked, and idly flipped through them. As he expected, most of the news was still dedicated to the attack on the city, even a whole month after it happened. An article about the sulrothum warriors that had helped the defenders during the attack caught his eye, if only because of the detailed drawing of a flying sandworm hovering above the city. He remembered that one... the devil wasps had refused Zorian's offer of simply gating them back home to their ziggurat and had decided to instead have their giant flying sandworm pick them up and slowly fly them back to their continent. Some kind of power play, probably. Thankfully, no one in Eldemar had been in the mood to

pick a fight with a giant flying sandworm, so they let them leave without incident.

Leafing through the articles more thoroughly, he also found subtle clues that the people who had received his 'gifts' had already started to make waves with the knowledge he provided them with. In all honesty, Zorian had yet to hand out even a fraction of the stuff he owed to people for their help. It would take him literal years to finish paying back his debts this way, but he would persist. In any case, he was glad people were starting to make use of the knowledge they had been given. It assured him he wasn't doing all that in vain.

He had also started writing a book on mind magic, but that was still in its early stages, and nowhere near to completion. Publishing anything related to mind magic on a wide scale was going to be difficult, but he would find a way.

Hours passed, and the night began to fall. Zorian still continued to wander the streets of the city, restless. Though he had no real emergency to worry about, it somehow felt wrong to him to just lay around and do nothing. He had spent so much time constantly on the move, constantly tackling one crisis after another, that he felt like he had to do something with himself... even if that something was basically wandering the city with no clear aim in sight.

His mind wandered to the couple of issues he still hadn't dealt with. For instance, Princess. The giant divinely-enhanced hydra had survived her fight with Oganj's apprentice, and Zorian had no idea what he was going to do with her. There was no way to transfer ownership of her to Zach, so he was stuck with her. Thankfully, she was doing just fine for now, lazing around in the Great Northern Forest, but he knew that couldn't continue forever. He had to figure out what to do with her one of these days.

Another complication was the giant iron beak flock. Zorian

had simply released them into the northern wilderness when he had been checking up on Princess, thinking they would simply scatter and continue on with their own lives from now on. Instead, they decided to stick around Princess and now followed her around everywhere, helping her hunt and feeding on the remains of her prey when she had her fill. It made Princess far more noticeable and eye-catching than she would have otherwise been, and made the question of what to do with her all the more pressing.

He also didn't know what to do about Mrva. He had managed to get the golem colossus out of Cyoria before the army could move in and confiscate him, but his precious construct was still completely non-functional and the place where he was storing him was not really as secure as he would have liked.

Annoyingly, he was probably going to have to tolerate this state of affairs for quite a long time. Restoring Mrva back into combat condition and making a properly secure place to house him in would both take a large amount of money... and money was annoyingly hard to get out of the time loop. There were no more invader caches and bank accounts to steal from, so unless he wanted to prey on innocent citizens he had to find other sources of funds... and vastly scale down his expenses.

He had a bit of a problem, in all honesty. During the time loop he'd gotten into the habit of spending money like water, and though he was mindful of it after their victory, he still struggled to keep his expenses under control. He still had a sizeable stash of funds to draw upon, but it was constantly getting smaller by the day. He had tried to get large sums of money by selling some of his creations, but that had drawn way more attention than he had thought it would, so he was forced to stop with that for the time being. The only thing he could do was, ugh... *spend less*.

At least until he found a convenient way to make a lot of money without it making huge waves or being traced back to

him.

He stopped walking and looked at the full moon shining bright in the skies above. For some reason, the sight of the night sky, accompanied by the warm night air, helped put his mind at ease.

"Well Zorian, you wanted a normal life," he said out loud to himself, "Now you're having money problems. What could be more normal than that?"

"You said it, brother!" an unknown man shouted at him from his left. It wasn't anyone Zorian knew – it was just some drunk that happened to be close by. Drunk enough to be spouting nonsense, but sober enough to make himself understood. "I too am completely penniless! I spent every-thing I had tonight... and there is *nothing* wrong with that! What could be more normal than that? Yes in-deed, yes in-deed, yes in-deed..."

Zorian sighed, and then turned in the direction of Imaya's house. He supposed it really was time to get some sleep.

- break -

She had no name. She did not need one. She was a hunter and a mother, devoid of any higher purpose except for surviving, protecting her territory, and raising as many offspring as she could.

But that was Before. After her last feast, she had found herself imbued with greater purpose. The essence of her prey, the hated two-legs that had provoked her again and again, had proven so sweet and so powerful. It filled her up, suffusing her in a way she had never experienced before, then filtered through her and settled inside her eggs.

Her eggs were special now, she knew. The brood that would hatch out of them was going to be special too. She had always guarded her eggs and young diligently and with passion, only chasing them off when they grew too big and needy, but this time it was different. These eggs, and the young that would hatch from them, had to be guarded with her life. She would do anything to keep

them safe. She would *die* for them if she had to.

With her special purpose and her special eggs, there came a voice, *an urge*. She had to go deeper. Her new children couldn't be satisfied with the weak prey that lived on the surface, or even the more palatable things that wandered the upper tunnels of the world. No, if she wanted to raise them right, she had to go deep, deep, deep – deeper than she would ever dare go under normal circumstances. She was mighty, but some of the things that made their homes here could end her in a moment if she weren't careful.

She was afraid. She wanted to go back, go up, return to the safety of higher hunting grounds... but the urge, *her purpose* was stronger.

She had to survive. She had to protect her eggs. She had to go deeper.

So despite her fears, despite what all her life experience was telling her, she stubbornly kept going deeper...

...where her destiny awaited.

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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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